

Immigration: ‘A Lifelong Pregnancy’? An Analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction

Inaugural-Dissertation zur
Erlangung der Würde des Doktors der Philosophie
in der Fakultät Kulturwissenschaften
der Technischen Universität Dortmund

vorgelegt von

Ramona-Alice Bran

1. Erstgutachter: Prof. Dr. Walter Grünzweig
2. Zweitgutachterin: Prof. Dr. Randi Gunzenhäuser

Dortmund 2014

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Prof. Dr. Walter Grünzweig for accepting me as his PhD student and for believing I could pull this through, for having had the patience to read my work and guide my steps when I was stuck, for providing so much help and insight, and for having taken the time to get to know me. I am immensely grateful to you.

I am also thankful to the other wonderful people I have met at the American Studies Department from Dortmund. First and foremost, thank you Prof. Dr. Randi Gunzenhäuser for having read my dissertation. I really appreciate your humor and witty comments. Thank you: Sina, Elena, Mario, Johanna, Julia, Eriko and Martina for your friendship and support. Looking back, I realize I have had such an enriching experience and I can only hope we will keep in touch.

All my love goes to my closest friends back home who have stood by me all along. Thanks, in particular, to Remus, the one with whom I have embarked on this unexpected adventure. This five-year long journey has taken us to different places, but what an amazing experience it has been!

Most of all, thanks to my family who has always believed in me. Thank you, mum, for supporting me unconditionally in every choice I make. Thank you, dad, for everything. I wish you could still be here to read this.

Timișoara, September 2014

“For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that 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.” (Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* 49-50)

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Introduction and Theoretical Foundations

In my thesis, I will investigate the fictional work of Indian-American writer Jhumpa Lahiri. Her oeuvre belongs to what Rosemary Marangoly George calls the “immigrant genre”, namely that type of “contemporary literary writing in which the politics and experience of location or rather of ‘dislocation’ are the central narratives” (278). She also suggests that “it is the search for a location where one can feel at home, in spite of the obvious foreignness of the space that propels the discourse engendered by the experience of immigration” (285). This ‘feeling at home’ may or may not require assimilation into mainstream culture, and often the process of making oneself at home stretches across several successive generations. Therefore, George proclaims that the marks of the immigrant genre are the easy movement between past, present, and future, as well as between countries. Further, it is concerned with a juxtaposition of recognition and the impulse to forget.

In the past five decades, numerous literary works by Indian-born writers have placed issues connected to immigration at the center of their narratives. Internationally acclaimed authors like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh or Salman Rushdie, to mention only a few, have drawn attention to the experience of migration and the traumas often associated with leaving one’s homeland and coming in contact with another culture. However, Sanjukta Dasgupta has pointed out that male migrant writers engage more with concerns regarding ‘imaginary homelands’ (Rushdie, Ghosh, or Rohinton Mistry) whereas female writers of the diaspora (including Jhumpa Lahiri) focus on the very basic quest for home as a secure, familiar space (2007: 82).

Lahiri was born in London in 1967 to Indian parents, and she migrated with them to the United States two years later. Her narratives are a mixture of fiction and autobiography filtered through a dual lens, even though she confessed that while growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s, she felt neither Indian nor American: “Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was generally the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another” (“My Two Lives” 2006). The hyphen both separates and joins, and from the interstices thus created Lahiri is able to investigate both sides. She differs from writers such

as Bharati Mukherjee or Chitra Davakaruni, with whom she is often paralleled, in that she is a second-generation non-resident Indian whose interest in her roots is “most likely that of an intelligent and sensitive tourist” (Sanjukta Dasgupta 84). While the former praise American freedom and demonize traditional Indian cultural norms, Lahiri is able to avoid both these pitfalls and to produce a balanced representation of the two cultures.

Critics such as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Vijay Mishra have theorized the writings into which hybrid identities are inscribed. Using the concepts of cultural translation and cultural hybridization (Bhabha), subaltern status (Spivak), diasporic formation and diaspora space (Brah), cultural identity (Hall and Grossberg), transnationalism (Faist, Vertovec, Kennedy and Roudometof), and ‘third space’ (Bhabha and Soja), my thesis will demonstrate how Lahiri uses physical space (houses, other buildings, and cities) in her oeuvre in order to move from cultural translations, through cultural hybridity, to a ‘third space’ of transnational encounters. Thus, I will construct a logic of the sequence of Lahiri’s texts, a unitary development from her first work, *The Interpreter of Maladies* (published in 1999 and dealing predominantly with cultural translations), through her novel *The Namesake* (which appeared in 2003 and includes cultural translations, but also examines cultural hybridity and transnationalism), to *Unaccustomed Earth* (her second collection of short stories, which was printed in 2008 and explores ‘third space’ and transnationalism). I will thereby demonstrate that intratextuality is a defining feature of her oeuvre. Her latest book, *The Lowland* (2013), intricately communicates with the other three published works, and in the fourth chapter of this dissertation I use Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the ‘chronotope’ in order to show how.

During my research I have come across several volumes which try to provide a radiography of Lahiri’s work. An early attempt was edited in 2002 by Suman Bala and was called *Jhumpa Lahiri: The Master Storyteller*. The collection gathers thirty essays, mainly by Indian contributors, and offers a critical response to her debut volume. Another critical overview is *On the Alien Shore: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee* (2010). The articles edited by Jaydeep Sarangi analyze Lahiri’s books before turning briefly to some of Mukherjee’s writings. The contributors touch upon issues like identity (examined through a Lacanian lens), the importance of objects (as tools for memory or nostalgia) in her narratives, and the ways in which immigrant parents want their children to live out the American Dream while preserving a strong connection with their Indian roots.

But my project will be guided by one particular analysis of Lahiri's text corpus, namely the book edited by Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung and called *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies* (2012). Intrigued by the enormous media and popular attention drawn by Jhumpa Lahiri's first three published books, the authors included in this volume attempt to determine the literary canon(s) to which she contributes. They suggest in their essays that several labels are appropriate to her work which "subtly sheds light on *both* universal dimensions of human experience *and* more specific Bengali, postcolonial, Indian diasporic, South Asian American, and Asian American politics" (*Introduction* xii). In other words, while depicting specific ethnic experiences of educated, upper middle-class Bengalis living and working in New England since the mid-1960s, Lahiri simultaneously addresses universal themes like marital harmony, loss of a loved one, or parenting. These qualities make her narratives easily consumable by many categories of readers. Furthermore, her choice of genres (her first and third books are short-story volumes, whilst her second and fourth publications are novels) allows "for a diversity of heterogeneous perspectives even from within a presumably homogeneous community" (*Introduction* ix). Her frequent intertextual references (to E.M. Forster, Nikolai Gogol, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, to mention just her most prominent predecessors) link the ethnic particularity to world literature, "requiring us to view her *oeuvre* in its own 'third space'" (*Introduction* xiv). By repeatedly making Indian/Bengali and international texts meet, she opens up her literary creations to a wider audience, and explores new cultural territories. At the same time, she makes it clear that her intention is not to circumscribe her work to 'pure' ethnic communities, but on the contrary, to delve into the heterogeneity of identities.

The fiction produced by young South Asian diasporic writers has a global reach and heralds a "new era for Indian literature in English", as Mervyn Rothstein boldly puts it (2000, para 4). Jhumpa Lahiri herself has been dubbed "the public face and voice of the second generation" (Bhalla 2008: 183), therefore she carries the burden of being spokesperson for the Indian/Bengali community in the United States by creating narratives of shared experience. At the same time, she is the first South Asian recipient of the coveted Pulitzer Prize for her breakthrough collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), an award that recognizes her as a distinctly American writer. Indeed, Dhingra & Cheung stress that Lahiri's focus is primarily on narrating second-generation *American* experiences (*Introduction* viii). So, I will place her work in the context of an Indian-American fictional canon established by Phillipa

Kafka's book *On the Outside Looking In(dian): Indian Women Writers at Home and Abroad* (2003) and Vijay Mishra's *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2008).

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In "DissemiNation: Time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation", the essay that rounds up *Nation and Narration* (1990), Homi Bhabha argues that the modern nation is written at its margins by those who occupy those spaces, namely 'the colonized', 'women', 'the migrant', and 'the immigrant'. The margins of the nation displace the center; the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis. Moreover, by saying that these people "disturb the ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (300), the critic challenges Anderson's idea that nations come into being when diverse people imagine a homogeneous sense of shared community. "Colonials, post-colonials, migrants, minorities (...) are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary" (315) of the modern nation, Bhabha continues, and this shifting boundary writes a doubleness, a splitting, or an ambivalence into the narratives produced at the margins. Hence, "DissemiNation" provides a perspective on the disjunctive forms of representation that signify a people, a nation, or a national culture, and posits that in the act of writing the nation categories like the people, minorities, or 'cultural difference' continually overlap.

In fact, all the essays contained in *Nation and Narration* (1990) explore the cultural representation of this ambivalence of contemporary society in which margins contest claims to cultural supremacy and homogeneity: "In this sense, then, the ambivalent, antagonistic perspective of nation as narration will establish the cultural boundaries of the nation so that they may be acknowledged as 'containing' thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased, and translated in the process of cultural production" (Bhabha 4). However, the scholar warns that the 'locality' of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself; therefore, it must not be seen simply as 'other' in relation to what is outside or beyond it. On the contrary, "[t]he boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people' in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political

antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation” (4). Bhabha suggests here that boundaries and limits are *in-between* spaces where the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated. Hence, the ambivalent nation-space becomes the crossroads to a new transnational culture and the ‘other’ (re)emerges forcefully within cultural discourse and plays a key role.

Bhabha has acknowledged the fact that many of his ideas on migrant and minority spaces have been inspired by Salman Rushdie’s novels, and uses the latter’s double narrative figures of Gibreel Farishta/Saladin Chamcha, or Gibreel Farishta/Sir Henry Diamond, to suggest that the national narrative has become hybrid and provides the site for an ambivalent identification. Thus, Gibreel, “the migrant hybrid in masquerade, as Sir Henry Diamond, mimics the collaborative colonial ideologies of patriotism and patriarchy, depriving those narratives of their imperial authority” (318). In the process, he efficiently marginalizes and singularizes the totality of national culture since he represents “the history that happened elsewhere, overseas; his postcolonial, migrant presence does not evoke a harmonious patchwork of cultures, but articulates the narrative of cultural difference which can never let the national history look at itself narcissistically in the eye” (318). Bhabha affirms that postcolonial space now stands in a subaltern relation that, in fact, redraws the frontiers of the West. Referring to the same novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), the critic states in an interview with Jonathan Rutherford (1990) that it is crucial to think of migration as literary metaphor, thus opening up “meanings that are ambivalent, doubling and dissembling” (212). He explains that the resulting fragmentation of identity comes as an acknowledgement of how important the alienation of the self is in constructing forms of solidarity and in gaining the freedom of a non-assimilationist politics that embraces cultural difference.

When asked by Rutherford in the same interview to elaborate on his famous statement “The colonial moment is the history of the West” (discussion with Bhikhu Parekh in *Marxism Today*, June 1989), Bhabha draws attention to the fact that in the 18th and 19th centuries, when certain master narratives of the state, the citizen, cultural value, art, science, and the novel were being developed, the West was also producing another history of itself through its colonial possessions and relations:

The material legacy of this repressed history is inscribed in the return of post-colonial peoples to the metropolis. Their very presence there changes the politics of the metropolis, its cultural ideologies and its intellectual traditions, because they – as a people who have been recipients of a

colonial cultural experience – displace some of the great metropolitan narratives of progress and law and order, and question the authority and authenticity of those narratives (218).

He argues that the history of colonialism is, in fact, a counter-history to the normative, traditional history of the West. In this context, the migrant metaphor mentioned above stresses the fact that cultural and political identity is constructed through a process of ‘othering’. By looking at John Barrell’s analysis of the ‘English gentleman’ in the 18th century novel and at Huston Baker’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Bhabha establishes that both gentleman and slave, with dissimilar cultural means and to different historical ends, demonstrate that forces of social authority and subalternity may emerge in displaced or decentered strategies of signification.

Therefore, we are now dealing with a contested cultural territory where the people are, at the same time, the ‘historical objects’ of a constructed nationalist pedagogy, and the ‘subjects’ of a process of signification that tries to erase any originary presence of the nation-people in order to redeem national life as a repeating and reproductive process. The nation itself becomes a space internally marked by a productive cultural difference which aims to re-articulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the ‘other’ that resists totalization, hence producing other spaces of subaltern signification. Minorities and the diasporic come to the city to change or rewrite the history of the nation. It follows that the city, from its periphery, provides the space for emergent identifications, new social movements, and culture’s transnational dissemination. To round up “DissemiNation” and to illustrate this last point, Bhabha uses a fragment from Walter Benjamin’s classic essay, *The Task of the Translator*:

Fragments of a vessel in order to be articulated together must follow one another in the smallest details although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of making itself similar to the meaning of the original, it must lovingly and in detail, form itself according to the manner of meaning of the original, to make them both recognizable as fragments of the greater language, just as fragments are the broken parts of a vessel. (320)

Similarly, acts of cultural translation become synonymous with the condition of human migrancy. In these processes, that obviously do not refer only to linguistic translation, the ‘given’ content becomes alien and estranged, and that “leaves the language of translation *Aufgabe*, always confronted by its double, the untranslatable – alien and foreign” (315). There is, then, a cultural unassimilability of the migrant which matches Benjamin’s concept of untranslatability.

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha stresses from the beginning the idea that in our times the question of culture is located in a moment of transit, “where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside,

inclusion and exclusion” (1). He reiterates that it is imperative to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities, and to focus on the processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. The resulting ‘in-between’ spaces “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (1-2). In such interstices, personal and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are continuously negotiated. And this on-going negotiation, from the minority’s perspective, seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. Such borderline manifestations of cultural difference may be consensual, but also conflictual; above all, they may realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public and challenge normative expectations of development and progress.

In the narratives of the cultural and political diaspora, the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its “presencing” in a movement similar to the ambivalent articulation that Bhabha has described extensively above. Postcolonial cultures use their hybridity productively in order “to ‘translate’, and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity” (6). If once the transmission of national traditions was the main focus of world literature, in post-colonial times the *transnational* histories of migrants, of people on the border, are at the forefront of literary productions. Bhabha argues that those who have suffered subjugation, domination and displacement, produce and transmit a culture of survival, which is both transnational and translational. He clarifies this idea:

It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement, whether they are the ‘middle passage’ of slavery and indenture, the ‘voyage out’ of the civilizing mission, the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World. Culture is translational because such spatial histories of displacement – now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of ‘global’ media technologies – make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by *culture*, a rather complex issue. (172)

The transnational dimension of migration, which entails diaspora-formation, displacement and relocation, enhances the process of cultural translation and makes it highly significant. The unifying discourses of ‘nation’ or ‘authentic folk tradition’ can now be left behind, as people become more and more aware of the fact that culture is constructed and tradition is invented. The limitations of a consensual sense of community are now evident, and cultural identity is productively constructed (only) through a process of alterity. Consequently, Bhabha affirms that

the time for ‘assimilating’ minorities to holistic and organic notions of culture has passed, and the language of cultural community needs to be rethought from a post-colonial perspective. He compares this realignment to the profound shift in the language of sexuality, the self and cultural community, produced by feminists in the 1970s and the gay community in the 1980s.

In his essay “Culture’s In-between” (2010), Bhabha reflects on the issues of cultural hybridization once again, as he spots the ironic resonance T. S. Eliot’s words have in relation to contemporary third-world migration: “The culture which develops on the new soil must therefore be bafflingly alike and different from the parent culture: it will be complicated sometimes by whatever relations are established with some native race and further by immigration from other than the original source. In this way, peculiar types of culture-sympathy and culture-clash appear” (Eliot qtd. in Bhabha 2010: 54). The critic comments that the ‘partial’ culture Eliot refers to is the contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures, which demonstrates both the impossibility of culture’s containedness and the boundary between, resulting in ‘culture’s in-between’. Therefore, the translation of cultures is a complex act that generates sympathy and clash concomitantly. The ensuing social divisions and unequal developments disturb the self-recognition of the national culture, prompting us “to get away from defining subaltern consciousness as binary, as having positive or negative dimensions”, and “allowing the articulation of subaltern agency to emerge as relocation and reinscription” (*Location of Culture* 192).

Bhabha’s last statement brings me to another important aspect of my thesis, namely demonstrating how Lahiri’s female characters overcome their subaltern status, precisely by relocation and reinscription. In order to achieve this goal, I will rely mainly on Gayatri Spivak’s work and, in particular, on her groundbreaking essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) The first part of her essay is dedicated to an analysis of the way in which Western intellectuals, such as Deleuze and Foucault, assume they are outside the system they actually accuse of exploiting Third-World subalterns. Moreover, the above-mentioned critics claim that subalterns (marginalized people) are, in fact, able to ‘speak for themselves’, despite all their evident disadvantages. Yet, Spivak suggests that, while ascribing a voice to the subaltern, these intellectuals are speaking on their behalf and thus continue to construct them as subalterns.

Having dealt with the Western elite, she then moves to the Indian intellectuals who, she is quick to notice, were formed by representatives of the former. She quotes a programmatic

paragraph from Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" (1835). The President of the Council on Education in India wrote:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population. (Macaulay qtd. in Spivak 1988: 282)

This brings her to the conclusion that the colonized subaltern subject is "irretrievably heterogeneous" (284), and certain members of the Indian elite are at best native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the 'Other'. Spivak then launches the pivotal question "Can the subaltern speak?" and refers to the Subaltern Studies group, led by Ranajit Guha, whom she supports but also criticizes. The term 'subaltern' is taken from Antonio Gramsci who used it to refer to the economically dispossessed, and applied to post-colonial India:

In subaltern studies, because of the violence of imperialistic epistemic, social and disciplinary inscription, a project understood in essentialist terms must traffic in a radical textual practice of differences. The object of the group's investigation, in the case not even of the people as such but of the floating buffer zone of the regional elite-subaltern is a *deviation* from an *ideal* – the people or subaltern – which is itself defined as a difference from the elite. (285)

The issue really is whether subalterns enjoy any agency at all, whether they can speak and make themselves heard, or whether they are condemned to be always spoken for and represented by others (mainly their exploiters). Spivak's answer is categorical: "The subaltern cannot speak" (308). In order to illustrate her standpoint, the critic devotes most of her attention to the woman as subaltern. She argues that the relationship between the 'figure' of woman and silence can be plotted by women themselves, and that race and class differences are subsumed under that charge. However, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male in dominant position. And in the context of colonial production the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, therefore the subaltern as female is even more deeply affected. Being poor, black and female is, thus, a threefold bias, and Spivak cautions against the post-colonial intellectual's alleged neutrality when invoking the subaltern's perspective. As she puts it, the intellectual should "learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman" (295). In this way,

he or she would also learn to critique post-colonial discourse and not simply substitute the lost figure of the colonized.

She then turns to the prohibition of *sati*, the immolation of Hindu widows, which was still practiced in nineteenth-century India. She formulates the famous utterance: “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (296), in an attempt to show how there was a ‘competition’ to represent the colonial woman’s best interests. The British male colonizers claimed that they were liberating Indian women, thus legitimizing their mission of establishing a ‘good’, ‘civilized’ society, whereas native males assumed the voice of the subaltern women who allegedly wanted to die. Both were, in fact, tragically silencing the female subaltern while making use of her supposed free will.

What is more, by redefining as a crime what had been known as a ritual, the Hindu law modified by the British “jumped the frontier between the private and the public domain” (293). *Sati* (which means ‘good wife’) was prevalent in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Bengal because there, unlike anywhere else in India, widows could inherit property. Hence, surviving members of the family had every interest to get rid of the widow by appealing to her love for and devotion to her husband. In Hindu mythology, the goddess Sati arrives at her father’s court uninvited by him or by her divine husband Siva; her father starts to abuse Siva and Sati dies in pain. Siva dances over the universe with Sati’s corpse on his shoulder, then Vishnu dismembers her body and bits are strewn over the earth. Her father is responsible for her death and her husband avenges her, so Spivak’s conclusion is unequivocal: “There is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak” (307). Moreover, she stresses that between patriarchy and imperialism the figure of the woman actually disappears “into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (306).

Paradoxically, however, critics such as Bart Moore-Gilbert have observed that by insisting that the subaltern does not have a voice and therefore cannot speak, Spivak herself is in fact “repeating the gesture of constituting and speaking for, or in place of, the subaltern” (qtd. in Bertrand 4). Indeed, Spivak’s own position as non-subaltern critic reinforces Moore-Gilbert’s idea that “there may be a number of intermediate positions between ‘full’ subalternity and hegemony” (qtd. in Bertrand 6). Consequently, in her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*

(1999), Spivak nuances her stand and claims that by merely asking the question she was trying “to give the subaltern a voice in history” (284).

My argument will be that women are particularly powerfully affected by the multi-ethnic environment of the cities they migrate to, thus paralleling the global power structure as a whole. I will also demonstrate, however, how Lahiri’s characters are not “full subalterns”. Most of them come from wealthy Indian families and have received an English education. They usually follow their husbands, in their turn educated and skilled professionals, to a different continent. The ‘air’ of the American city, although stifling in the beginning, eventually liberates and emancipates most of its Indian female inhabitants, while not inhibiting manifestations of their ethnic identities. To put it differently, this is an attempt to show the variety of ways in which Lahiri’s Indian women work to overcome their subaltern status as both members of an ethnic minority group and as women in a dominant white male culture, in the American environment, and the difficulties they encounter. Although still centering on family and recreating a home in the new land, some of these migrants develop in diverse ways and in the end become transnational characters who occupy a homelike ‘third space’.

In my thesis, I will show that spaces, places, and the experience of the metropolitan American city are central for Lahiri’s work. My analysis will investigate the importance of space and place in identity formation processes, as well as the ways in which Lahiri constructs American cities, especially in the context of other metropolises her characters experience, mainly in India and Europe. Particularly her female characters initially go through processes of disorientation and alienation in these cities but, ultimately, their (changing) identities are linked with these transnational urban environments. Indian cities emerge as idealized, imaginary spaces, falling into Anderson’s idea of imagined communities, shared by first-generation migrants. Some characters return again and again to the motherland, but in the end foreign soils seem to provide most of them with a fertile background to strike new roots. Others embody what Steven Vertovec has called a “transnational type of consciousness” (2001). Ashima Ganguli, Gogol’s mother from *The Namesake* is one example; after her husband dies she lives six months in America, and six months in India, inviting readers to abandon static and dichotomous notions of diasporic women who either long for a permanent return to the mythic homeland, or struggle to integrate in the hostland.

Consequently, another important question that my work will look at is whether one can be at home in foreign places. In her book *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), Avtar Brah writes that 'home' can be both the place of origin and/or the site of everyday lived experience, thus supporting the idea that what is more important is the sense of 'feeling at home'. Hence, Brah suggests that "the concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins while taking account of a homing desire, as distinct from a desire for a 'homeland'. This distinction is important, not least because not all diasporas sustain an ideology of 'return'" (16). She continues to explore the crucial question "Where is home?" and comes to the conclusion that: "On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality" (192). As Paul Gilroy has also posited, the question of home is, thus, "simultaneously about roots and routes" (qtd. in Brah 192).

Although migration is often associated with traumas of separation, dislocation, and relocation (uprooting and making efforts of re-rooting), diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They become contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories "collide, reassemble and reconfigure" (Brah 193). Thus, migrants *can* be at home even away from home. Indeed, in the imaginary of some diasporic members "the double, triple, or multi-placedness of 'home' (...) does not mean that such groups do not feel anchored in the place of settlement" (193), but, quite on the contrary, it means that "they are at once local and global, inhabiting both imagined and encountered communities" (196). Moreover, Brah insists that this multi-placedness of home in the diasporic imaginary does not imply that diasporian subjectivity is 'rootless'. It is further proof that identity is always plural and in process. Diasporic identity is particularly dynamic, as it straddles across geographical, cultural and psychological boundaries at the same time, enabling transnational migrants to have a more fluid relationship with their homes.

Regina Lee, on the other hand, identifies three main types of diasporic consciousness: idealization of homeland, boutique multicultural manifestation, and transitional or transformational identity politics (2004: 54). The first one, of course, involves a strong identification with the country of origin on the part of its diaspora. Migrants define themselves in terms of temporal and spatial distance from the homeland, and their diasporic experiences are

dominated by the myth of return. It follows that this type of community is “always marginalized because it is physically absent from the homeland (its ‘center’), and (consequently) socially excluded from the host society and its narrative” (Lee 59). The second type has emerged against the backdrop of cultural pluralism which values ethnic minorities for their difference, hence limiting their understanding of these groups to trendy, boutique manifestations. Diasporas know what the host society wants, and feed it to them, commodifying their visibility in order to gain as much acceptance as this type of consciousness allows. Lee’s third conceptualization views diasporas in a transitional or transformational state, still evolving, and integrating in an informed way with the host societies. Paraphrasing Paul Gilroy’s famous article “It Ain’t Where You’re From, It’s Where You’re At...” (1991), Regina Lee argues that this third type of consciousness balances the tension between ‘where you’re from’ (the past) and ‘where you’re at’ (the present) in order to establish ‘where you’re going’ (the future diasporic trajectory). The inherent transitionality of diasporic experience bears an unlimited empowering and productive potential similar to Bhabha’s ‘third space’ concept that I will refer to later in this introductory chapter.

Bhabha analyzes the feeling of ‘unhomeliness’ often mentioned by migrants. In *The Location of Culture* (1994) he writes that to be ‘unhomed’ does not mean to be homeless, yet it is difficult to accommodate the ‘unhomely’ in the familiar division between the private and the public spheres. In the process of displacement, “the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (9). It follows that the ‘unhomely’ is a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition. By spotting this moment in civil society feminists pinpoint its patriarchal and gendered nature. They assert that the symmetry of private and public is now disturbed by the difference of genders “which does not neatly map on to the private and the public, but becomes disturbingly supplementary to them. This results in redrawing the domestic space as the space of the normalizing, pastoralizing, and individuating techniques of modern power and police: the personal-is-the-political; the world-in-the-home” (Bhabha 10-11). Referring to the metaphoricity of houses as sites of memory in the writings of Toni Morrison and Nadine Gordimer, he comments that each ‘unhomely’ house marks a deeper historical displacement. Therefore, hybridity is a difference within a subject that inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality, bridging the home and the world (the private and the public realms), but also past and present, the psyche and the social. It must be said here that Martina Ghosh-Schellhorn

(1999) has criticized Bhabha's notion of 'in-between' because, she argues, "an 'in-between' always already presupposes fixed spaces, in relation to which, *between* which, it exists as a paradoxically concretized Derridean supplement might do" (34). Thus, she asserts that the concept of 'transitional identity' would more accurately reflect the chaos of states always in flux, never fixed or settled but "incessantly open to the influence of motion, hence constantly modified by the experiences which act on them" (35).

The house becomes a powerful metaphor for security, permanence and belonging, an expression of immigrant identity; and on the contrary, not having a permanent residence may stand for displacement, or alienation in host culture. As I will show in my dissertation, the house stands out as a key symbol in all of Lahiri's written productions. I will insist on a very important difference between men and women, as far as their rapport with the house is concerned. For her male characters owning a house in the United States is the ultimate proof of belonging and assimilation, whereas for most of her female characters it is the locus where they strive to preserve their Indianness by recreating homeland traditions and by raising Indian-American children. Yet, characters like Ashima Ganguli from *The Namesake*, for example, manage to turn the initial discomfort and feelings of 'unhomeliness' in the new setting into a propitious experience. Starting from the house, in which she first attempts to recreate a micro homeland, she gradually begins to explore the outside, and eventually ends up navigating smoothly between the two spaces.

In his book *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2008), Vijay Mishra also reflects on the inherent ambivalence entailed by migration and on the allegorical function of the house. Diasporas inevitably become part of the landscape yet they still experience Heidegger's *Unheimlichkeit*, 'to-not-be-at-home' feeling, in conventional German meaning 'uncanniness'. Mishra stresses that immigrants want to possess a residence in order to escape living in a state of perpetual transience, but also in order to reenact the symbolic rituals of the past. So, he looks at V.S. Naipaul's famous novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, and comments:

The failure to find roots, the failure of Biswas actually to build a house on solid foundations – the house that he finally owns and which is heavily mortgaged, the house in which he dies, is as open to the elements as any sieve – this failure is part of the totality of the diasporic experience. The house, the sign that would have transformed the route (the temporariness) into a root (the familiar) is as unsteady as the sailing ships themselves. (...) The novel therefore begins and ends with death within the confines of a house that encapsulates, allegorically, a specifically diasporic negotiation of space in terms of indenture history and its (spatial) sites. (98)

For Naipaul, diaspora and nomadism are traumatic conditions. While affirming movement, routing, and departure, he still emphasizes a search for rootedness. According to Mishra, this idea distinguishes the old plantation-Indian diaspora from the new late-modern diaspora of the border. The former “lives out its trauma through a constant return to an original moment that is in the habit of re-wounding the subject. It is as if the moment itself has the ‘unspeakable’ feature of trauma and can be glimpsed only through its re-inscription in a narrative of departure and loss” (107). Deleuze and Guattari, on the other hand, celebrate nomadism (the ‘route’) to the detriment of the idea of a fixed physical home (the ‘root’), which they dismiss as the “sedentary point of view of history” (qtd. in Mishra 107).

What, then, are the parameters for success and failure of the migrant experience? Is there a clear gender differentiation, in the sense that women have more to gain? What are the differences between first and second-generation immigrants? What are the relationships between mothers (as ‘repositories’ of the Indian culture), and daughters (as second-generation Indian-Americans striving to establish their cultural identities)? These relationships are often complicated, particularly since mothers insist that their daughters incorporate a solid Indian component in their sense of self as Indian-Americans living in the United States. What about fathers, brothers and husbands featured in the works of these writers? Does migration also entail a change in Indian men’s attitudes?

As Tamara Bhalla shows in her PhD thesis, entitled *Between History and Identity: Reading the Authentic in South Asian Diasporic Literature and Community* (2008), scholars of South Asian American literatures (such as Inderpal Grewal or Rajini Srikanth) have insisted on the complex role of gender in shaping the community’s public image. They stress that Chitra Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee, and Jhumpa Lahiri “are largely responsible for establishing a South Asian *American* literary tradition by setting their stories and fiction in familiar urban and suburban spaces in the U.S. and describing the experiences of first, second, and now third generation Indian immigrants” (Bhalla 2008: 29). It is obvious that the relationship of the first generation to the place of migration is different from that of subsequent generations. They have firsthand memories of what they left behind, plus they have extracted themselves from the safety net represented by their extended families (very important in Indian culture). In addition, they struggle to relocate, to form new social networks, and to negotiate new economic, political and cultural realities. Social relations are going to suffer reconfigurations, without hostland norms

being directly superimposed over homeland traditions. When the children of immigrants come of age, their parents' psychology has changed considerably from the early years. Parts of them are already acculturated and fulfilled in American society, and parts of them wish they could go back to the old life in India. They do not seem aware that, naturally, the India they left behind is changed and changing, and they continue to project onto the children certain idealized images of a lost homeland. Consequently, the second generation is torn between the American environment into which they were formed and the ancestral homeland of their parents.

Phillipa Kafka also refers to the ahistorical attitude of Indian immigrants towards an idealized motherland. She notices that, after the migration to the West, Indian diasporic communities tend to be nostalgic and remain fixed at the point where they were upon their departure from South Asia. Both men and women, Muslim or Hindu, seem equally unaware that the conditions in their country of origin are undergoing continuous transformations: "This ahistorically essentialist nostalgia is nothing more than an idealized, moldering, out-of-date fantasy quite different from the ongoing, complex reality they left behind them when they left their home countries" (6). Kafka touches on the subject of Indian parents in the diaspora and on the relationships with their children, especially girls. She points out that, despite their consolidated image as 'model minority' in the United States, Indian immigrants often perpetuate a gendered conduct within their communities. She quotes from DasGupta & Das Dasgupta who argue convincingly that the main role of Indian women abroad is to ensure continuation of homeland culture and traditions:

Although strict adherents of their heritage, the nationalists simultaneously covet expertise in Western technologies in order to achieve upward mobility, while (op)pressing their women into symbolic repositories of the public morality and virtue of the entire Indian immigrant community. Any woman who does not submit to this concept of The Indian Woman is considered a traitor to her family and to the entire community and treated accordingly. It should also be noted here that controlling women metaphorically through the construction of binaries such as goddess/whore, good girl/bad girl is actually a transnational phenomenon and by no means limited to Indian nationalists. (Kafka 7)

After exposing the internal gendering of migration, Phillipa Kafka moves on to examine the works of Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee, two emblematic female Indian-American novelists with which Lahiri is often compared. She quotes Desai, who has stated after living in the United States for a number of years that a screen has come between her and India. She describes her feelings of extreme isolation as she is forced to grapple with life in a society with which she has

“no natural link whatsoever” (Desai qtd. in Kafka 75). According to Kafka, Anita Desai is the first Indian woman writer to consciously illustrate in both her male and female characters the feelings of ‘the duality of belonging’, of not belonging at all, of homelessness, and of all the variations within this paradigm. Thus, Desai accurately depicts Indians alienated in India, which Kafka calls ‘alienated outsiders from within’ (usually Indian women) and ‘alienated insiders without’ (expatriate Indians who return to India for visits). Desai’s character Guddo in *The Fire Sacrifice*, on the other hand, becomes hopeless about the perpetuation of Indian rituals in the United States, where they are so irrelevant that they become merely gestures without meaning. Consequently, her immigrants are neither Indian nor American, and diasporic life in the United States is “a rootless existence”, leaving them with a perpetual “feeling of being outside” (Desai qtd. in Kafka 82). However, should her Indian immigrant women return to India they would probably experience rejection and nonrecognition there as well. So, on the one hand, Anita Desai’s characters have nostalgic memories of houses back in India, filled with female relatives, servants, and neighbors that they did not realize they would miss. On the other hand, they have learned invaluable lessons in America, such as to speak up for what they want, which is why many Indian women cannot return to India permanently. It would be virtually impossible for them to act that way ‘back home’.

Similarly, Bharati Mukherjee also “writes of insiders who are on the outside in India, as well as outsiders when they are outside India, and of Indians, especially women, who emigrate to the West from India” (Kafka 83). Mukherjee herself, like Desai, writes from the complicated perspective of being an outsider both in India and in the West. However, she finally moves beyond her initial anxiety and comes to the conclusion that she feels emotionally and intellectually most at home in the United States, in a ‘homeland’ that she had chosen and not inherited. After having lived in Canada and having felt terribly alienated there, she relocated to America and settled for a positive attitude about being a ‘nowhere creature’ as a result of her multiple migrations, thus moving beyond Desai in this regard. Phillipa Kafka concludes that Mukherjee “focuses with great brilliance and clarity on the responses of Indian women to their host countries, on the responses of their host countries to them, and on the impact of each on the other” (86).

Vijay Mishra also looks at the immigrant experience of various Indian writers, as he attempts to theorize the Indian diasporic imaginary. He uses this phrase to refer “to any ethnic

enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion, as a group that lives in displacement” (14). Like Phillipa Kafka, Mishra argues that there is much that is hidden behind the ‘model minority myth’ often associated with the South Asian communities. Consequently, the critic claims that in order to understand diasporic groups, one should tamper with the idealist and celebratory rhetoric of their ‘exemplariness’ in the modern world. Instead, one should focus on diaspora’s agony and pain of adjustment.

From the beginning, Mishra makes the bold statement that “All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way” (1). Diasporas refer to people wanting to explore the meaning of the hyphen. Yet, their position is precarious within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, despite the late-modern celebratory argument that diasporic communities “occupy a border zone where the most vibrant kinds of interaction take place, and where ethnicity and nation are kept separate. In this argument, diasporas are fluid, ideal social formations happy to live wherever there is an international airport and stand for a longer, much admired historical process” (1). Nevertheless, Mishra makes it clear that diasporas construct homelands in ways that are very different from the way in which homeland peoples construct themselves: “The diaspora wants, in Suketu Mehta’s words, ‘an urban, affluent, glossy India, the India they imagine they grew up in and wish they could live in now’, an India projected by Bollywood” (18). Although this idealized homeland (the *desh* in Hindi) does not exist, against it all other lands are foreign (or *videsh*). This is the source of homesickness, accentuated by the fact that, as a general rule diasporas do not return to their homeland (real or imagined).

Mishra examines Bharati Mukherjee’s essay “Two ways to belong in America” (*New York Times* 1996) which is precisely about the different ways in which people (in this case the author and her sister Mira) negotiate the experience of uprooting and migration. Bharati Mukherjee positions herself as someone for whom the period of mourning for a lost homeland is over, whereas her sister Mira represents the expatriate Indian who always dreams of a return. Mira’s voice is that of “millions of migrants for whom migrancy means secure and permanent jobs so that one can remain rooted in a city, in a place, and reconnect with the homeland through a network of relationships among the migrants. Here the ancestral culture is duplicated, the cuisine maintained, and the home simply transferred to the comfort zone of America” (Mishra 187). Mira thus interacts differently to America from her sister; she lives in America as an

‘expatriate Indian’ not as an ‘immigrant American’. Ultimately though, unlike people such as Rushdie, Naipaul, or Bharati Mukherjee, who write about their traumatizing diasporic experiences, Mira Mukherjee enjoys the certainties of a world locked into meaning. For the hyphenated writers just mentioned, diasporic space appears as contradictory, but it provides them with the possibility of creatively exploring hybrid, cross-cultural, even interdiasporic relationships. Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* is a characteristic example, suggesting she does not trust the idea that a pure cultural or national identity is desirable. According to Alfonso-Forero, the eponymous character’s pregnancy throughout the novel symbolizes the fact that she is literally embodying a quest of re-making America and what it means to be ‘American’ (2011: 36).

In her doctoral dissertation, *Re-Modeling Minority: Mapping Critical Femininities in the South Asian American Diaspora* (2009), Vanita Dharam Reddy discusses the ways in which writers such as Mukherjee, Divakaruni, and Lahiri, map the local, national and transnational itineraries of the ‘global’ feminine body from the vantage point of the North American diaspora. Reddy acknowledges Bharati Mukherjee’s status as a progenitor who ushered in a boom in South Asian American literary production over the last four decades. She goes on to argue that Jhumpa Lahiri’s arrival on the literary scene marks a different generation of South Asian writing in the United States. Moreover, Lahiri has also garnered a much more global visibility than Mukherjee, due mainly to the “literary cultural moment of international fervor over Indian Writing in English (IWE) that preceded her Pulitzer Prize win” (11). She has been awarded numerous other prizes, including the Hemingway/PEN award, joining the gallery of other hyphenated Americans, all of whom “explore complex intersections of identity with such constructs as nation, gender, and race” (Rajan 123). Lahiri has also been included in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (7th Edition, 2006), which guarantees her status of a ‘classic’ according to Carmen Concilio (2010: 88).

Vijay Mishra concurs and underlines that, as a twice-displaced individual (an immigrant first to the United Kingdom and then to the United States), Jhumpa Lahiri challenges “theories of diaspora which fail to consider the ‘differential’ and uneven experiences of migration” (158). Although he only refers to her first collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, he argues that her narratives are largely celebrated not necessarily for their examination of diasporic anxieties but for their exploration of human relations in general. Her volume captures the out-of-context

lives of immigrants, expatriates and first-generation Americans of Indian descent, thus giving the collection a “decisive orientation towards anxieties of the diaspora in the place where they are at, not where they came from” (191). Her diasporic narrative is mainly about cultural translations, about first-generation Indian immigrants coming to terms with the loneliness of displacement and their struggle “to master a new landscape, to map and read it as ‘natives’ do” (175). But all her three volumes are also about the efforts immigrants make to raise their children in what Gauri Bhat calls a “vacuum culture” (qtd. in Mishra 184). Belonging both ‘here’ and ‘there’, US-born children nevertheless experience an acute impossibility of a permanent return. Because of this vacuum upbringing, they are the ones most aware of their ethnicity as they aim to process the hyphen.

In the prose of Jhumpa Lahiri I think characters eventually exploit in their favor this ‘vacuum space’ that opens up during their diasporic identity formation processes. In this way she establishes her literary originality and takes up her distinct place in the gallery of Indian-American writers. Writing for Lahiri is a means of being at home, of finding a home, as she explains in an interview: “I never felt that I had any claim to any place in the world. (...) But, in my writing, I’ve found my home, really, in a very basic sense – in a way that I never had one growing up” (Vitale, 2008, para 3). Thus, for ethnic writers the act of storytelling is often an act of empowerment as well.

At the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of the journey. Global conditions have made it possible for people to relocate (both physically and culturally) more frequently and by their own choice. Avtar Brah underlines that this journey is clearly not the same as casual travel, nor is it a temporary sojourn. Diasporic journeys are, in fact, about settling down and putting roots ‘elsewhere’ (182). The word ‘diaspora’, in itself, refers to ‘dispersion’ from a center (a ‘home’). However, members of diasporas often undertake multiple journeys to different parts of the globe, and this may be interpreted metaphorically as a search for favorable soil where to strike roots. These multiple travels are lived, produced and reproduced through individual as well as collective memory. Ultimately, they converge into one journey of that imagined diasporic community, but the identity of that particular group is constantly changing, far from being fixed. Moreover, a certain ‘diaspora space’, in Brah’s coinage, is “constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively” (183).

Journeys are, thus, at the core of migration, and traveling is significant in Lahiri's work as well. Journeys, particularly from East to West, span her literary creations. Most characters travel from India to the United States; others travel within the United States, but also from East to West (for example, Ruma moves with her family from New York to Seattle, and Sonia Ganguli relocates from Massachusetts to California). Some travel to other continents as well (mainly the characters from *Unaccustomed Earth* and *The Namesake*). Boori Ma, the character from "A Real Durwan" (*Interpreter of Maladies*), migrates from East to West Bengal; she is the only one who makes the journey because she is forced to by political upheavals. She is thus dislocated, a unique character in Lahiri's gallery of successful migrants who voluntarily depart from home. Most of them relocate to the United States, but they make at least one trip back to the East. The majority only returns to visit relatives, but some even move back after a lifetime spent in America. Members of the Das family, from "Interpreter of Maladies", travel to India as tourists, and the Gangulis from *The Namesake* move to Calcutta for eight months which is an extreme cultural shock for their two American-born children. In any case, traveling gives all of them an insight into their pluralist identities.

The concept of identity widely used nowadays accepts that identities are never unified, but, quite on the contrary, increasingly fragmented. Stuart Hall adds that they are "never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (4). In the context of contemporary global migration processes, ethnic identities seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they allegedly still correspond, but in fact they are using resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being. While acknowledging that time and space are key elements in shaping immigrant identities, Hall underlines the fact that individuals can either accept, or reject their influence. He continues that it is not so important 'who we are' or 'where we came from', as much as 'what we might become', and he agrees with Gilroy that the so-called return to roots is not as important as coming to terms with one's routes. Thus, identity is a concept which cannot be thought in the old way anymore, "but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all" (Hall & du Gay 2).

Drawing on Derrida, Laclau, and Butler, Hall argues that identities are constructed through, not outside, difference: "This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what

has been called its *constitutive outside* that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term – and thus its ‘identity’ – can be constructed” (4-5). He then links identity to identification, the latter being constructed on recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal. This inevitably results in a form of solidarity, working together in the process (never completed) of articulating identification. As a process, identification operates across difference, and it “requires what is left outside, its constitutive outside” (Hall & du Gay 3) in order to be consolidated.

Lawrence Grossberg also tackles the question of identity in the particular context of cultural studies. In his essay “Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There Is?” (Hall & du Gay 2010), he argues that “(...) there are a number of different, overlapping, intersecting and sometimes even competing figures which, taken together, define the space within which cultural studies has theorized the problem of identity” (90). He refers to these figures with terms such as: *différance*, fragmentation, hybridity, border and diaspora, and then proceeds to describe each one. For instance, the figure of *différance* outlines a constitutive relation of negativity, “in which the subordinate term (the marginalized other or subaltern) is a necessary and internal force of destabilization existing within the identity of the dominant term. The subaltern here is itself constitutive of, and necessary for, the dominant term” (90). Any dominant identity must always and already incorporate its negation, resulting in an inherent instability. The subaltern represents an implicit ambiguity at the center of any formation of language or identity, which obviously undermines language’s power to define a unified, stable identity. The figure of *fragmentation* stresses the multiplicity of identities, which are always contradictory, made up of partial fragments.

Hybridity, on the other hand, is more difficult to characterize, so Grossberg turns to Bhabha’s theories of the ‘in-betweenness’ inhabited by the subaltern in order to clarify this important postcolonial figure. Hence, “[i]mages of *liminality* collapse the geography of the third space into the border itself; the subaltern lives, as it were, on the border” (Grossberg 91) and attempts various ‘border-crossings’. Subsequently, the figure of *diaspora* is tightly connected to this idea of border-crossing, not simply referring to the transnational movement of people, but also to the political struggles to establish itself as a distinctive community in historical contexts of displacement. According to Grossberg, diaspora links identity to spatial location and identifications, thus emphasizing “the historically spatial fluidity and intentionality of identity,

its articulation to structures of historical movements (whether forced or chosen, necessary or desired)” (92). As such, all diasporas are heterogeneous and occupy contested spaces even as they attempt to construct a common ‘we’. Who is empowered and who is disempowered in a specific construction of this ‘we’? What is the relationship of this ‘we’ to its ‘others’? There is not one single dominant other, but multiple others embedded within and across binaries, which is why cultural hybridity takes up the front row in post-colonial discourse. In-betweenness becomes an advantage, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference, too.

In the interview with Jonathan Rutherford (1990), Bhabha clarifies the distinction between cultural diversity and cultural difference, as well as notions of translation, in-betweenness and hybridity resulting in what he terms the ‘third space’. Western tradition has accommodated the idea that the diversity of cultures is a positive thing, but tried to contain it within the norm given by the host society or dominant culture. However, national populations are ever more visibly constructed from a range of different kinds of cultural histories, different post-colonial lineages, and different sexual orientations. Therefore, these multiple identities are articulated in challenging ways, either positively or negatively, often conflictually. Multiculturalism tried to respond and control the dynamic process of the articulation of cultural difference by “administering a *consensus* based on a norm that propagates cultural diversity” (209, emphasis in the original). But any norm aims at annihilating differences, which determines Bhabha to place himself in a position of liminality, described as “that productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity or otherness” (209), in order to keep alive the notion of cultural difference. The difference of cultures cannot be fitted within a universalist framework, and attempting this might even be counterproductive. Hence, he uses the notion of ‘cultural translation’ to suggest that all forms of culture are in some way related to each other, and that meaning is constructed across the bar of difference and separation between the signifier and the signified:

So it follows that no culture is full unto itself, no culture is plainly plenitudinous, not only because there are other cultures which contradict its authority, but also because its own symbol-forming activity, its own interpellation in the process of representation, language, signification and meaning-making, always underscores the claim to an originary, holistic, organic identity. (210)

That is why cultures are always subject to intrinsic forms of translation, with the ‘original’ never finished or complete in itself but only constituted in relation to the otherness internal to their own symbol-forming activity. In this process, the possibility opens up for articulating *different* cultural practices and priorities.

The concept of translation is very important in Lahiri’s writings, particularly in her debut work, *Interpreter of Maladies*, as the title already announces. She states in an essay called “Intimate Alienation: Immigrant Fiction and Translation” (2002) that almost all her characters are translators, “insofar as they must make sense of the foreign in order to survive” (120). Although he laments the fact that the old-fashioned field of literary translation is losing ground to the current trend of dealing with cultural translations, Harish Trivedi (2005) agrees that it is a fitting metaphor for the processes undergone by people being borne across continents and cultures. He establishes a clear connection between Lahiri’s use of the verb “survive” and Bhabha’s concept of living on the borderlines, which becomes “the migrant’s dream of survival; an *initiatory* interstices; an empowering condition of hybridity” (qtd. in Trivedi 5, emphasis in the original). Lahiri underlines in her essay that, unlike her parents who are first generation immigrants, she no longer has to translate in order to survive in the new world, but does so in order “to create and illuminate a nonexistent one” (2002: 120). Ethnic writers are themselves translated beings who create figures of translators and interpreters with the aim of unveiling the difficulties entailed by cross-cultural interactions. I quote at length from Eleonora Federici who develops on this idea in an article:

Interpreters and translators are protagonists of stories of in-betweenness, epitomising at the same time the sense of belonging to more than one culture and the complex task they accomplish as mediators. At the center of the plot the reader finds characters who struggle to define their own identity and, at the same time, try to understand the point of view of the ‘other’ in order to negotiate between linguistic and cultural differences. (2007: 219)

In this process, however, interpreters come across untranslatable elements, thus exposing the limits of translations. This “space of the untranslatable”, as Bhabha has called it (qtd. in Federici 219), unavoidably remains in between the two cultures. Nevertheless, translators continue to play the critical part of mediators or interpreters between linguistic and cultural worlds, and I will further elaborate on this idea in Chapter 1.

Cultural hybridity is born out of concepts of difference and translation. For Bhabha, the most important thing about hybridity “is not to be able to trace two original moments from which

the third emerges” (Rutherford 211), but being able to explore the hybridized ‘third space’ which allows other positions to emerge. Cultural hybridity demands a translation and an extension of certain principles, and this is perfectly illustrated in Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake*, even if I were only to hint here at Gogol Ganguli’s ‘name problem’. Bhabha’s model of hybrid identities complicates homogenized ideas of national communities, and in my thesis I argue that Gogol negotiates the resulting ‘third space’ to his favor. Eventually, he emerges as an empowered individual, at peace with his cultural pluralism. I would like to stress here that in Lahiri’s works, particularly in *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, this ‘third space’ is not necessarily the space between India and the United States, but it is a transnational space in which identities are plural and fluid.

Migrants have traditionally been confronted with two alternatives: resist full assimilation and maintain a high degree of separatism, or pursue full absorption in the host society. But, Thomas Faist has proposed a third model, namely “surviving in multiple transnationalized forms in conjunction with other equally translocal and hybridized cultures across many borders” (qtd. in Kennedy and Roudometof 22). This is particularly relevant for characters from Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* because they have more dynamic relations with the transnational spaces they inhabit. Kaushik, for instance, does not feel the need for a concrete homeland, but continuously negotiates his state of being in-between the place of origin and that of destination. Having lived in several countries, he does not need to imagine a community as tied to a particular location.

Since the concept of transnationalism is not exactly new, I have come across a massive body of studies, articles, definitions, and redefinitions of this influential idea. Ulf Hannerz (1996) postulates that distances and boundaries are not what they used to be, and introduces the phrase “global ecumene” to refer to the cultural interconnectedness of the contemporary world, by way of interactions, exchanges and related developments. In fact, there is an increasing interconnectedness in space, too, as “people move with their meanings, and as meanings find ways of traveling even when people stay put” (8). Consequently, territories cannot contain cultures anymore, granted that they ever have, considering people have been on the move throughout history. But people now live in diverse “habitats of meaning” (22) which are not territorially restricted and yet influence the construction of identity.

Ludger Pries (2001) affirms that social spaces are “durable configurations of social practices, systems of symbols and artifacts” (50). International migration and global activities of companies have established transnational social spaces, which can extend over different geographic spaces (pluri-local entities), although they cannot exist without reference to a geographic space. Transmigrants, for example, move back and forth between different places and develop their social space of everyday life.

From the myriad of approaches, I think the most suitable for the scope of my dissertation are those formulated by Vertovec (2001) and Kennedy and Roudometof (2002). Steven Vertovec, for one, argues that transnational migration has not been sufficiently theorized in relation to assimilation, acculturation, cultural pluralism, integration, and intergenerational succession and reproduction of transnational ties (all things that concern me in Lahiri’s work). Vertovec even calls for a juxtaposition of the concepts of transnationalism and identity, since many transnational networks are grounded on a perception of shared identity often based on a place of origin, common language and culture. He defines transnationalism as a notion referring to different kinds of global or cross-border connections, and identity (although a slippery notion) as ways in which people conceive themselves and are characterized by others. He continues that “identities are seen to be generated in, and constructed through, a kind of internal (self-attributed) and external (other-ascribed) dialectic conditioned within specific social worlds” (577). Hence, certain contemporary migrants negotiate their identities in transnational spaces, namely “within social worlds that span more than one place” (573). Obviously, newer and more efficient technologies of communication and transportation allow migrants to maintain tighter transnational connections which, in their turn, have a considerable economic, political, and socio-cultural impact on the migrants’ identity.

Drawing from Aihwa Ong, Vertovec continues that the ensuing transnational, multiple identities give way to ‘flexible’ frameworks of citizenship (576). At the same time, he also acknowledges that there are diverse approaches to transnational influences on identity construction and expression due to differing migration processes, group and individual experiences, policies, institutional settings, and even culturally gendered rules that permeate transnational social fields. All in all, “transnationalism presents possibilities of unfixing identities - particularly nation-derived ones - and arriving at new, cosmopolitan perspectives on culture and belonging” (580).

Kennedy and Roudometof (2002) argue that transnational relationships need to be understood as expressions of broader social trends, not confined to the experience of immigrants but shaping the lives of people engaged in other kinds of networks as well. Thus, they highlight that the non-migrant flows of cultural practices are equally important to the transnational flows of people. Communities are no longer defined according to physical proximity (locality and residence), but are founded on shared cultural outlooks and values, constantly negotiated by members. Of course the rapid pace of globalization has generated a delocalization (in Stuart Hall's term) of cultures, their supposedly fixed and internally coherent nature being seriously challenged. With distance no longer an impediment, cultures interconnect and overlap more and more, and the idea of transculturality surfaces. Migrants still perpetuate active linkage between homeland and host country, but members of the second-, third- or fourth-generation "might be empowered to reinvent and revitalize their former national cultural identities long after it seemed that they had moved firmly in the direction of host society assimilation" (13). The resulting transnational cultures give way to the formation of 'communities of taste', shared beliefs or economic interests.

According to Arjun Appadurai (2000), within these deterritorialized communities social interactions take place "across, beyond, outside and frequently without any reference to particular nations, borders and identities" (13). Transnational migrants, alongside tourists, professionals, and other groups of people, occupy these spaces (called 'ethnoscapes' by Appadurai) and are all exposed to local and global influences simultaneously. Some transnational links might still be constructed primarily based on ethnic loyalties (keeping in mind that ethnic communities are heterogeneous themselves), but others are shaped according to different affiliations (globalized communities of meaning cohere around shared lifestyle, leisure, business and so on). It is now possible for individuals to participate in more than one kind of community and have multiple affiliations at the same time, which is empowering for both individuals and groups. In conclusion, Kennedy and Roudometof posit that transnational communities are destined to provide the most significant form of 'community' in the future, now that 'place' is increasingly being replaced by an imagined or symbolic unit of shared meanings.

Cultures are, as I have underlined several times in this chapter, never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic and exclusionary in the relation of Self to Other. Homi Bhabha insists that a cultural text cannot be sufficient unto itself because it is crossed by the *difference* of

writing. This difference in the process of language “is crucial to the production of meaning and ensures, at the same time, that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent” (*Location of Culture* 35-6). Hence, the intervention of the Third Space (capitalized by Bhabha in this text) of enunciation makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process. And when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space, then

[w]e begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity. (...) It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (Bhabha 37)

Therefore, such a space offers unlimited possibilities of unsettling static conceptions about national identities. This hybrid space enables and empowers minorities to articulate their difference and to envision a future in which identity constructions are rewritten in a productive manner.

In his book *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (2004), Edward Soja juxtaposes his ideas to those of Homi Bhabha as he develops his concept of ‘Thirdspace’, a space of radical openness and hybridity. As we have seen, hybridity represents a third space which enables other positions to emerge, and Bhabha’s ‘Third Space’ is firmly rooted in the experience of post-coloniality as it explicitly challenges hegemonic historiography. In Soja’s opinion, the fruitful ‘in-between’ spaces Bhabha identifies “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (143). Thus, both scholars propose a space that echoes the chosen marginality of figures such as bell hooks, Gayatri Spivak, or Edward Said.

Drawing heavily on Lefebvre, Soja states from the onset that the objective of his book is to encourage readers “to think differently about the meanings and significance of space and those related concepts that compose and comprise the inherent *spatiality of human life*: place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory, and geography” (1). We are intrinsically spatial beings and we participate actively in the social construction of space. But here space is understood as an ever-changing, constantly shifting “milieu of ideas, events, appearances and meanings” (2), and Soja uses Thirdspace as a tentative and flexible term meant

to capture these meanings and open up new ones. Hence, Thirdspace represents at once a space of extraordinary openness and a place of critical exchange, “where the geographical imagination can be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives that have heretofore been considered by the epistemological referees to be incompatible, uncombinable. It is a space where issues of race, class, and gender can be addressed simultaneously without privileging one over the other (...)” (5).

Spatiality has been ignored for too long, while people placed emphasis only on the historicity and sociality of human life. Nevertheless, Soja claims that there is a growing awareness of the simultaneity, inseparability and interdependence of the social, the historical, and the spatial:

And this three-sided sensibility of spatiality-historicity-sociality is not only bringing about a profound change in the ways we think about space, it is also beginning to lead to major revisions in how we study history and society. The challenge being raised in *Thirdspace* is therefore transdisciplinary in scope. It cuts across all perspectives and modes of thought, and is not confined solely to geographers, architects, urbanists and others for whom spatial thinking is a primary professional occupation. (3)

French metaphilosopher Henri Lefebvre has, of course, been more influential than any other scholar in opening up and exploring the limitless dimensions of social spatiality. He argued forcefully for linking historicity, sociality, and spatiality in a balanced and transdisciplinary ‘triple dialectic’. Lefebvre dismissed all forms of categorical or binary logic, and insisted that “two terms (and the oppositions and antinomies built around them) are never enough. *Il y a toujours l’Autre*, there is always an-Other term, with *Autre/Other* capitalized to emphasize its critical importance” (qtd. in Soja 7). Lefebvre fought binaries and the compacting of meaning into an either/or opposition between two terms, concepts, or elements, thus transforming the closed logic of either/or into “the dialectically open logic of both/and also” (Soja 60). For Lefebvre every conclusion is also an opening, and, as a result, never-ending variations on recurrent spatial themes exist. Therefore, his ‘thirthing’ introduces a critical ‘other-than’ choice that continuously critiques through its otherness, that does not simply derive from combining its binary antecedents, “but rather from a disordering, deconstruction, and tentative reconstitution of their presumed totalization producing an open alternative that is both similar and strikingly different” (Soja 61). This ‘alternative’ is open to additional ‘othernesses’, leading to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge.

Lefebvre identified three kinds of spaces: the *perceived* space of materialized Spatial practice; the *conceived* space he defined as Representations of Space; and the *lived* Spaces of Representation (a combination of the two). Soja equates these with Firstspace (the 'real' material world), Secondspace (a perspective that interprets the material reality through 'imagined' representations of spatiality), and *Thirdspace* (a creative recombination and extension, one that builds on and extends the first two). The latter is a product of a 'thirthing' of the spatial imagination, and it draws from traditional distinction between the material and mental spaces. At the same time, it "extends well beyond them in scope, substance, and meaning. Simultaneously real and imagined and more (both and also...), the exploration of Thirdspace can be described and inscribed in journeys to 'real-and-imagined' (or perhaps 'realandimagined'?) places" (11). There is a radical openness to Thirdspace, a strategic flexibility in dealing with multiple forms of oppression and inequality in the areas of race, gender, and ethnicity, typically associated with global economic and political restructuring.

Henri Lefebvre does not simply locate this space of radical openness 'in-between' the center and the periphery(ies), or in some additive combination of them. It stretches 'beyond', in a (third) world that could be entered and explored through *metaphilosophy* (the summative description he provided for his methodology). While he described himself as being at the same time peripheral and central, he underlined the fact that he takes sides with the periphery. He is thus the insider who purposefully chooses to remain outside, and this center-periphery relation echoes another dialectic, namely the relation between the 'conceived' (*conçu*) and the 'lived' (*vécu*), or as he also describes it, the relation between the 'representations of space' and the 'spaces of representation'.

As I have shown above, the materialized, socially produced space is described by Lefebvre as *perceived* space (the real, physical space that Soja dubs 'Firstspace'). It is the traditional focus of attention in all the spatial disciplines. *Conceived* space, on the other hand, refers to the mental, imagined space that Soja has termed 'Secondspace'. These 'representations of space' (to use Lefebvre's phrase) are in fact representations of power, ideology and control, and they are the primary spaces of utopian thought, as well as of the purely creative imagination of artists and poets. Soja clarifies this idea: "In its purest form, Secondspace is entirely ideational, made up of projections into the empirical world from conceived or imagined geographies. This does not mean that there is no material reality, no Firstspace, but rather that

the knowledge of this material reality is comprehended essentially through thought, as *res cogito*, literally ‘thought things’” (79). Finally, *lived* spaces (or ‘spaces of representation’) are seen by Lefebvre as distinct from the first two, but also encompassing them. Directly lived space is a strategic location from which to understand and potentially transform all the other spaces. Combining the real and the imagined, while not privileging one over the other, these lived spaces of representation provide the terrain for the generation of ‘counterspaces’, described as spaces of resistance to the dominant order arising precisely from their subordinate, peripheral or marginalized positioning. “With its foregrounding of relations of dominance, subordination, and resistance; its subliminal mystery and limited knowability; its radical openness and teeming imagery, this third space of Lefebvre closely approximates what I am defining as Thirdspace”, Soja concludes (68).

In a nutshell, spaces of representation contain all other real and imagined spaces simultaneously, without freezing them in a fixed dimension of space. Rather, this new dimension of space is constantly changing and opening up to new spaces: “It is disorderly, unruly, constantly evolving, unfixed, never presentable in permanent constructions” (Soja 70). However, it is important to underline the fact that the ‘third’ term - and Thirdspace as a concept - is not sanctified in and of itself. Soja insists that: “The critique is not meant to stop at three, to construct a holy trinity, but to build further, to move on, to continuously expand the production of knowledge beyond what is presently known” (61).

Thirdspace, as Soja defines it, retains the multiple meanings Lefebvre ascribed to social space. It is both a space that is distinguishable from other spaces (physical and mental, or First and Second) and a transcending composite of all spaces. In order to capture this limitless feature of Thirdspace, Edward Soja uses Borges’ beautiful allegory of the Aleph, namely the place ‘where all places are’. The Argentine writer describes this point in space that contains all other points: “The Aleph’s diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished” (qtd. in Soja 56). Aleph (or Alef) is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the number 1 (also in Hebrew). Its esoteric meaning relates to the origin of the universe. By analogy, lived social space is Lefebvre’s infinite Aleph, the space of all inclusive simultaneities, perils and possibilities, as well as the space of social struggle. By attaching the meanings of the Aleph to Lefebvre’s conceptualization of the production of space, Soja reinforces at the same time the radical openness he is trying to convey as Thirdspace. It is, then,

“the space where all places are, capable of being seen from every angle, each standing clear; but also a secret and conjectured object, filled with illusions and allusions, a space that is common to all of us yet never able to be completely seen and understood, an ‘unimaginable universe’, or as Lefebvre would put it, ‘the most general of products’” (56-7). In other words, *everything* comes together in Soja’s sense of Thirdspace: “subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history” (57). On the contrary, anything which tries to fragment Thirdspace into separate specialized knowledges or exclusive domains in fact destroys its meaning and openness.

Thus, Lefebvre has opened the way to a ‘trialectics of spatiality’, always insisting that each mode of thinking about space (be it physical, mental, or social) should be seen as real and imagined, concrete and abstract, material and metaphorical at the same time. In the last chapter of *La Production de l’espace*, entitled “Openings and Conclusions”, Lefebvre proclaims that space is becoming the principal stake of goal-directed actions and struggles. Although it has always been the reservoir of resources and the medium in which strategies are applied, only recently has space become something more than the theatre, the disinterested stage of action. More importantly perhaps, space does not eliminate the other elements that play a part in the socio-political arena, but brings them all together. Space is a medium, a milieu, and an intermediary, “more and more active, both as instrument and as goal, as means and as end” (Lefebvre qtd. in Soja 45). This leads Soja to the conclusion that space now accrues to itself everything that has been formerly attached to the social production of time as history or social historicity. And in this rebalanced trialectic of spatiality-historicity-sociality, social reality does not simply exist ‘in’ space, but “it is presuppositionally and ontologically spatial. *There is no unspatialized social reality*. There are no aspatial social processes” (46, emphasis in the original).

As we have seen, Thirdspace is filled with the real and the imagined intertwined, but also with politics and ideology, with capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and other material spatial practices. People at the margins now deliberately choose to inhabit these ‘dominated spaces’, in order to carry out their fight for liberation and emancipation. For example bell hooks, the well-known black intellectual, has chosen to envelop and develop this *marginality* as a space “from

which to build communities of resistance and renewal that cross the boundaries and double-cross the binaries of race, gender, class, and all oppressively Othering categories” (Soja 84). At once, ‘peripheralness’ becomes a strategic positioning that disorders, disrupts, and transgresses the center-periphery relationship. Soja explains that hooks chooses marginality and in this way “opens up in these real-and-imagined other spaces a Thirdspace of possibilities for a new cultural politics of difference and identity that is both radically postmodern and consciously spatialized from the beginning” (96). Because we are not dealing with an imposed marginality anymore, but with one chosen consciously as a site of resistance, the margins themselves are being restructured and recentered, thus creating new spaces of opportunity and action. hooks gives special attention to the homeplace (the private space where there is no direct encounter with racist aggression) and its social construction, used by African-American women in particular as a ‘community of resistance’. The links between space and power are both oppressive and enabling, containing possibilities of empowerment of the ‘subaltern’ against the ‘hegemon’.

However, as Michel Foucault has warned, the multisidedness of power and its relation to the cultural politics of difference and identity is often oversimplified into hegemonic and counter-hegemonic categories used to maintain modes of social and spatial division: “‘We’ and ‘they’ are dichotomously spatialized and enclosed in an imposed territoriality of apartheid, ghettos, barrios, reservations, colonies, fortresses, metropolises, citadels, and other trappings that emanate from the center-periphery relation. In this sense, hegemonic power universalizes and *contains* difference in real and imagined spaces and places” (Foucault qtd. in Soja 87).

Edward Soja moves on to provide an overview of modernist spatial feminist critique, which focused on the social production resulting in a gendering of space (especially the space of the city). One of the lead figures of this school, Dolores Hayden, showed that suburbanization in fact equated with the (symbolic) marginalization of women. Postmodernist spatial critique has widened the orbit of spatial thought and praxis, extending it beyond the traditional Firstspace and Secondspace binary. This school of thought pays particular attention to the spatiality and sensuality of the body, giving it “a central positioning in the critical interpretation of the real-and-imagined geographies of everyday life in and outside the city. In Elizabeth Grosz’s words, ‘the city is made and made over into the simulacrum of the body, and the body, in its turn, is transformed, ‘citified’, urbanized as a distinctively metropolitan body’” (qtd. in Soja 112). Postcolonial critique finally allows the ‘subaltern’ to speak and pushes the discourse into an

unprecedented space where both development and social justice can be revised together, along with their histories and geographies. The resulting Thirdspace is not a simple additive or 'in-between' positioning. Instead, it launches an invitation to continuous deconstruction and reconstitution, to an incessant effort to move beyond the established limits of our understanding of the world.

Gloria Anzaldúa and Maria Lugones both manage to exploit the multiple meanings of the border as lived space to their favor. Anzaldúa writes of 'cultural borderlands' (spaces where two cultures edge each other, giving way to a positive encounter), but also of psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands. The openness of Thirdspace is evident again, as the border becomes a zone of crossing and alterity, leading to renewal and emancipation. Maria Lugones is a 'world-traveler', and by 'world-traveling' she understands "the shift from being one person to being a different person" (qtd. in Soja 131). World-travelers are, then, on a journey towards becoming oneself. All such 'excursions' take into account the fact that people are historical-social-spatial beings, actively participating individually and collectively in the construction of histories, geographies, and societies.

To sum up, I would like to revisit the defining qualities of Thirdspace. Thus, it is concomitantly a knowable and unknowable, real and imagined space of experiences, emotions, events, and political choices. It is an unlimited space, existentially shaped by the problematic interplay between centers and peripheries, the abstract and concrete, the conceptual and the lived.

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While taking into consideration these sociological and urban studies approaches, my thesis will focus mainly on the discourses, the narratives and the style that produces, expresses, and represents the situation of Lahiri's immigrant characters, and the way in which they forge their identities. I will show how such discourses may in fact empower some underprivileged personages (her female characters in particular). As I have discussed above, post-colonial theorizations have often privileged the space of articulation over the lived experiences of individuals in real time and space. Keeping in mind that spaces of articulation are closely intertwined with the location occupied by subjects, I will focus on the relationships of the personages that populate Lahiri's fiction with the lived space of the house, with the city and its

inhabitants, and with each other. In this way I will be able not only to understand her significant oeuvre, but also to sketch patterns of identity formation and emancipation of Indian-Americans.

Others have, of course, looked at the emancipatory possibilities emerging from diasporic spaces. Aparajita De, for instance, investigates in her dissertation *Mapping Subjectivities: The Cultural Poetics of Mobility and Identity in South Asian Diasporic Literature* (2009) the ways in which several women writers (including Lahiri) represent tropes of belonging and emancipation in their works. She views location (both the physical and the ideological spaces occupied by the individual) as many superimposed spatial frameworks, negotiated within one geographical place and a particular time frame. Her conclusion is that “subjectivity in the diaspora develops as a function of the space the individual inhabits, experiences, and responds to” (3). Hence, her project aims to reconceptualize “public spaces as a context and constituent of social experience and as a site of hybrid articulation” (25). However, while she puts Lahiri in dialogue with other South Asian authors, De only looks at *The Namesake* and analyzes Gogol’s life experiences which eventually lead him to resolve his hybrid location and reconcile his cultural and identitarian plurality.

In her PhD thesis entitled *Translating Postcolonial Pasts: Immigration and Identity in the Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee, Elizabeth Nunez, and Jhumpa Lahiri* (2011), Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero examines how the female protagonists’ pasts are translated in the United States. Looking through the triple lens of postcolonial theory, ethnic American studies, and transnational feminism, she shows how all these authors offer a transnational model of belonging for their characters. She starts from analyzing the controversial question “Is the U.S. postcolonial and to what extent?” and cites two scholars, Jenny Sharpe and Inderpal Grewal, who both argue that it indeed is postcolonial, via its immigration policies favoring skilled ‘third world’ workers, and via its role in maintaining global consumerism. Thus, the U.S. has become “a neoliberal imperialist power precisely because of the colonialism that preceded it in countries such as India” (Alfonso-Forero 17), and it is postcolonial in that it has created certain “indigenous elites” whose members act transnationally in the capitalist interests of the global consumerist system. The borders paradigm covers the paradoxes of American identity and the processes taking place during the transition from former colony to hegemonic power.

Alfonso-Forero then quotes Spivak and Gilroy who both scrutinize the shift from postcoloniality to contemporary transnational approaches. The two critics warn that America’s

neocolonial role should be acknowledged as a reinscription of previous colonial relationships, at home and abroad. Internal colonization, as Alonso-Forero calls it, manifests itself by requiring immigrants to be 'more American', and to achieve economic success. In fact, all transnational feminists agree that there are many strategies for employing female agency, and that particular circumstances must be taken into consideration in order to establish which of these strategies is favored by each ethnic character. She demonstrates in her thesis how Ashima of Lahiri's *The Namesake* "utilizes what some might understand as traditional gender roles to challenge the idea that she must consider herself either Indian or American and adopts a culturally mobile transnational identity" (25). She constructs this identity starting from her home which becomes "a potentially transnational space in Lahiri's fiction" (128).

Picking up on this last idea, I would like to argue that there is a clear progression in Jhumpa Lahiri's works, from first-generation immigrants who struggle to translate between home and alien culture (Mrs. Sen from *Interpreter of Maladies* is an obvious example), to fellow first-generation characters who become transnational migrants after spending a lifetime in the United States (Ashima Ganguli from *The Namesake*, as has already been stated, but also Ruma's father from *Unaccustomed earth* represents the same typology), and to second-generation representatives who have allegiances to multiple places and a much more dynamic relationship to the concept of 'home' (Moushumi from *The Namesake* and several characters from *Unaccustomed Earth*, such as Sang from "Nobody's Business" and Sudha from "Only Goodness"). Thus, immigration in Lahiri's oeuvre starts out as a sort of lifelong pregnancy, but it eventually results in the delivery of a transnational self.

Chapter 1

Cultural Translations, Interpretations, and Misinterpretations

This chapter will look at Lahiri's debut collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and demonstrate its negotiations of cultural translation. The nine stories share common themes such as the sense of loss, marital problems, and the importance of communication, all set against the backdrop of the migrant experience. The subtitle of the collection is "Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond", which points to the transnational trajectories of its characters, most of whom are Bengali, immigrate to the United States and settle in the Boston area. However, the use of 'beyond' indicates that their diasporic journey is not necessarily restricted to the physical place. Instead, it can be viewed as an immensely rich, universal experience that unites people across continents. In fact, Indian-American writer and journalist Amitava Kumar (2000) characterized Lahiri as "a seasoned translator" and "a global soul", and posited that her fiction produced from a space of 'in-betweenness' reflects this globalism. Interestingly, however, the subtitle is not included in the American editions of her volume.

The protagonists of Lahiri's short stories live in two or more linguistic and cultural worlds and constantly try to create an intratextual dialogue between them. It is not an easy task, but one that is implicit in such types of cultural negotiation. Lahiri herself acknowledges in an interview that it is hard to have parents who consider another place 'home', and that "even after living abroad for thirty years, India is home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here" (Patel, 1999, para 5). Hence, her own representation of India in the stories is in fact her 'translation of India'. What is more, in her essay "Intimate Alienation: Immigrant Fiction and Translation" (2002), Lahiri evaluates her role as translator in order to define her own identity and work. She writes: "I am the first one to admit my knowledge of India is limited, the way in which all translations are. [...] And whether I write as an American or as an Indian, about things American or otherwise, one thing remains constant: I translate therefore I am" (120). The act of translation is intrinsically linked to the practice of writing and greatly influences her notion of self-representation. As Salman Rushdie also points out, it is a process where something is lost and something is gained, similar to immigration: "The word 'translation' comes, etymologically, from the Latin for 'bearing across'. Having been borne across the world,

we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained” (*Imaginary Homelands* 17).

My reading of Lahiri’s work embraces this positive connotation of the interpreter/translator who becomes a major intercultural mediator. I believe the metaphor of translation makes a solid connection between two linguistic and cultural contexts. Yet, what is interesting and fresh in her stories is the fact that she uses adult characters but also children endowed with a surprising maturity in order to capture a wide range of cultural negotiations. Childhood is an important trope, present in seven of the nine stories. As Michael Cox observes, Lahiri’s child protagonists possess an “awareness of the immigrant world in juxtaposition to the particulars of an American childhood” (121), which gives them a unique perspective. Both first- and second-generation immigrants work towards developing a new culture of Indian-Americans. The Oxford English Dictionary offers various other meanings for ‘translation’, all connected to actions of movement and change. Hence, the challenge of the translator is always going to be conveying difference while preserving similarity of meaning. And Indian children, growing up in American environments, have a first-hand part to play in that interchange.

As the theme of childhood announces, *Interpreter of Maladies* can be read as a short story cycle. At first glance such a description may seem strange, considering the fact that Lahiri’s Pulitzer Prize-winning collection features unrelated characters, different narrative styles, and no common locale. However, Noelle Brada-Williams reveals the intricate ways in which Lahiri uses pattern and motif in order to bind her stories together. These include “the recurring themes of the barriers to and opportunities for human communication; community, including marital, extra-marital, and parent-child relationships; and the dichotomy of care and neglect” (Brada-Williams 451). Obviously, the grand theme of immigration and establishing an Indian-American identity runs through the book. Although the short story cycle is a very difficult genre to define, she supports Susan Garland Mann’s assertion that the essential characteristic of this genre is the “simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence of the stories that make up the whole” (qtd. in Brada-Williams 452). Therefore, Lahiri’s choice of creating a short story cycle aims to represent as accurately as possible an entire community within the confines of a single work. Looking at the cycle as a whole, Brada-Williams concludes that Lahiri manages to fine-tune the different representations. Thus, according to her,

the cheating husbands of “Sexy” are balanced by the depiction of the unfaithful Mrs. Das of “Interpreter of Maladies”. The relative ease with which Lilia of “When Mr. Pirzada Came to

Dine” participates in an American childhood is contrasted with the separation and stigmatization that the Dixit children experience in the story “Sexy”. Mrs. Sen’s severe homesickness and separation from US culture is contrasted with the adaptability of Lilia’s mother and Mala in “The Third and Final Continent”. (453)

The rather negative depiction of an Indian community in “A Real Durwan” is balanced by the generally positive portrayal in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”, and these examples show how Lahiri “constructs a conversation among her pieces” (453). However, the most evident symmetry is achieved between the plots of the first and last stories. Thus, “The Third and Final Continent”, the narrative which closes the volume, reflects and reverses the plot of the first one, called “A Temporary Matter”. Lahiri’s choice of adjectives, ‘temporary’ versus ‘final’, also supports this point and confirms the cyclical nature of her collection. The opening story revolves around the death of a son possibly leading to the ‘death’ of a marriage, while the closing narrative provides a tale of the survival and resilience of both the parents’ marriage and their son.

Another theme of pivotal importance that unites the stories from *Interpreter of Maladies* is the dichotomy of care and neglect. Scenes referring to ‘care’ are linked to love, responsibility, and homesickness, whereas images of neglect range from small incidents like a dress which slips off its hanger or a plant that withers, to a car accident. Such subtle images reflect the characters’ emotional states and processes. Although readers are free to create their own closure for most of the stories, Brada-Williams warns that “this freedom comes with our responsibility to read *with care*” (463, emphasis in the original).

In my opinion, there are two other highly significant threads interwoven in all the texts. Namely, there is a house at the center of each story and Lahiri is always playing with the motif of stranger(s) in the house and/or country. Those who read “A Temporary Matter” get a sense of how two married people gradually become strangers within the walls of their house. By contrast, in “The Third and Final Continent” two strangers are forced into an arranged marriage, but readers witness how they close the gap between them in a house in America. In “Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, a total stranger comes to the house of a Bengali-American family and they develop a surprising intimacy and friendship. In the title story we encounter a woman who cheats on her husband, in their marital home, with a perfect stranger. “Sexy” details another extramarital relationship, unfolding in an apartment in Boston between two characters who go back to being strangers after the affair ends. In “Mrs. Sen’s” the Genitive in the title refers to her place, but she feels like a stranger in her own house and certainly in the new country. Two

Indian-Americans who get married after a distance relationship of only four months negotiate the space of their residence as well as the terms of their relationship in “This Blessed House”. Finally, the two stories that take place in India, with an exclusively Indian cast, also document the life and relationships unfolding in two apartment buildings. In “A Real Durwan”, the main character is a refugee (therefore a foreigner) who is ruthlessly kicked out of the building in which she was initially accepted, but in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” the situation is quite the opposite: the neighbors accommodate a single woman with a bizarre malady, who is impregnated by a stranger.

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“A Temporary Matter” is not only the first story in the book, but also the first short story Lahiri wrote as an adult. In “Trading Stories” (2011) she explains that this narrative is based on the life of an Indian-American couple who moved next to the Lahiris in the early 1970s and built a house identical to theirs. This parallelism obsessed Jhumpa as a child, especially since the neighborhood children would tease and ask whether “all Indians lived in matching houses” (7). But it also made her realize that their families’ lives were not parallel, since their neighbors’ baby had died at birth, while Jhumpa’s sister was born around the same time and survived. Shoba and Shukumar, the fictional characters, are estranged from each other after their baby is stillborn, and are apparently unable to overcome this tragic event and mend their relationship. Vijay Mishra argues that this story “touches so delicately on an emotional register often overlooked in theorizations about diaspora: the lived experiences of diasporic bodies as individuals, as people with their very human dilemmas” (191-92).

The story debuts with Shukumar, the male character whose point of view filters the third-person narration, finding a notice which informs them about a ‘temporary matter’: for five days the electricity would be cut off for one hour, beginning at eight P.M. The situation is not permanent, but it is out of their hands, and Shoba and Shukumar have to wait ‘in the dark’ for the repairmen to fix the line that went down during the last snowstorm. The couple has lived in this house in Boston for three years. Shoba is thirty-three, and she goes to the gym to stay fit, but otherwise has neglected her look after having given birth to a dead baby six months before. Shukumar, too, has neglected his look, not having shaved in a few days and not having brushed

his teeth the day in which the story begins. Signs of carelessness and neglect on both sides evoke a period of mourning for their lost child, but also a relationship which itself has been neglected and is on the verge of falling to pieces altogether.

At thirty-five, Shukumar is still a student, working on the final chapters of his dissertation on agrarian revolts in India. Lately he has been working at home while his wife has been spending more and more time away from the house: “The more Shoba stayed out, the more she began putting in extra hours at work and taking on additional projects, the more he wanted to stay in, not even leaving to get the mail, or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley stop” (*IOM 2*)¹. In September, while he was away attending an academic conference in Baltimore, she went into labor three weeks before she was due. He had not wanted to go, but she had insisted it was important for him to make contacts as he would be entering the job market the following year. Now Shukumar is stuck in the house, and perhaps this seclusion is a self-administered punishment for not having been by her side when she gave birth. Each time he recalls the morning he left for Baltimore, the last moment he saw Shoba pregnant, it is the cab he remembers most, a station wagon, painted red with blue lettering. Although Shukumar is tall, he remembers feeling dwarfed in the back seat and imagining a day when he and his wife would need a station wagon of their own to carry their children. Ironically, this is the first time he actually welcomes the idea of becoming a father. Upon his return to Boston, however, he finds Shoba asleep in hospital room, the tragedy having already happened.

Now she is never at home anymore, already gone to her office downtown by the time he wakes up, busy searching for typographical errors in textbooks. He, on the other hand, has not gone out in a week, but lies in bed until lunchtime, gazing absently at his side of the closet which Shoba always leaves partly open. Though he has the spring semester off to round up his thesis, he feels no drive to work. Instead, Shukumar meditates about the way in which he and his wife have become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house (meant for three), spending as much time on separate floors as possible. Interestingly, as she works more, he works less, as she buries herself in files in order to forget about the trauma, he locks himself up in the house but is unable to work. Both are grieving, but in different ways.

¹ Henceforth, direct citations from Lahiri’s works will be referenced as follows: *Interpreter of Maladies (IOM)*, *The Namesake (Namesake)*, *Unaccustomed Earth (UE)*, *The Lowland (Lowland)*.

Despite the fact that the obstetrician told Shoba her hips “were made for childbearing” (7) and gave assurances that there is nothing to indicate she will not be able to have children in the future, the ways in which the husbands have been using the space of the house indicate that neither actually wants to have another baby. Thus, they spend practically all their time in separate rooms. Every night before going upstairs to bed, Shoba comes into his study. She rests her hands on his shoulders for a few minutes and this is “the one time in the day she sought him out, and yet he’d come to dread it. He knew it was something she forced herself to do” (8). She, too, dreads coming into his study because they had prepared the room for the baby. However, in January he sets up his desk there deliberately, “partly because the room soothed him, and partly because it was a place Shoba avoided” (8). When she does come in, she looks

around the walls of the room, which they had decorated together last summer with a border of marching ducks and rabbits playing trumpets and drums. By the end of August there was a cherry crib under the window, a white changing table with mint-green knobs, and a rocking chair with checkered cushions. Shukumar had disassembled it all before bringing Shoba back from the hospital, scraping off the rabbits and ducks with a spatula. For some reason the room did not haunt him the way it haunted Shoba. (8)

So the former nursery haunts her because it is filled with the child’s ghost. It becomes the most important room in the house, representing a space they decorated together and they should have shared with joy. But he had disassembled it alone before she returned from the hospital, thus exerting some of his bereavement. Although the physical evidence has been erased, Shoba still cannot get over the fact that the room was initially meant for their baby. She has to make tremendous efforts to even walk into the room, all too aware of the child’s absence. Maybe she even thinks it is a sacrilege on his behalf to have gotten rid of ‘the rabbits and ducks’ so soon. Shukumar transformed the former nursery into his home office, yet he too is haunted in a way by the baby’s ghost and is rarely able to write a single line.

Before the dramatic event they were a happy couple, well-adjusted to America, preparing to welcome a new member into the family while successfully combining elements from the Indian culture (food, entertaining, rituals) with parts from the Western one (living in a suburban house, having middle-class jobs). Shoba “was the type to prepare for surprises, good and bad” (6), a woman who blended the American and Indian cultures extremely well. On the one hand she had a satisfying career, while also taking good care of her appearance, on the other hand she ran the household like an Indian matriarch, always stacking the pantry with countless boxes of pasta, sacks of basmati rice, or plastic bags of lamb and goat meat, as well as extra bottles of

olive and corn oil she needed when cooking Indian or Italian. Every other Saturday she and Shukumar used to go grocery shopping and “[h]e watched in disbelief as she bought more food, trailing behind her with canvas bags as she pushed through the crowd, arguing under the morning sun with boys (...) who twisted up brown paper bags of artichokes, plums, gingerroot, and yams, and dropped them on their scales, and tossed them to Shoba one by one” (7). At the market she displayed a very Indian attitude: pushing her way through the crowd, bargaining for better prices, and acquiring large quantities of food. During the drive back home, both marveled at how much food they had bought, although she was clearly the one in charge. But all the food did not go to waste, because Shoba would get home and cook for the whole week. Moreover, she loved to entertain and prepare elaborate meals for their numerous friends. Before the tragedy they thought the jars and bottles would last for their grandchildren to taste, but they had consumed the provisions in just a few months.

Shoba’s emotional state is reflected in the abundance of her pantry (before giving birth) and in the emptiness of the shelves (after the stillbirth). Her Indianness surfaces again, because during periods of mourning Indians cook less and do not eat certain foods at all. Now Shukumar is the one who presides over the kitchen, preparing meals for the two of them, finishing up her last supplies, using her cookbooks. He notices that each recipe has a date on it representing the first time they ate the dish together, even though “he had no memory of eating those meals, and yet there they were, recorded in her proofreader’s hand” (7). For the past months they have been eating separately, he in his study, pretending to work, she in the living room, watching game shows or doing some extra work. He is aware of the way in which their roles have reversed since their baby’s death because now if he did not cook Shoba would only eat a bowl of cereal for her dinner.

Forced by the circumstances, he is cooking lamb when his wife comes home the first night of power cuts. He can only find some birthday candles to provide light, and recalls the surprise birthday party she had thrown for him the previous year. One hundred and twenty people had crammed into the house that day. They now systematically avoid these people and the house is empty, echoing the loneliness between the two. Since September their only guest has been Shoba’s mother, who came from Arizona and stayed with them for two months, helping with household chores. A first-generation Indian immigrant, Shoba’s mother is integrated in America (she drives around, has had a job in a department store) but still displays an Indian

attitude (she sets up a shrine and prays twice a day for grandchildren). What is more, she comes to comfort her daughter and takes up a motherly role in times of hardship, namely cooking dinner every night and doing their laundry. Although she is polite to Shukumar and never talks to him about Shoba, once, when he mentions the baby's death, she looks up from her knitting and says, "But you weren't even there" (9). All this time, she has probably blamed him tacitly because her daughter had to go through the traumatic experience alone. But does Shoba agree with her? Maybe the distance between them is also due to the fact that she, too, blames him for being absent that night. Because they were not together when the baby was born and died, they now undergo individual, separate mourning processes. Despite their previously shared happiness, love, and cultural ties, they do not share the grief until the very last paragraph of the story.

Shukumar places the birthday candles in the soil of a potted ivy, and although "the plant was inches from the tap, the soil was so dry that he had to water it first before the candles would stand straight" (10). This image also resonates with the state of their relationship: none took the time to water the ivy, even though it would have been an effortless act. They lost interest in their shared environment, as they did in keeping the relationship alive. Noelle Brada-Williams writes that "[t]aken together, the sheer number of these small failures to provide care helps to define the depths of Shoba and Shukumar's common yet isolated experience of grief for their lost child as well as their waning care and love for each other" (457). They act like strangers living in the same house. In fact, Shoba now treats the whole house "as if it were a hotel" (*IOM* 6), an impersonal space in which she feels 'unhomely'. While setting the table, Shukumar remembers their first meals in that very kitchen, back when they were thrilled to be living in the same house at last, more eager to make love than to eat. But when his wife comes downstairs she walks absently towards the stove and notices unenthusiastically that he has made paprika stew served with lentils and rice.

Then the lights go out, and Shoba remarks that it is like India where the current sometimes disappears for hours at a stretch. She continues that she once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark, and stresses how "[t]he baby just cried and cried" (11). Shukumar thinks that their baby never cried and would never have a rice ceremony, even though Shoba (meticulous as usual) already made the guest list, and decided which of her three brothers she was going to ask to feed the child its first taste of solid food, at six months if it was a boy, seven if it was a girl (according to Indian rituals). The same thoughts probably cross her mind also, but

neither says anything. Instead she mentions the food is delicious and they drink wine together, but the silence that follows is heavy and awkward. The two are not used to communicating anymore, and they are even uncomfortable to be in the same space. Shukumar struggles to say something that interests her, and eventually learns “not to mind the silences” (12).

However, on this first night of power cuts, Shoba remembers that during power failures in India they sometimes told each other jokes or facts about the world. Her relatives always wanted her to tell them the names of people in America, fascinated with any piece of information about that faraway ‘promise land’. Indians are intrigued by the ‘riches’ of America, while their country is presented as extremely poor: the electricity is cut off periodically and Shukumar nearly died of amoebic dysentery when he was in India as an infant. Afterwards his parents went back to visit their relatives without him. Thus, as a teenager Shukumar preferred sailing camp or scooping ice cream during the summers to going to Calcutta. After his father died, in his last year of college, the country suddenly began to interest him, and he started to study its history from course books in a search for his roots. But he is less connected to their parents’ homeland than his wife, and wishes now “that he had his own childhood story of India” (12) so he could relate more to a common cultural background and, simultaneously, to her. Had the baby lived, they would have organized a rice ceremony and would have brought him up to incorporate their Indian heritage. While regretting that he only has a fragile link with the *desh*, Shukumar also mourns the fact that his baby has not survived to have its own ‘childhood story of India’.

Starting from her childhood memory, Shoba proposes to trade secrets in the intimacy provided by the darkness. She breaks the ice and lets him know that the first time she was alone in his apartment she peeked in his address book to see if he had written her in. At first he cannot think of anything to say; he recalls the first time they met, at a recital in Cambridge given by a group of Bengali poets. He was bored and noticed the beautiful woman sitting next to him. Now it strikes him each day that her once breathtaking beauty is fading away (a physical sign of the trauma), and “the cosmetics that had seemed superfluous were necessary now, not to improve her but to define her somehow” (14). Eventually, he confesses that the first time they went to dinner he forgot to tip the waiter so he went back the next day to do that. He explains he was distracted because by the end of the meal he had a funny feeling that he might marry her.

The following day, Shukumar goes out to buy candles and actually looks forward to the lights going out. After eating the lamb that was left over, they do the dishes together but act

almost like strangers, “their reflections fitting together in the frame of the window” (15). At eight o’clock the house goes black and they go outside, sit on the steps, and watch people pass. Everyone seems to be on the street, and the Bradfords, an American couple from the suburb, announce they are going to the bookstore. These neighbors had left a sympathy card in Shoba and Shukumar’s mailbox in September, acknowledging their pain but not coming into the house and establishing a closer connection.

Meanwhile, Shukumar is wondering what her confession will be on this second night – is she going to admit to having an affair? Will she blame him outright for being away when she gave birth, like her mother did? Does she not respect him anymore because he is still a student while she has a promising career? But she eventually says that one night when his mother had come to visit she lied about staying late at work and went for a drink with her friend Gillian instead. Shukumar’s mother came to spend a few weeks with her son and his wife so they could commemorate together the twelve years since his father had passed. Each night she would cook something his father had liked, “but she was too upset to eat the dishes herself, and her eyes would well up as Shoba stroked her hand” (17). Now he pictures his wife complaining to Gillian about her mother-in-law’s visit, and this bothers him even more since Gillian was the one who drove Shoba to the hospital when she went into labor. Shukumar’s own confession is that he cheated on his oriental civilization exam in college; he copied an answer from an American guy who knew Urdu and Sanskrit. She presses his hand, and they sit together until lights come back on, when they go inside hand in hand.

On the third night he admits that he sold a vest she had given him as a gift for their anniversary and then got drunk on the money, and on the fourth night he confesses to having ripped out the picture of a woman in a fashion magazine and had looked at it for a week. Shoba was pregnant then and her stomach was “suddenly immense, to the point where Shukumar no longer wanted to touch her” (19), but this is the closest he has come to infidelity. She does not say anything, but takes his hand again: “Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again” (19). Thus, the third night after the mutual confessions they kiss, and the fourth they walk “carefully upstairs, to bed, feeling together for the final step with their feet before the landing, and making love with a desperation they had forgotten” (19). She weeps without sound and then whispers his name, while he wonders what their confessions would be the next day, this thought exciting him and somehow reconnecting him to his wife.

On the fifth day the electric line is repaired ahead of schedule. Shukumar is disappointed; he was eager to cook shrimp *malai* for Shoba and he is afraid their newly recovered intimacy is going to be ruined. They still eat together in candlelight, but after finishing the shrimp and the first bottle of wine, Shoba declares that this is the end of their game. She blows the candle and turns on the light switch, saying “I want you to see my face when I tell you this” (21). His heart begins to pound since she used the same words the day she announced she was pregnant. He does not want her to be pregnant again, and he does not want “to have to pretend to be happy” (21). Instead, she says she has been looking for an apartment and has found one within walking distance from her office. Symbolically, the house is on Beacon Hill, showing she is ready for a fresh start, away from the ‘dark’ house they share. She has even signed the lease that very night before coming home.

Shukumar realizes that while his confessions have been relatively benign and “have no real bearing on her” (Williams 72), Shoba spent these past evenings preparing for a life without him. Williams underlines that Shoba’s confessions “suggest a progression away from her husband, and increasing degrees of knowledge and agency” (72). She has carefully prepared her move, because in order for her to overcome the grief she needs to leave the ‘haunted’ house, a constant reminder of their dead child. Their reconciliation was only a temporary matter, a misinterpretation on his part, Laura Anh Williams concludes. She argues that:

Although the story is told from Shukumar’s perspective, Shoba has agency outside of his knowledge, as demonstrated by her refusal to restock the pantry or cook for her husband, actions that correspond to her development of an independent self that Shukumar knows nothing about. Finally this agency allows her to move past their tragedy to a new life that does not contain Shukumar’s nutritionally and psychically consumptive and exhaustive presence and practices. (Williams 72)

But the story has one final twist. At one time he wondered what the point of her game was, what they did not know about each other. He knew all the little details, but also remembered that when they returned from the hospital the first thing she did was pick out different things from all the rooms and throw them into a pile in the hallway, “books from the shelves, plants from the windowsills, paintings from walls, photos from tables, pots and pans that hung from the hooks over the stove” (*IOM* 16). This should have indicated the fact that she would no longer be able to share that/a house with him.

Nevertheless, his final confession is going to be his revenge. Shoba had asked the doctor not to tell them the sex of the baby, seeking solace in this mystery. What she never suspected was that Shukumar had arrived from Baltimore just in time to see the baby and to hold it for a few minutes. As the doctor had suggested, these moments made the difference and helped him in the grieving process. Thus he announces: “Our baby was a boy. His skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighed almost five pounds. His fingers were curled shut, just like yours in the night” (22). His tone is distant, the details are meant to hurt her, just like she hurt him with the decision to move out. The description is so accurate that one can ‘see’ the baby; for the first time in the story its looming absence is transformed into an overwhelming presence. She looks at him, her face contorted with sorrow, and they are both confronted with the enormity of the truth: “He had held his son, who had known life only within her, against his chest in a darkened room in an unknown wing of the hospital. He had held him until a nurse knocked and took him away, and he promised himself that day that he would never tell Shoba, because he still loved her then, and it was the one thing in her life that she had wanted to be a surprise” (22). The fact that they had a boy is important (Indian tradition welcomes male newborns), and so is the detail that it looked exactly like its mother.

Initially the two characters are seemingly very skilled at translating between their Indian background and the American society in which they live. Shukumar, who does not have very strong ties with his heritage to begin with, wishes he did and is determined to raise his child according to the requirements of their shared Indianness. At the same time, when his wife stops cooking, he takes over and prepares excellent traditional foods. He is not a typical Lahirian male character because he is not well-assimilated in the work field, but prefers to do domestic chores rather than strive for a good job. Shoba, on the other hand, seems to be perfect at managing an Indian household and a demanding American career at the same time. She is an expert at preparing elaborate meals, stocking the pantry for winter, and taking care of the housework in general. Meanwhile, she is also careful with her appearance, using make-up and going to the gym.

However, their roles are inverted after the baby’s death. I think Shoba went to great lengths in order to maintain a functional marriage and a well-organized household because she was preparing to raise a child in the Indian tradition while smoothly navigating between the happy home and the American workplace. I am arguing that she was hoping to continue in her

mother's footsteps and be successful at both these endeavors. But, the fact that she abruptly stops taking care of the house and of her own body reveals her break from the traditional feminine roles she once embraced. Unable to pass down her Indian heritage, she shuns the 'ideal' of devoted wife and mother she adhered to before, and decides to stir towards Americanness. She wants to move alone to an apartment that is closer to her office, intending to dedicate herself to her work. Although the story is narrated from the male character's point of view, I believe he is a foil meant to highlight the changes Shoba goes through as a result of her failed motherhood. The doctor reassures her she is physically fit to give birth again, yet she apparently has no desire to do so and rejects this culturally determined role altogether. It is as if she is blaming herself for not having brought to life a healthy baby, and seeks refuge in the impersonal spaces of the office and of a new house which is not imbued with Shukumar's presence and their child's absence.

In the closing scene Shukumar takes the plates to the sink and looks out the window at the Bradfords walking arm in arm. Now that all their dark secrets are out in the light, Shoba turns off the switch and they sit at the table and weep "for the things they now knew" (22). The title and the open ending might lead to the conclusion that the two decide to split up. After all, Shoba has just leased an apartment and declared she intends to live alone. However, it is the first time that they actually grieve *together*, so the last paragraph might contain a flicker of hope for their relationship. Neither was prepared for how crushing the experience of losing a child would be, but perhaps the mourning period (coinciding with a time during which their marriage stopped working) is over and they have uncovered the love that united them in the beginning. It could, then, be a temporary matter until they have another child. Lahiri does not suggest remedies for the emotional maladies of her characters, but leaves it up to the readers to decide whether in the case of Shoba and Shukumar communication is the solution.

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"When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is the second story in the book and it breaks with the theme of marital problems, although it does feature a married couple. However, the focus is on the couple's friendship with Mr. Pirzada in the few months before and during the twelve days of East Pakistan's war of independence. Lilia, their child and the story's narrator, observes the interesting friendship that is created between her Indian parents and Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani

from Dacca: “Most of all I remember the three of them operating during that time as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear” (41). Ironically, this unity is only achieved in a house in America, as across the globe their nations are in opposite camps and prepare to enter the war that will eventually allow East Pakistan to become the independent nation of Bangladesh. But human connection and communication prevail and diasporans in this story succeed to erase borders delineated by maps. As Avtar Brah would put it, “the construction of a common ‘we’” (184) is more important to them.

Lahiri based this tale on a man from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, back then a city which belonged to Pakistan, who used to come to visit her parents in the autumn of 1971. She was four at the time, so she actually does not have any memories of him, but heard through her parents about his situation, and was so impressed that years later she wrote this story about that period in her parents’ life. During those months, the subcontinent was torn by civil war and Lahiri’s characters watched American television broadcast the conflict unfolding. In Dacca “Mr. Pirzada had a three-story home, a lectureship in botany at the university, a wife of twenty years, and seven daughters between the ages of six and sixteen whose names all began with the letter A” (*IOM* 23). The names were chosen by Mr. Pirzada’s wife, and he jokes about having difficulty distinguishing among Ayesha, Amira, Amina, or Aziza. However, every week he sends comic books to each of his seven daughters alongside letters to his wife. He spends the year in America, studying the foliage of New England on a grant awarded by the Pakistani government, so he cannot return to his homeland before he finishes writing a book about his discoveries. Since he has not heard from his family in six months, Mr. Pirzada is worried that they are among the estimated nine million refugees, or even that something worse might have happened to them. His daughters are absent, but as opposed to the parents from the previous story, he does not have the certainty that they are harmed or dead.

Mr. Pirzada lives in a graduate dormitory where he does not have a stove or a television set. So he comes to this Bengali family to dine, as the title of the short story prefigures, and watch the news. They eat in the living room, the plates perched on the edge of their knees, so that they can have an unobstructed view of the television. Sharing food is an important ritual which links Indian diasporic communities abroad. Although only ten years old, Lilia realizes how attached her parents still are to their homeland and how they nurture connections with Indians in

America. Their homesickness and the big cultural differences they have to get used to are underlined by the use of negatives in the following paragraph:

It was a small campus, with narrow brick walkways and white pillared buildings, located on the fringes of what seemed to be an even smaller town. The supermarket did not carry mustard oil, doctors did not make house calls, neighbors never dropped by without an invitation, and of these things, every so often, my parents complained. In search of compatriots, they used to trail their fingers, at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world. (24)

Lilia's parents are so estranged in America that they call literal strangers (albeit Indians) and invite them over to their house. This is how they come in contact with Mr. Pirzada, who becomes a regular guest. He enters the house joking that he is "another refugee [...] on Indian territory" (28). He is always "impeccably suited and scarved" (27), and wears "a black fez made of wool of Persian lambs, secured by bobby pins" (28). He is very fond of Lilia (who inevitably reminds him of his daughters), and brings her sweets every time he visits. This is described by Lilia as an awkward moment, one which she awaits in part with dread, in part with delight, although it makes her feel like a stranger in her own home: "It had become our ritual, and for several weeks, before we grew more comfortable with one another, it was the only time he spoke to me directly" (29).

Once she expresses her thanks for a spectacular lollipop she receives, but Mr. Pirzada does not know how to interpret the simple phrase 'thank you': "What is this thank-you? The lady at the bank thanks me, the cashier at the shop thanks me, the librarian thanks me when I return an overdue book, the overseas operator thanks me as she tries to connect me to Dacca and fails. If I am buried in this country I will be thanked, no doubt, at my funeral" (29). This outburst reveals a cultural disconnection: the child narrator is born and bred in the United States, so to her it is common sense to express gratitude by saying 'thank you'. Their guest is new to this country and its mores; however, he somewhat surprisingly envisions the possibility of being buried here one day.

Lilia thinks it is inappropriate to eat the 'treats' from Mr. Pirzada in a casual manner; therefore, she covets the candy as she would a jewel and keeps it in a little 'treasure box' which used to belong to her grandmother. The small keepsake box is made of carved sandalwood and it represents Lilia's only link with a grandmother whom she has never met. She senses that their guest is also connected to her Indian heritage and honors this fact by placing the gifts she

receives from him in the Indian box. When she does consume the sweets, the girl invents a private ritual. Thus, she treats the candy like an offering in her prayers for Mr. Pirzada's family:

Eventually I took a square of white chocolate out of the box, and unwrapped it, and then I did something I had never done before. I put the chocolate in my mouth, letting it soften until the last possible moment, and then as I chewed it slowly, I prayed that Mr. Pirzada's family was safe and sound. I had never prayed for anything before, had never been taught or told to, but I decided, given the circumstances, that it was something I should do. That night when I went to the bathroom I only pretended to brush my teeth, for I feared that I would somehow rinse the prayer out as well. I wet the brush and rearranged the tube of paste to prevent my parents from asking any questions, and fell asleep with sugar on my tongue. (32)

Lilia dedicates a 'sweet' personal prayer for the safety of Mr. Pirzada's wife and daughters, although her parents are not religious and have not taught their girl any prayers. In their world religious differences do not matter (as they do in India and Pakistan), so they receive a Muslim into their house because they focus on the similarities. They share a culture and that is more important for them in America. Growing up in this family, the girl is sincerely worried about their guest's family so she invokes a universal deity to keep them free from harm. In the safe and intimate space of her room, Lilia ruminates on the events of the day, and decides that a spiritual exercise is something she 'should' do.

One night when she is setting the table, Lilia asks her father to hand her a glass "for the Indian man". Her father informs her that Mr. Pirzada is not coming over that night and adds: "More importantly, Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian. (...) Not since Partition. Our country was divided. 1947" (25). Lilia is confused because she is only aware that 1947 is the year of India's independence from Britain, and has no knowledge of the territorial separation between Hindus and Muslims. Her father explains that "Dacca no longer belongs to us" (25), and adds that during Partition, Hindus and Muslims set fire to each other's homes. For many the idea of eating in the other's company is still unthinkable. All of this makes no sense to Lilia since to her mind Mr. Pirzada and her parents speak the same language, laugh at the same jokes, and look more or less the same. "They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea" (25). The girl describes these traditions as somewhat foreign to her, which is why she only identifies her parents with Mr. Pirzada and uses the pronoun 'they'

instead of 'we'. Nevertheless, she enumerates the similarities between them and is able to spot no difference.

But her father takes her to a map of India they display in the house and explains that Mr. Pirzada has not been Indian since 1947, although he still is Bengali. Because he is a Muslim, their guest lives in East Pakistan, but by the end of the story he is going to be a Bangladeshi. His complex identity epitomizes 'in-betweenness', and Lilia's father tries to clarify some of these confusing differences on the map:

His finger trailed across the Atlantic, through Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and finally to the sprawling orange diamond that my mother once told me resembled a woman wearing a sari with her left arm extended. Various cities had been circled with lines drawn between them to indicate my parents' travels, and the place of their birth, Calcutta, was signified by a small silver star. I had been there only once and had no memory of the trip. (26)

His finger thus trails across the map, symbolically recreating their migration path, this time backwards (from the United States to their homeland). India is compared to a diamond and is feminized – Lilia's mother describes their home country as a "woman wearing a sari", in this way reproducing "nationalist narratives that construct Indian women as bearers of the nation and as repositories of national culture in the diaspora" (Reddy 134). Pakistan is a different country, colored in yellow, not orange, on the map. Lilia notices that there are "two distinct parts to it, one much larger than the other, separated by an expanse of Indian territory; it was as if California and Connecticut constituted a nation apart from the U.S." (*IOM* 26). The map of the United States is more familiar to her and she reconfigures its topography in her mind in order to understand the issue of partition in South Asia.

Her father is intrigued that Lilia does not know these geographical facts, but her mother astutely points out that she has plenty to learn at school and continues: "We live here now, she was born here" (26). They articulate two contrasting ways of forging an Indian-American identity. In the mother's opinion, immigration requires distancing oneself from the past and the country they come from. The father, on the other hand, desires for his daughter an education that stretches beyond national borders. Moreover, he wants her to know that there are other places in the world, particularly those from which her own family has migrated not long before. His wife insists that in America their daughter is assured a safe and easy life, a fine formal education, and more opportunities. She can live the American dream, instead of having to "eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from [the] rooftop, or hide neighbors in water tanks to prevent them

from being shot” (26-7), as they had. After cataloguing these Indian realities, Lilia’s mother addresses her husband directly: “Imagine having to place her in a decent school. Imagine her having to read during power failures by the light of kerosene lamps. Imagine the pressures, the tutors, the constant exams. (...) How can you possibly expect her to know about Partition?” (27) She works as a bank teller and is less nostalgic or homesick than her spouse. Although she compares India’s shape with a woman in a sari, most probably she does not wear a sari herself. What is more, she is not a typical Indian woman at all. In general émigrés struggle to preserve strong bonds with an idealized homeland. On the contrary, Lilia’s mother is very radical in her depiction of her homeland and too lenient perhaps in portraying the new world. Riots and shootings happen in America, too.

In school, Lilia is studying American history and geography, learning about the American War of Independence (which took place two hundred years before the one unfolding in the subcontinent), and going on trips to Plymouth Rock, to walk the Freedom Trail and climb to the top of the Bunker Hill Monument. During tests she is given blank maps of the thirteen colonies, and asked to fill in names, dates, capitals. “I could do it with my eyes closed” (27), Lilia says. But the American formal schooling system does not recognize what is happening on the other side of the world, or the solidarity between Bengalis that is formed in Lilia’s living room. So the girl begins to understand that she has to grow up negotiating three almost parallel worlds: one is the outside American world in which she is being educated, the other is the intimate world created in their living room between them and Mr. Pirzada, and the last one is far away but brought into their house by television channels.

After learning that Mr. Pirzada is ‘not Indian’, Lilia begins “to study him with extra care” (30), trying to figure out what makes him different. Every evening before eating, he performs a ritual which is perceived by Lilia as curious and which, she decides, is “one of those things” that mark his difference. Thus, he always carefully winds his pocket watch and sets it to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead. For the duration of the meal he keeps this watch on the coffee table, although he never seems to consult it. Yet he comments that “[o]ne can only hope (...) Dacca’s refugees are as heartily fed” (29) as he is, so he does think of his fellow countrymen throughout the dinner. A state of “uneasiness” possesses the young narrator when she realizes this man keeps multiple times and lives in multiple locations at once. She puts herself in the shoes of his daughters, understanding that life could have been so different had her parents not

immigrated to the United States. She imagines Mr. Pirzada's daughters "rising from sleep, tying ribbons in their hair, anticipating breakfast, preparing for school" (30-1). More importantly, perhaps, she notices that their meals and actions "were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged" (31). Even though he physically lives in the United States, for him life happens in Dacca. As they hear news about refugees fleeing from East Pakistan and about General Yahyah Khan's policies, Lilia empathizes with Mr. Pirzada's and his people and, as a result, she can no longer eat.

After spotting the 'difference' between her Indian parents and Mr. Pirzada, Lilia also grasps the difference between herself and her American schoolmates: "No one at school talked about the war followed so faithfully in my living room" (32). Instead, they continue to memorize passages from the Declaration of Independence. Their teacher, Mrs. Kenyon, frequently points to another map, one that charts the route of the *Mayflower*, or shows the location of the Philadelphia Liberty Bell. For one of Mrs. Kenyon's classes, Lilia is sent to the library with her friend Dora to prepare a presentation on the surrender at Yorktown. Lilia cannot concentrate on the task at hand, but goes to the shelves labeled "Asia" and picks up a book called *Pakistan: A Land and Its People*. As she is browsing it, the teacher appears on the aisle and lifts the book disdainfully "by the tip of its spine as if it were a hair clinging to my sweater" (33). She reprimands Lilia for consulting a book that is not connected to her American history project, and according to Reddy, this moment "marks Lilia's emergence as both a postcolonial subject and as a racial minority subject of the U.S. nation" (132). The girl identifies with her 'Asian' heritage, as she refuses to separate the civil war going on in her parents' homeland from her history lessons, thus delimitating herself from the 'official' history she learns in school.

Moreover, Reddy argues that Lilia's "understanding of the centrality of violent communalism to the construction of discrete national identities allows her to construct a form of transnational subjectivity that pivots upon a diasporic sense of 'Bengali-ness'" (135). This regional identity of Bengaliness can only emerge from the everyday intimacies of the immigrant home, where Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or American national borders can be erased or transcended. Caesar concurs that such "meaningful moments in which Lilia's separate worlds touch" (2003: 84) cannot occur in public American schools where history teachers see no reason for students to consult books about Pakistan.

A parallel history is being written in South Asia, and the family continues to watch the news over leisurely meals with Mr. Pirzada. After the television is turned off they joke, comment on the peculiar eating habits of her mother's American coworkers at the bank, and play Scrabble. During the game they laugh and argue about the spellings of English words, and around midnight Mr. Pirzada walks back to his dormitory. Lilia is upstairs in her room by then, but each night as she falls asleep she hears them "anticipating the birth of a nation on the other side of the world" (*IOM* 34). Their shared Bengalianness keeps them together, despite the rigid territorial reality shown by maps and the violence that goes on between the separate nation-states of India, Pakistan and soon-to-be Bangladesh. In the privacy of her American room, the child allows the three worlds to merge. She draws meaning from all of them and negotiates her identity with surprising balance and wisdom in a fluid, borderless space.

Around Halloween Mr. Pirzada asks about the "large orange vegetables on people's doorsteps" (34) and his Indian-American hosts clarify the purpose of jack-o'-lanterns. The next day he helps Lilia carve a ten-pound pumpkin, leaving the television on. While carving the smile they hear the news about the imminent start of a war between India and Pakistan, and Mr. Pirzada slips the knife and makes a gash dipping towards the base of the pumpkin. He apologizes and offers to buy another one, but Lilia's father intervenes and carves out the gash: "What resulted was a disproportionately large hole the size of a lemon, so that our jack-o'-lantern wore an expression of placid astonishment, the eyebrows no longer fierce, floating in frozen surprise above a vacant, geometric gaze" (36), mirroring their emotions upon hearing the distressing news.

On Halloween, Lilia and her friend Dora dress like witches and are allowed, for the first time, to roam the neighborhood unattended. The first treats come from Mr. Pirzada, as usual, although nothing else occurs as usual during that night. For instance, the guest takes off his shoes but does not place them where he normally did, and Lilia does not take his coat because Dora calls from the bathroom saying she needs help drawing a mole. Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's father do not go to the living room right away, but they hover in the foyer, waiting for the girls to leave. Mr. Pirzada offers to accompany them, his eyes containing a panic Lilia has never seen before, a deep concern that something bad might happen to her. He is unable to protect the family he left behind in Dacca, but he is willing to do everything he can to protect Lilia. Her parents explain that there is no real danger since this is an American tradition and all the children are out this

evening. Lilia herself utters the words “Don’t worry” for the first time, although she has tried to say these two simple words for weeks. When the girls finally leave, Lilia spots Mr. Pirzada’s short figure standing in the doorframe between her parents, as if he were part of the family.

Dora, an American child most probably growing up in a mono-cultural world, wants to know why “that man” offered to come with them. “His daughters are missing” (39), Lilia replies but immediately regrets it because she feels that just by saying it out loud “made it true, that Mr. Pirzada’s daughters really were missing, and that he would never see them again” (39). Her nightly prayers are performed silently in the ‘sacred’ space of her room, so it must sound frightening to little Lilia to hear herself utter such serious things in the middle of the street. Dora then asks if they were kidnapped from a park because she obviously does not have the slightest idea about the war refugees from Pakistan. The word ‘missing’ can only be associated in her mind with a kidnapping, like the ones happening in American cities. Lilia sees the opportunity and dismisses what she has previously said as a mere language mistake: “I don’t mean they were missing. I meant he misses them. They live in a different country and he hasn’t seen them for a while, that’s all” (39).

As the girls go from house to house, performing the Halloween ritual, several people comment that they have never seen an Indian witch before. Neighbors appropriate this ritual as American, stressing Lilia’s otherness. When they reach Dora’s house, more differences emerge. Lilia notices that the television is not on and that her friend’s father is lying on the couch with a glass of wine, reading a magazine while saxophone music is playing on the stereo. Lilia and Dora divide the ‘loot’ and then Dora’s mother drives Lilia back to her house. Here the pumpkin has been shattered, as have the hearts of those inside: India and Pakistan are getting closer to war, and Mr. Pirzada has his head in his hands: “The United States was siding with West Pakistan, the Soviet Union with India and what was soon to be Bangladesh. War was declared officially on December 4, and twelve days later, the Pakistani army, weakened by having to fight three thousand miles from their source of supplies, surrendered in Dacca” (40). Symbolically, during the twelve days of war Mr. Pirzada stops bringing candy, Lilia’s father does not ask her to watch the news with them anymore, and even her mother refuses to serve anything more elaborate than boiled eggs with rice for dinner. Mr. Pirzada starts sleeping on their couch and they call relatives in Calcutta to learn firsthand details about the situation.

In January, Mr. Pirzada finishes his book and flies back home, while millions of refugees are returning from India to Bangladesh. In the United States dinners continue as usual, the only difference being that Mr. Pirzada and his extra watch showing the time in Dacca are not there anymore. Every now and then Lilia glances at her father's map, outdated by then (space is always in a process of becoming), and pictures Mr. Pirzada "on that small patch of yellow, perspiring heavily (...) in one of his suits, searching for his family" (41). Several months later they receive a card commemorating the Muslim New Year and a letter from him announcing that he was happily reunited with his wife and daughters. Despite the dramatic historical and territorial changes, they survived the events apparently unharmed, and although the girls are a bit taller, Mr. Pirzada still teases that he cannot keep their names in order. He thanks Lilia's family for their hospitality, showing that he now understands the meaning of the phrase 'thank you', but adding that it still is not enough to express his gratitude. To celebrate the good news, Lilia's mother prepares a special meal that evening. But the girl does not feel like celebrating. Although she understands he is now back where he belongs, Lilia has come to know what 'missing' someone who is so far in space and time means. Upon hearing the news that they are fine she abruptly stops her prayers, and throws the candy away, thus marking her own symbolic 'partition' from Mr. Pirzada.

Mr. Pirzada's brief presence in their house has opened up several coexisting worlds for the young narrator. So when she throws the sweets away, I would say Lilia has made sense of the fact that different cultures coexist in her life, and has forged for herself an identity that combines the best parts from all. Maybe she is too young to be called 'mature', but her encounter with Mr. Pirzada has definitely contributed to her growth.

Judith Caesar connects Lahiri's story to some of the classic American fiction of the 19th and 20th centuries, from *Huckleberry Finn* to *Catcher in the Rye* which feature male characters, to *The Member of the Wedding* and *Housekeeping* introducing female characters. All of these narratives focus on children or adolescents who are "trying to develop a system of moral values without the help of either trustworthy conventional morals or outside guidance" (Caesar 2003: 89). Although it sometimes gets lonely, and it never is easy, Lahiri's child protagonist develops as she translates between cultures. These processes happen mainly in the space of her room, a mirror of her subjectivity. In fact, many times and spaces come together here and Lilia has the impressive capacity to filter and rearticulate all of them and negotiate a transnational identity. In

the end she emerges as an empathic human being. As an adult narrator, she is able to reflect and report on this development.

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The phrase ‘interpreter of maladies’ came to Lahiri years before she wrote the story bearing this title, when she ran into a friend who acted as a Russian liaison in a Boston doctor’s office: “On the way home I heard the phrase in my head. It was the closest I’ve ever come to poetry,” she says in an interview (Flynn, 2000, para 3). She adds: “Over the years it was fading, and every so often I’d come across it and think, Am I ever going to do something with it? Then one day I did” (*idem*).

“Interpreter of Maladies” is a third-person narrative filtered through the point of view of Mr. Kapasi, a driver who acts as a tour guide of the Orissa region because he knows English quite well, but who also works as an interpreter for a doctor since he can speak Gujarati, a dialect less known in that part of India. However, Laura Karttunen points out that “[i]n a bicultural text like Lahiri’s, where the cultural background of the narrator (who, we infer, is American) differs from that of a character (an Indian, Mr. Kapasi), the two angles of perception may easily diverge” (430). For example, the same style is used in order to describe both the Indian setting and the American tourists who are said to eat “onions and potatoes deep-fried in graham-flour batter” (*IOM* 54). But Karttunen shows that graham-flour is the flour of choice in India, therefore “this attribute is redundant and must stem from an outsider’s perspective. (...) The attributives used by Lahiri are not suspect *per se*, but they become so when used indiscriminately, regardless of the attribution of the focus” (433). So, she regards these features “as stylistic failures arising from an assumption of the universality of perception and reportability” and concludes that “Mr. Kapasi is constantly on the verge of becoming a focalizer, but the perspective is never truly his” (434).

The plot is rather simple: one day in mid-July, Mr. Kapasi drives Mina and Raj Das, a young couple of NRIs (non-resident Indians), and their three children to the Sun Temple at Konarak. The first thing he notices when he picks them up from the hotel is that the parents are very young, maybe not even thirty. Also, they “looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors” (*IOM* 43-4). They are

BOTH Indian AND foreigners, and the previous sentence captures this duality well. However, the children bear American names: Tina, Ronny, and Bobby. Although their family name is Das, Raj insists that not only his children, but also he and his wife were “born in America, (...) born and raised” (45). They come to India as tourists and display a very Westernized set of behaviors: Mina wears a short skirt, paints her nails in the car and rarely takes off her sunglasses, while Raj has a camera wrapped around his neck at all times and carries a paperback tour book. He is described as a clean-shaven man who looks “exactly like a magnified version of Ronny” (44), his eldest son. Even the clothes he wears betray signs of immaturity: “He had a sapphire blue visor, and was dressed in shorts, sneakers and a T-shirt” (44).

In stark contrast to the casually dressed American man, Mr. Kapasi is very careful with his looks. He wears “gray trousers and a matching-style shirt, tapered at the waist, with short sleeves and a large pointed collar made of a thin but durable material. He had specified both the cut and the fabric to his tailor – it was his preferred uniform for giving tours because it did not get crushed during his long hours behind the wheel” (45). Puspa Lal Damai (2004) argues that Lahiri presents Mr. Das as the double of Mr. Kapasi. Thus, the former teaches Science in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and takes his students on trips to the Museum of Natural History in New York City, where he himself serves as a guide. Moreover, he carries the tour book with him throughout the trip, rivaling their native guide, at times even reading out loud from it (at Konarak for example). Mr. Kapasi lost a son, and his wife could not forgive him for taking a job as interpreter with the doctor who was unable to save their child’s life. Mr. Das also symbolically lost a son. Although he does not know it, one of his sons is not his because his wife became pregnant during a brief affair. Therefore, both men also have severe marital problems.

For the Das couple this last statement is evident from the opening sentence of the short story which depicts them as bickering over who should take Tina to the restroom. Mrs. Das eventually accompanies her to the toilet, but does not hold the little girl’s hand as they walk. This and many other small signs of carelessness and childishness on part of the parents add up to reveal deep emotional discrepancies. The fact that a mother does not hold her daughter’s hand, as she should, is a sign of negligence. Moreover, once they are back in the car and set off, the girl begins to play with the lock on her door, clicking it forward and backward, but Mrs. Das says nothing to stop her. Instead, she sits “a bit slouched at one end of the back seat, not offering her puffed rice to anyone” (*IOM* 47), acting like a spoiled child herself. Laura Karttunen claims that

these negatives are important for Lahiri's text because they indicate a desired alternative: "the loving but firm mother who holds her child's hand, gently stops her from fiddling with the lock, and offers her rice to everyone. This is the norm, and Mrs. Das falls short of it" (431). But Mr. Das, too, could have said something to stop the child's repetitive and annoying gesture. When Mrs. Das starts doing her nails, Tina begs for her mother to apply some nail polish on hers too. But she replies brutally "Leave me alone. (...) You're making me mess up" (*IOM* 48), causing Mr. Kapasi to think that this family acts as if they are all siblings, with Mr. and Mrs. Das behaving "like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves" (49).

The Das couple shows immaturity and even irresponsibility, and the children are mere reflections of their parents. They are sketched in stereotypical lines, presented as spoiled and disrespectful: talking back to their parents, allowed doing whatever they please, unaware that the places they are visiting are loaded with Indian history. Although Indian, they are too Westernized, growing up but not learning from their experiences, lacking parental guidance. Unlike Lilia (from "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine") and Rohin (from "Sexy"), they are unable to take in cultural differences and forge a transnational identity. In all likelihood they will continue to follow in their parents' footsteps and remain ignorant to potentially enriching cultural connections. In a way, theirs is a failed reverse cultural translation, since they come as middle-class Americans to their forebears' homeland, but stay in a hotel (not with relatives) and go as tourists to visit a temple. In the end, India will prove a violent, unwelcoming territory for strangers like the Das family who are unable to incorporate their ancestors' legacy. Interestingly, the first two stories unfold entirely inside a house, while this one takes place exclusively outside, in the Indian countryside.

The trip takes about two and a half hours, enough for Mr. Kapasi to become infatuated with Mrs. Das and for his hopes to be shattered. Mr. Kapasi observes Mina Das as she walks to the car, and her appearance is both hyper feminine and paradoxically masculine at the same time. She wears a red-and-white-checked skirt, above the knees, "and a close-fitting blouse styled like a man's undershirt" (46) decorated with a strawberry. She has short hair, parted far to one side (also like a man's). Mina is a slightly plump woman, "with small hands like paws, her frosty pink fingernails painted to match her lips" (46). She wears oversized sunglasses and a big straw

bag. She is said to drag her “shaved, largely bare legs across the back seat” (43), and Mr. Kapasi contrasts this image to his wife who has never revealed so much skin to her husband: “Even when they had made love she kept the panels of her blouse hooked together, the string of her petticoat knotted around her waist” (58). When they reach the temple it occurs to Mr. Kapasi for the first time, as he gazes at the topless sculptured women, that he has never seen his own wife fully naked, and he has never admired the backs of her legs the way he now admires those of Mrs. Das, “walking as if for his benefit alone” (58). Thus, the body of the American woman seems available in a way his Indian wife’s never was.

Alessandro Monti posits that Mr. Kapasi’s desiring gaze, which fractures Mina into body parts (legs, knees, feet, lips, fingernails, face, throat and breasts), “translates Mina into a passive object of [his] sexual desire and silent hegemonic possession” (87). At one point while he is driving, he glances through the mirror at Mrs. Das. Lahiri repeats the verb ‘to glance’, which strengthens Monti’s assertion: “In addition to glancing at her face he glanced at the strawberry between her breasts, and the golden brown hollow in her throat” (*IOM* 53-4). Another time their eyes meet in the rearview mirror, and he notices her eyes are “pale, a bit small, their gaze fixed but drowsy” (50), leading Reddy to conclude that in this reverse economy “Mr. Kapasi in effect becomes the tourist, and Mina’s body the tourist site” (115). Indeed, his eyes seem to be alertly analyzing her at all times, while hers are described as “drowsy”.

As they drive along, the children are excited to see monkeys in the trees that line the road. But danger is apparent from this early stage of their trip, as one monkey jumps in the middle of the road, and another bounces on the hood of the car. Mr. Das is not troubled and asks the driver to stop so he can take a picture of the exotic animals. Then Mrs. Das complains that it is too hot in the car, and humiliates her husband by saying: “I told you to get a car with air-conditioning. (...) Why do you do this, Raj, just to save a few rupees. What are you saving us, fifty cents?” (*IOM* 49) Initially she uses ‘rupees’, the Indian national coin, but then switches to ‘cents’, signaling her double identity. Raj disregards her ironic remark and asks Mr. Kapasi if it ever gets tiresome to show people the same thing every day. The guide’s answer is surprising: he enjoys giving tours because the Sun Temple is one of his favorite places, and he only does this on Fridays and Saturdays since he works as an interpreter for a doctor during weekdays. Mrs. Das exclaims that this job is “so romantic” and wants to find out more about it, so he tells them about a patient who had a pain in his throat. After he translated the symptoms, the doctor was

able to prescribe the proper medication. Mr. and Mrs. Das concur that patients are totally dependent on Mr. Kapasi, and his role is even more important than that of the doctor himself because if he mistranslates what the patient is saying, the doctor will not be able to cure him/her. His is a big responsibility, the spouses conclude.

But Mr. Kapasi had never thought of his job in such flattering terms: “To him it was a thankless occupation. He found nothing noble in interpreting people’s maladies, assiduously translating the symptoms of so many swollen bones, countless cramps of bellies and bowels, spots on people’s palms that changed color, shape, or size” (51). He works in a stale little infirmary, and he believes this job is “a sign of his failings” (52). In his youth he studied foreign languages and dreamt of being an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries, “resolving conflicts between people and nations, settling disputes of which he alone could understand both sides” (52). As ‘interpreter of maladies’ he makes money, but this job does not bring him the satisfaction conversing in English, French, Russian, Portuguese, or Italian would. As a tour guide he can practice his English, the only non-Indian language he still speaks fluently, but that is not a remarkable talent in a global world in which he fears even his children know better English than him, just from watching television.

He started working as an interpreter after his firstborn son contracted typhoid at the age of seven. Therefore, this job constantly reminds him of his lost boy who died in his mother’s arms. She still resents the fact that her husband now helps save other lives, and looks down on his profession calling him the ‘doctor’s assistant’, “as if the process of interpretation were equal to taking someone’s temperature, or changing a bedpan” (53). Mr. Kapasi, on the other hand, feels he has sacrificed his dream career in order to work two jobs so that he can support his family. As a result, the way in which he refers to his wife and children is distant and even bitter. He says after the boy passed away “there was the funeral to pay for, and the other children who were born soon enough, and the newer, bigger house, and the good schools and tutors, and the fine shoes and television (...)” (52). His words suggest that he is overwhelmed by a feeling of duty, not by genuine grief for his son’s death, or by joy to have had other babies. Similarly, although he tried to console his wife and to keep her from crying in her sleep, he has not been able to interpret his own failures in their marriage, and together they have not managed to overcome the death of their firstborn. Their relationship is affected by the hovering absence of the son, similar to the situation between Shukumar and Shoba.

Consequently, Mr. Kapasi is attracted to the Americanized Mrs. Das because she takes an interest in his job and reminds him of his intellectual aspirations. She uses the word 'romantic' to describe it, while she does not behave in a romantic way toward her husband. Like he and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Das also act like strangers to one another, and they seem to have little "in common apart from their three children and a decade of their lives" (53). Thus, when they stop for lunch and Mr. Das offers to take a photo of Mr. Kapasi together with Mina, he nervously smooths his silver hair and worries that she might smell his perspiration. He becomes even more anxious when she asks for his address so that she can mail him the photos, and hands him a scrap of paper which she had ripped from a page of a magazine. He puts down his address "in clear, careful letters" (55) on the narrow blank portion, making sure she can read it and revealing once more the fundamental distinction between them: he is careful in everything he does, whereas she is careless. Despite the fact that they both long for human communication and an escape from their unhappy marriages, in the end this connection will not be established. While he worries that he might have misspelled his name, dreams of keeping a correspondence with her and of making her laugh out loud as she reads his letters in their house in New Jersey, she drops the small slip of paper with his contact information "into the jumble of her bag" (56).

Still, he quickly calculates that in approximately six weeks' time he will receive her response, and fantasizes about keeping the picture of the two of them tucked between the pages of his Russian grammar. He compares this feeling with the one he experienced long ago "when, after months of translating with the aid of a dictionary, he would finally read a passage from a French novel, or an Italian sonnet, and understand the words, one after another, unencumbered by his own efforts. In those moments Mr. Kapasi used to believe that all was right with the world, that all struggles were rewarded, that all of life's mistakes made sense in the end" (55-6). The ability of translating meaning from one language to another, offers him the possibility of decoding reality and of putting his life in order. The process of translation is both a linguistic and a cultural act.

The multiple cultural and intertextual references to India highlight Lahiri's own cultural translation, and her continuous struggle to preserve what it means to her and her parents to be first and forever Indian. In her essay "Intimate Alienation: Immigrant Fiction and Translation" (2002), she states: "Unlike my parents I translate not so much to survive in the world around me as to create and illuminate a nonexistent one. Fiction is the foreign land of my choosing, the

place where I strive to convey and preserve the meaningful” (120). Thus, in “Interpreter of Maladies” she includes a lengthy description of the Konarak monument, trying to translate its meanings for her readers. The temple is a pyramid-like structure made of sandstone, shaped like a chariot, dedicated to the sun, “which struck three sides of the edifice as it made its journey each day across the sky. Twenty-four giant wheels were carved on the north and south sides of the plinth. The whole thing was drawn by a team of seven horses, speeding as if through the heavens” (*IOM* 56). Mr. Kapasi explains that it was built between A.D. 1243 and 1255, with the efforts of twelve hundred artisans, by a great ruler of the Ganga dynasty, to mark his victory against the Muslim army. Eleonora Federici posits that:

Through the insertion of words which refer to colonial Indian history and culture together with allusions deeply embedded in the Indian context, the author reclaims and recentres a multiple linguistic and cultural identity and offers an example of a challenging text to convey in another language. (...) If the description of the Konarak Sun Temple and the many references to the monkey deity are easily translatable, the many intertextual layers of Indian religion, literature and culture are not. Intertextual references are a reflection of social, historical and cultural practices and meanings which are a core element of the text; if left untranslated or partly translated, they must be explained and decoded for the target reader. (157-58)

The guide leads them to one of the wheels of the chariot, trying his best to show them everything he can during this short visit. Meanwhile, Mr. Das reads from his book that the wheels symbolize “the cycle of creation, preservation, and achievement of realization” (*IOM* 57). They notice countless friezes of scenes from daily life, like hunting, trading, or going to war, but also of bodies making love in various positions which prefigure Mrs. Das’s confession that she cheated on her husband while he was at work. Indeed, she often stops to stare “silently at the carved lovers, and the processions of elephants, and the topless female musicians beating on two-sided drums” (57). Taking her cue from Indian feminist scholars Janaki Nair and Mary John, Vanita Dharam Reddy points out that temples and erotic sculptures “emerge in colonial and postcolonial contexts as sites of sexual awakening” (124).

Finally, they reach “three life-sized bronze avatars of Surya, the sun god, each emerging from its own niche on the temple façade to greet the sun at dawn, noon, and evening. They wore elaborate headdresses, their languid, elongated eyes closed, their bare chests draped with carved chains and amulets” (*IOM* 58). Mr. Kapasi explains to Mrs. Das that this is Astachala-Surya, the setting sun, and in a couple of hours the sun will actually set right there. She exclaims “Neat” (59), and he is not certain what the word suggests, but has a feeling it is a favorable response. He

is a translator, yet is unfamiliar with words like 'cool' or 'neat' which the Das parents use. Besides this language barrier, there certainly is a cultural one. For example, Mr. Kapasi knows that in America drivers sit on the other side because he has seen it on *Dallas*. But the interpreter has the complex task of revealing his own cultural world to people raised in a different background, and he can only hope that Mrs. Das understands Surya's beauty and power. He even dreams of discussing it further in their letters: "He would explain things 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). He fantasizes about taking her in his arms and freezing in an embrace witnessed by his favorite Surya, but she has already walked away, oblivious to his hopes of transnational cultural connection.

As they drive back in silence, Mr. Kapasi thinks of a way of delaying the moment of dropping them off. His attraction for Mrs. Das has made him slip into immaturity. Otherwise a dutiful adult, caring for his family, Mr. Kapasi now suggests a detour and an additional visit of the monastic dwellings at Udayagiri and Khandagiri so that he can linger a few more hours in the American woman's presence. Everyone agrees so he turns the wheel, "almost delirious with relief" (60), as he continues to imagine what he will do or say to Mrs. Das once they arrived. But when they get there she refuses to get out of the car, claiming that her legs are tired and the monkeys lined along the path give her 'the creeps'. Mr. Kapasi, the native, assures them that the monkeys are more hungry than dangerous and that, lest one provokes them with food, they will not become aggressive. Raj and the children leave, and Mina slips in the front seat next to the driver. As they watch Bobby pass a stick to monkey, Mr. Kapasi comments that he is a brave boy, and Mina retorts that it is not surprising since he is not Raj's son.

She and Raj met when they were children and got married when they were still in college. Their parents were best friends and during her childhood she saw him every weekend, so it was assumed they would get married. But after having this arranged marriage at a young age and her first child soon after, Mina was overwhelmed by the nursing, warming up bottles of milk, and testing their temperature against her wrist while Raj was at work. He "never looked crossed or harried, or plump as she had become after the first baby" (63), and did not notice that she was becoming more isolated and frustrated as he was busy in his job teaching students about rocks and dinosaurs. She was fulfilling the traditional roles of a wife, so to him it probably seemed a normal development in a marriage.

At first she was outraged to hear that a Punjabi friend of Raj's was going to stay at their place for a week for a job interview. Then she allowed the visitor to make love "to her swiftly, in silence, with an expertise she had never known, without the meaningful expressions and smiles Raj always insisted on afterward" (64). Bobby was conceived that afternoon, and she has kept this secret for eight years. His biological father is married, lives in London, and does not know Mina's secret. Ironically, they still exchange Christmas cards and family photos every year.

It is telling that Mina cheats on Raj in the house they share. Unfortunately, they do not share much else but the space of the house. This apparently well-adjusted Indian-American family viewed from the inside is nothing close to happy. They might be Indian in heritage, but the two are insensitive to their children and ignorant of the world outside the United States. Raj thinks it is enough to play with the children for a short while after coming back from work, and does not invest more time and effort into their education. Mina behaves like a whimsical child throughout the story. Trapped in the house and frustrated with her life as housewife and mother, she cheats on her husband "on a sofa littered with rubber teething toys (...) while Ronny cried to be freed from his playpen" (64).

Mr. Kapasi asks why she has confessed the secret to him and she says: "I told you because of your talents" (65). She only voices her sin to a stranger, in a foreign land with which she feels no connection at all. She is certain that no one from New Jersey will ever find out and hopes to return home at peace with herself after this confession. Mina selfishly presumes the interpreter could help her feel better about her illicit sexual act, and suggest some remedy for her boring married life. In just one paragraph she repeats the word 'terrible' four times, showing that she is not as superficial as she seems, but she does have feelings of remorse about her 'terrible' deed. They may come out of her Indian upbringing which requires a woman to get married, be faithful, and dedicate herself to raising children. Mina realizes her emotional state has been "unhealthy" (65) ever since she committed adultery, and she addresses the 'interpreter of maladies' for a remedy.

But since they do not face any language barrier, Mr. Kapasi sees no need for a translation. Moreover, he feels insulted that "Mrs. Das should ask him to interpret her common, trivial little secret. She did not resemble the patients in the doctor's office, those who came glassy-eyed and desperate, unable to sleep or breathe or urinate with ease, unable, above all, to give words to their pains" (66). Her only problem is that she wants to be freed from marital and

parenting responsibilities, as well as from Indian cultural constraints. But the Indian man's attitude changes radically after he learns that she has already been unfaithful to her husband (inconceivable for Indian mores). He no longer desires Mina's body; still, he decides it is his duty to assist Mrs. Das and perhaps mediate between the tourists. Thus he asks her bluntly: "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (66) She turns to him and her glare (so different from that in the rearview mirror) crushes him because "he knew at that moment that he was not even important enough to be properly insulted" (66). She only tells him this secret because she misinterprets the attributes of his job and hopes he will make her feel better about her erotic guilt. In this way, she "disciplines his desire" both for her hyper feminine body and for belonging to a "transnational South Asian bourgeoisie" (Reddy 125). On the other hand, the interpreter realizes he cannot translate her ethical 'malady', nor can he translate Indian history and culture for the Indian-American family. Any possibility of communicating both at personal and at cultural level is thus abruptly severed.

Various critics such as Alessandro Monti, Vanita Dharam Reddy, and Simon Lewis have read this story as a post-colonial reworking and updating of the trip to the Marabar Caves in E. M. Forster's 1924 novel *A Passage to India*, this time told from the perspective of Mr. Kapasi in the role formerly held by Dr. Aziz. Vanita Dharam Reddy (2009) believes that Forster's novel is an important intertext to Lahiri's title story, and that the latter "both draws from and reworks colonial visual economies of desire (...) for a specifically postcolonial diasporic context" (114). But she also points out the fact that whereas Aziz finds Adela physically repulsive, she describes Aziz as "a handsome little Oriental" (Forster qtd. in Reddy 114). This is a sort of 'Oriental pathology' that "renders such transracial desire impermissible" (117). Moreover, Reddy stresses that class differences between Mr. Kapasi and his American tourists complicate Lahiri's translations of gender, race, and nation, particularly since she negotiates "the relationship of nation to diaspora (and vice versa) in a rapidly globalizing India" (115). While featuring an autonomous female immigrant subject, as many South Asian women authors do, Lahiri "maintains a critical focus on the fetishization of this body vis-à-vis the racialized, class and sexual subjectivities of white women and South Asian/American men" (126).

Simon Lewis (2001) asserts that the male Indian guide and the female Indian-American tourist misinterpret each other's verbal and nonverbal signals, but Lahiri's text is intriguing

because this miscomprehension results from cultural rather than racial difference. In this way, he argues,

Lahiri moves beyond Eurocentric or Orientalist images of India to those of a contemporary postcolonial nation more concerned with dialogue with its own diaspora than with its former colonizers. The story may repeat the Forsterian theme of mutual human incomprehension, but the world of 'Interpreter of Maladies' is an exclusively Indian one, in which Indians define notions of self and other, in which Indians move freely among countries and cultures, and in which India itself is an object of scrutiny by Indian eyes. (219)

Even though Kapasi, unlike Aziz, clearly finds the female tourist attractive, his desire for her does not fit the "transracial model of colonial fiction" (Lewis 220). Instead, her appeal seems to stem partly from the fact that she is similar to him (looks Indian, has marital problems, is estranged from her children as well), and partly from the fact that she seems to take an interest in his person. Yet his hopes of keeping in touch with her, and thus acting like an 'interpreter between nations', are quashed no less emphatically than Forster quashes the hope of an Indian-British connection in his novel. Even though both Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das are Indian, the gap between them is as wide as that between the Indian Aziz and the Brit Adela Quested. According to Lewis, Lahiri's story reiterates Forster's pessimism concerning human relations, but "it denies that the malady that comes between people has its origin in race or geographical location", thus exposing "the outdated racialism of Forster's novel" (221).

The moment of Mina's confession and her subsequent reaction to the interpreter's question has its analogue in E. M. Forster's scene in which Adela's naïve question to Aziz if he has more than one wife irritates the man "so much that he has to leave her and smoke a cigarette in order to regain his composure as host" (Lewis 220). In "Interpreter of Maladies", Mina gets out of the car and begins walking up the path to join her family, eating puffed rice from her bag. She is careless again and rice falls through her fingers, "leaving a zigzagging trail, causing a monkey to leap down from a tree and devour the little white grains. In search of more, the monkey begins to follow Mrs. Das. Others joined him, so that she was soon being followed by about half a dozen of them, their velvety tails dragging behind" (*IOM* 66-7). When she reaches her family, Bobby is missing. They find him under a tree, surrounded by over a dozen monkeys which are pulling at his T-shirt and raking over the puffed rice Mrs. Das had spilled. The boy is crying and one of the monkeys is beating him with a stick. Raj is scared and unable to react, so Mina pleads once more for Mr. Kapasi's help, shouting "Do something, for God's sake, do

something!" (68) Mr. Kapasi shoos them away and takes Bobby in his arms. The animals retreat, "obedient but unintimidated" (68), and for a second the interpreter is tempted to whisper the secret into the boy's ear. But he does not, and this might be the 'remedy' he eventually gives Mina Das.

In what follows Mr. Das arranges the visor on the child's head, and Mrs. Das tapes a bandage over the cut on his knee, hinting that they will stay together and perhaps the innocent child's blood has redeemed Mina's mistake. As she takes out a hairbrush from her bag to brush his hair, the slip of paper with Mr. Kapasi's address flutters away in the wind. No one but Mr. Kapasi notices. The lost piece of paper symbolizes their non-connection, making it clear that no further communication is possible between them. Mr. Kapasi will never receive the picture he took with Mrs. Das, nor will he ever fulfill his fantasy of transnational communication. Instead, all the characters will remember the sinister picture of the violent monkeys' attack.

The assault on the boy coincides with the revelation of his illegitimate birth; nevertheless, his wounds are not deep, and the family gathers around him, apparently more united than before. Mrs. Das was careless when she got pregnant with him, and she is negligent again when she drops the rice. However, Mr. Das too is imprudent as he leaves the boy unsupervised, and then is cowardly and does not intervene to save him. This superficiality in raising their children is also emblematic of the way in which they fail to maintain their relationship.

Mr. Kapasi is an Indian patriarch who also has a dysfunctional marriage, but the causes are totally different. He fails to understand the relationship between the two Americans, therefore their 'maladies' are beyond his power of interpretation. Or perhaps guilt is a universal incurable malady. Either way, the hills beyond the impressive Sun Temple and the Udayagiri and Khandagiri caves do not prove auspicious spaces for reconciliation and healing. On the contrary, they are filled with adversity for foreigners unwilling and unable to take in their historical and cultural meanings.

Although the trip provided them with the perfect opportunity to explore their heritage, the Das family goes back to the United States without having learned much about their Indianness. Raj will return home knowing he was incapable of rising up to the occasion and defending the boy. He will resume his comfortable life, unaware of his wife's betrayal and of the fact that he is incapable of satisfying her. Mina will continue to feel trapped in her marriage and to fall short of both cultures: she is not a good wife or mother (inconceivable for a woman of Indian descent),

but she is not able to achieve any fulfillment in the American society either (she does not have a job or the possibility of getting one, and she does not have a satisfactory social life). While she rejects domestic obligations, she cannot replace them with anything else. As opposed to Shoba who would have thrived as a mother but did not have the opportunity to, Mina is the mother of three but feels miserable and wishes she could escape from her own life. Unfortunately she fails to translate between cultures and this leaves her with very little space to negotiate a 'happier' sense of self and a more fluid identity. She is caught in a narrow place between the Indianness she does not understand and the Americanness she thinks she understands but cannot really access. Moreover, I think she blames the Indian cultural obligations of being a wonderful wife and mother for her inability to achieve personal fulfillment as a representative of the second-generation living in contemporary America.

Lahiri declared in an interview that she knew from the beginning this had to be the title story of the collection since it best expresses "the predicament at the heart of the book – the dilemma, the difficulty, and often the impossibility of communicating emotional pain and affliction to others, as well as expressing it to ourselves" (qtd. in Dalton-Brown 344). Thus, speaking the same language is not enough to convey, interpret, and eventually solve deep emotional afflictions. It is also insufficient when it comes to cultural translations.

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"A Real Durwan" takes up thirteen pages and it is the shortest story in the collection. Lahiri picks up again on the theme of Partition (the division of the province of Bengal into East Pakistan and West Bengal which belongs to India), but this time her focus is on one of the approximately twelve million refugees. Boori Ma (meaning 'old mother') is a sixty-four-year-old woman who has fled from East Bengal to Calcutta. Readers do not learn her real name, probably because "the displaced subject, the refugee, is most often forgotten, or made invisible by historical narratives" (Neutill 148). Lahiri thus creates a marginal figure, who has a 'roof' over her head but is not fully integrated in the community after having been left homeless by violent historical events beyond her control. Furthermore, towards the end of the story she is relegated to the roof, before being literally thrown out onto the streets.

The plot unfolds in an apartment building in Calcutta, the city most affected by what has been called “history’s largest relocation of peoples” (Butalia qtd. in Neutill 148). Boori Ma acts as a *durwan* or gatekeeper, and is allowed to dwell in the peripheral space of the building’s stairwell, more precisely, under the letter boxes. She also cleans the building’s public areas, thus her only possessions are a bucket, a few quilts, and a broom. In the beginning she is accepted by the rest of the dwellers, but one has a constant feeling that the neighbors merely tolerate her presence. When she visits her fellow residents, they assure her that she is always welcome; they never draw the latch bars across their doors except at night, and they go about their business untroubled by her company. From time to time they give her a glass of tea or some crackers. Nevertheless, she is a foreigner, an outsider both in the building and in Calcutta. Hence, she inhabits marginal spaces, and is aware that she does not truly belong: “Knowing not to sit on the furniture, she crouched, instead, in doorways and hallways, and observed gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city” (*IOM* 76).

Madhuparna Mitra concludes from this scene that Boori Ma “has crossed the geographical border into Indian space, but psychologically, she inhabits the threshold, the border that separates India from East Pakistan” (2007: 243). Rani Neutill also reads this episode as a border crossing, and compares the building to the nation at large: “If the building can be described as a metaphor for the nation, Boori Ma is at the lowest rank, and her actions remind us that she is constantly on the margins” (156). Lahiri herself writes that the character “enjoyed drifting in and out of the various households” (*IOM* 76), insisting on her homelessness, foreignness, and non-belonging.

Boori Ma’s daily routine consists of climbing the four flights to the roof, but as she grows older the stairs seem to be getting steeper and climbing them feels as if she were climbing a ladder. She is extremely thin, looking “almost as narrow from the front as she did from the side” (70), and her physical frailty reflects her precarious social condition. Importantly however, “the only thing that appeared three-dimensional about Boori Ma was her voice: brittle with sorrows, as tart as curds, and shrill enough to grate meat from a coconut” (70). Twice a day as she sweeps the stairs, she voices details of the losses she suffered since her deportation to Calcutta: “At that time, she maintained, the turmoil had separated her from a husband, four daughters, a two-story brick house, a rosewood *almari*, and a number of coffer boxes whose skeleton keys she still wore, along with her life savings, tied to the free end of her sari” (70-1). She repeatedly refers to

an alleged affluent past in East Bengal, thus constructing for herself an identity which is superior to the lower-middle class residents of the building.

She constantly tells stories of a former idyllic life. For instance, at her third daughter's wedding, "mustard prawns were steamed in banana leaves" and "not a delicacy was spared" (71). Yet this was no extravagance for their family who presumably could afford to eat goat twice a week, and to keep a pond full of fish on their property. Another time she refers to a man who used to come and pick their dates and guavas, while a different man clipped their hibiscus. However, she crosses the border with just two bracelets on her wrist, and it is unclear what has happened to the rest of her relatives or to the riches she repeatedly alludes to. Boori Ma insists that there was a day when her feet touched nothing but marble, and obstinately repeats the phrase: "Believe me, don't believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them" (71). She uses this tagline like a chorus, with several variations (71, 72, 74, 79), and in the end this phrase is turned into a plight - "Believe me, believe me" (81, 82), but the residents will remain unimpressed.

Although she speaks all the time, it is questionable whether her voice is really heard or ever trusted. Her story is inconsistent; no one doubts she is a refugee since "the accent in her Bengali made that clear" (72), but all the residents deem it suspicious that the perimeters of her former estate have doubled in time, as have the contents of her coffer boxes. They do not trust her claims to prior wealth, and rather believe Boori Ma crossed the East Bengal border with the thousands of other refugees, on the back of a truck, between sacks of hemp. Even the children of the building sometimes tease and ask her to decide whether she came by truck or on a bullock cart. No one takes her seriously because "she garbled facts. She contradicted herself. She embellished almost everything. But her rants were so persuasive, her fretting so vivid, that it was not easy to dismiss her" (72). In the end, the women of the building conclude that she probably constructs tales as a way of mourning the loss of her family, while old Mr. Chaterjee proclaims that "Boori Ma's mouth is full of ashes, but she is the victim of changing times" (72). Mr. Chaterjee is in perfect opposition with the main character. He is a man who "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 highly esteemed" (72). Whereas Boori Ma is constantly on the move, having fled from East Bengal, climbing stairs every day up to the roof, and finally beginning to stray the neighborhood, he is fixed in the balcony of his own house.

Despite Boori Ma's exaggerations, she is harmless and entertaining. At the same time, she keeps their "crooked stairwell spotlessly clean" and also stands "guard between them and the outside world" (73). Over the years, her services start to resemble those of 'a real *durwan*', and she maintains "a vigil no less punctilious than if she were the gatekeeper of a house on Lower Circular Road, or Jodhpur Park, or any other fancy neighborhood" (73). Despite the fact that she never falls short of her responsibilities, the general perception is that "under normal circumstances this was no job for a woman" (73). Boori Ma is old, and more importantly, she is an old woman. The implication is that a 'real *durwan*' should be a man, possibly also young. As a consequence, in the story's conclusion she will be replaced remorselessly.

Mrs. Dalal is the only neighbor who truly has a soft spot for Boori Ma, and she occasionally gives her ginger paste to flavor her stews. Once she even promises Boori Ma new quilts, a pillow, and a blanket, as well as some pickles and powder for her aching back. But this will never happen, because one afternoon Mr. Dalal comes home with two ceramic basins. This event occasions a major process of modernization at all levels of the building described as very old, with bathwater that still has to be stored in drums and windows without glass. After he announces that he has been promoted to manage the College Street branch of the company he works for, Mrs. Dalal complains that she still cooks on kerosene, that they do not yet have a phone or the fridge he promised when they got married. She adds that a two-room flat does not need two basins, and a fight that can be heard in all the building follows. This is an example of a closed community, with rumors constantly spreading among envious and competitive neighbors, and with walls which have 'ears'.

During the night, Mr. Dalal decides to install one of the basins in their flat, and the other on the stairwell of the building. The residents are delighted, especially since until then they had all brushed their teeth with stored water poured from mugs. This changes the life of the community forever. Boori Ma will not be able to sweep the staircase anymore because of the workmen who invade her space, running up and down the stairs and eating their lunches squatting against the banister poles: "They hammered, shouted, spat, and cursed. They wiped their sweat with the ends of their turbans" (78). What is more, although she never gets the quilts from Mrs. Dalal, she has to sleep on the rooftop, in open air. But Mr. Chatterjee proclaims from his balcony that renovations represent "a sure sign of changing times" (79), and other residents also start to carry out different home improvement projects.

While the Dalals are away for ten days on a trip, the wives go out of their way to make renovations to the common space of the building: “One decided to barter a stack of her wedding bracelets and commissioned a white-washer to freshen the walls of the stairwell. Another pawned her sewing machine and summoned an exterminator. A third went to the silversmith and sold back a set of pudding bowls; she intended to have the shutters painted yellow” (80). Meanwhile Boori Ma is secluded since she does not own a residence she could renovate. As wealthier neighbors are improving their living conditions, she is relegated to the rooftop, and sleeps on newspapers, under heavy rains. It seems there is no more room for her in this modernized building, especially with her only protector now gone. Neutill argues that in this story “the effects of the planning for the building are metonymic for the processes of planning and progress that forge the Indian nation state and the losses that are accrued in the process of giving the nation state a modern face” (157). In such a large-scale project, nobody cares about collateral victims.

Not feeling welcomed in the building anymore, Boori Ma starts circling the neighborhood in the afternoons. This is striking since she never used to go out before, but would be content with gazing at the horizon from the rooftop. Other signs of modernization like television antennas, billboards, and the arches of Howrah Bridge are visible from up there. Now she wanders around the markets, “reed broom in hand, sari smeared with newsprint ink” (*IOM* 81), and begins spending her life savings on small treats like puffed rice, cashews, or sugarcane juice. Out of the safety of her precarious ‘home’, she seems to have regressed into childhood, wasting the little money she has and endangering herself. This becomes more and more obvious as she walks further and further away from the block of flats: “One day she walked as far as the bookstalls on College Street. The next day she walked even farther, to the produce markets in Bow Bazaar. It was there, while she was standing in a shopping arcade surveying jackfruits and persimmons, that she felt something tugging on the free end of her sari” (81). All her life she was careful with her possessions, despite her dramatic story of dislocation and the loss of her family, but in a moment of carelessness someone steals her lifesavings and her skeleton keys.

When she returns to the building, the residents are waiting for her at the collapsible gate, and the stairwell echoes the news that the common basin has also been stolen. While Boori Ma was being robbed on the streets, the building too witnessed a theft. The old woman is unable to say anything to her defense as they practically carry her up the stairs to the roof and plant “her on

one side of the clothesline and started screaming at her from the other” (81). The border is thus symbolically reinstated between West and East Bengalis. But this is a border Boori Ma will not be able to cross, as neighbors accuse her of having informed the robbers about their ‘precious’ basin, and in the end throw her out of the building forever. They do not speak directly to her, but their accusations are ruthless. She is the perfect scapegoat, blamed for wandering the streets and speaking to strangers instead of guarding the gate, accused of betrayal by the ‘benefactors’ who gave her a place to sleep. She starts to beg: “Believe me, believe me. I did not inform the robbers” (81), but they remain implacable, especially since her credibility has always been suspect. Mr. Chaterjee is the one who is called to settle the matter once and for all, but he remains physically and mentally immobile. After considering their arguments from the ‘height’ of his balcony, he gives the verdict: “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). So they toss her out, with what is left of her belongings.

Rani Jean Neutill sees Boori Ma as the embodiment of Spivak’s ‘subaltern’. Unfit to be a professional gatekeeper, with a suspect personal history, the woman is muted in the process of modernization. As telephones, freshly-painted shutters, and new basins acquire more importance, people’s values diminish. The refugee’s voice, enumerating past personal and collective losses, is not heard, and “between patriarchy and imperialism, a subject constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (Spivak qtd. in Neutill 159).

Madhuparna Mitra claims that Boori Ma is expelled from the building because her otherness cannot be separated from the historical plight of post-Partition refugees. She reads Boori Ma’s story as “a dramatization of the uneasy relationship between native Calcuttans (West Bengalis) and the border crossers (East Bengalis)” (2007: 242). In essence, Mr. Chaterjee and his fellow citizens have no sympathy for Boori Ma’s historical position as refugee. Mitra concludes that while much of ‘Partition literature’ has depicted the horrific violence of communal conflict, Lahiri’s story is more subtle in that it explores the space of apathy and indifference. Boori Ma is not physically harmed, but she is nevertheless traumatized. Thus, “in her inability to find a home, she embodies a more enduring problem of the trauma of partition” (Mitra 2007: 244).

In a nutshell, this is the story of a foreign woman who is tolerated in a building for as long as she takes care of the common spaces and guards the inhabitants from the outside world. Once she starts to venture out of the house more often, farther and farther out into the city, she brings back this outside world with her. It turns out that the residents are afraid of the unknown and of the upheavals of a daunting past; hence they eventually expel Boori Ma from their community. They do not tolerate her transgression of borders and feel they cannot trust her with safeguarding their closed community anymore. Her status as outsider is permanent and the neighbors shun her even from the marginal space she occupied on the first occasion that arises. Harmless Boori Ma, the anonymous victim both of Partition and of “changing times”, suddenly represents a threat, an unwanted reminder of the past.

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“The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” is the next to last story in the book. Although it does not follow immediately after “A Real Durwan”, I will now show the symmetry of these two stories. For example, both plots unfold exclusively in India and feature only Indian characters. However, the community in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” is in total opposition to the one that I have just analyzed, as it fully supports a single woman with epilepsy in the attempt to raise her illegitimate child. The narrative’s ‘we’ takes care of Bibi after she is isolated and eventually abandoned by her elder cousin Haldar and his wife. Lahiri’s technique in this story is similar to Faulkner’s method in “A Rose For Emily”, and she acknowledges in an interview with *Pif Magazine* that it was an experiment for her to try out the collective narrative voice of Faulkner’s tale. Lahiri’s narrator is a group of women “with no particular identity” (Aguiar, 1999, para 15), which inevitably underlines the role of the community in this story.

The house in which most of the plot unfolds is also an “unpainted four-story building” (*IOM* 159), like the one in “A Real Durwan”, and the majority of activities and events are known to all the neighbors. The unpredictable nature of Bibi’s illness confines her to an apartment on the second floor, where she sleeps on a folding camp cot: “Liable to fall unconscious and enter, at any moment, into a shameless delirium, Bibi could be trusted neither to cross a street nor board a tram without supervision” (159). Therefore, her daily occupation consists in keeping the inventory for her cousin’s shop, in the storage room on the roof, a space so small that one can sit

but not comfortably stand. Her cousin Haldar owns and manages a cosmetics shop in the building's common courtyard. For her help he gives Bibi free meals, provisions, and cotton once a year to have her wardrobe renewed by an inexpensive tailor. Like Boori Ma, Bibi complains about her situation and bemoans her fate every day, while the other women are hanging their laundry or going about their business. Also like Boori Ma, later in the story Bibi is banished to the rooftop for an indefinite period. However, the denouement differs considerably.

We learn from the beginning that Bibi Haldar is twenty-nine and not pretty: "Her upper lip was thin, her teeth too small. Her gums protruded when she spoke" (160). She is an uncanny creature, but she is trying to resist this 'othering' and to fit in at all costs. Although she does not migrate, much less immigrate, Bibi is the 'other' at home. In the beginning she is incapable of taking care of herself and behaves like a child. Furthermore, her malady

baffled family members, friends, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets, and fools. In efforts to cure her, concerned members of our town brought her holy water from seven holy rivers. When we heard her screams and throes in the night, when her wrists were bound with ropes and stinging poultices pressed upon her, we named her in our prayers. (...) At the suggestion of a blind Christian she was once taken by train to kiss the tombs of saints and martyrs. Amulets warding against the evil eye girded her arms and neck. Auspicious stones adorned her fingers. (158)

Despite the genuine concern of the entire community in this small unnamed town outside Calcutta, all religious and pagan methods fail to cure the young woman. In fact, treatments offered by doctors seem to make matters worse. They contradict each other and, in the end, Bibi's life is an encounter with one inefficient antidote after another. Nevertheless, during seizures all the neighbors rush out of their apartments with palm fans, sugar cubes, and tumblers of refrigerated water to pour on her head. Bibi herself is convinced that only finding a man and marrying him can cure her. She wants to be like the other women in the community, and getting married seems to be the only way. Thus, she is determined to conform to conventions of all types in order to reach her goal: "Like the rest of us, she wanted to serve suppers, and scold servants, and set aside money in her *almari* to have her eyebrows threaded every three weeks at the Chinese beauty parlors" (160).

Bahmanpour reads "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" in the light of female identity-formation processes, and argues that the story can be interpreted "as a commentary on the constructedness of the Indian notion of femininity and its possible burden on the life of the

marginalized female subaltern in Calcutta, India” (48). It can be said, then, that Bibi is struggling to translate the cultural codes of her own homeland.

So in the first part of the story all her hopes and efforts are channeled towards finding a husband, and the whole community of women starts preparing her for the big hypothetical event. However, no suitors show up and Bibi continues to lament: “I will never be cured, never married” (*IOM* 161). Marriage is the cure for her malady of not belonging, and in her darkest moments of disbelief, she even shows physical signs: “malaise dripped like a fever from her pores” (161). But in Bibi’s most difficult times the women prove totally supportive: they wrap her in shawls, wash her face, and bring her glasses of yogurt and rosewater. She remains a child and the communal ‘we’ acts like a mother, taking her to the tailor to replenish her blouses and petticoats, and hoping to increase whatever matrimonial prospects she had. They warn her that “No man wants a woman who dresses like a dishwasher” (161) and inoculate ideas about female beauty and roles in Bibi’s mind.

After another seizure even a doctor concludes that the only possible ‘treatment’ for Bibi is marriage. Although the women describe this suggested treatment as “the most outrageous of them all” (161), they whisper about it while performing their daily chores and agree that only relations “will calm her blood” (162). Bibi is delighted by this new diagnosis and begins to prepare for conjugal life. She polishes her toenails and softens her elbows. She neglects the new shipments delivered to the storage room, and instead of inserting them in the inventory, she starts writing recipes for vermicelli pudding and papaya stew. She even makes guest lists and menus for her wedding reception, and lists of honeymoon destinations. Bibi applies glycerine to smooth her lips, resists sweets to reduce her measurements, and drags the neighbors to every jeweler in order to choose an appropriate tiara. She becomes obsessed with fitting conventional beauty standards, because once these are attained, a husband is bound to show up. Her goals are clear: she must look pretty and know how to cook, so that she can turn into a suitable wife.

The only ones who remain immune to this frenzy are Haldar and his wife. They conduct business as usual, cramming cosmetics onto the shelves of their small shop. Haldar is not bothered by Bibi’s problems, but cynically replies to the women concerned about his cousin’s health: “What won’t be cured must be endured. Bibi has caused enough worry, added enough to expenses, sullied enough the family name” (163). His wife, a heavy woman preoccupied with having a pale complexion, is convinced that Bibi is possessed by the devil. So she agrees with

her husband that no man in his right mind would be willing to marry Bibi: “The girl knows nothing about anything, speaks backward, is practically thirty, can’t light a coal stove, can’t boil rice, can’t tell the difference between fennel and a cumin seed. Imagine her attempting to feed a man!” (163) Bibi simply does not master the set of social rules necessary for a woman to be married in this Indian community. Indeed, even the protective neighbors are aware that Bibi was not taught how to become a married woman. She was not taught elementary things like how to wear a sari without pinning it in four different places, or how to embroider slipcovers or crochet shawls. Moreover, her formal studies ended after the ninth standard, and it is interesting that education is brought up as a ‘requirement’ for a wife, alongside good looks and cooking skills. Bibi longs to be like the women in the community, but is the ‘undesirable’ Other, despite the various ways in which they support her.

Haldar and his wife have another reason for not wanting to marry Bibi off: they are unwilling to waste their profits on organizing a wedding and assembling a dowry which is their duty as the only relatives Bibi still has. Her mother died giving birth to Bibi, and her father, a teacher of mathematics, also passed away a few years before the time of the narration. He was fond of his daughter, kept track of her illness, wrote letters to doctors in England, and read casebooks in the library. Yet his interest was more scientific in nature, as he hoped to find a logical explanation for her condition. Although he even gave up his job in order to be at home and monitor Bibi at all hours, he could not do more than create a chart of her symptoms with directions for calming her, and distributed it throughout the neighborhood. But even these were eventually lost or turned into sailboats by children, or used to calculate grocery budgets on the reverse side. These signs of carelessness and even indifference show that people do not believe anything can be done for Bibi, apart from keeping her company and soothing her emotional distress.

One morning, dressed carefully by the neighbors in a lavender chiffon sari, she asks Haldar to take her to the photographer’s studio so that her portrait “could be circulated in the homes of eligible men” (164). He turns her down brutally, saying everybody in town knows she is “a liability and a loss” (164). Consequently, the next day she starts taking out her little revenge and begins to tell neighbors imprudent details about Haldar and his wife. Even people from neighboring buildings overhear the things she reveals, and her audience expands. In order to quiet her, Haldar places an advertisement in the town newspaper, soliciting a groom: “GIRL,

UNSTABLE, HEIGHT 152 CENTIMETERS, SEEKS HUSBAND” (165). But the identity of the prospective bride is no secret to parents of young, eligible men, and no family is willing to take such a blatant risk. Although nobody can be ‘persuaded’ to propose, not even “the lonely four-toothed widower who repaired our handbags in the market” (165), the women do not lose faith but continue to “coach her in wifely ways” (165). She is instructed not to frown, but always smile and engage in small talk with nearby men, all of whom are possible suitors. Recalling their own experiences, they train Bibi for a thorough interview. According to traditions, the groom usually arrives with one parent and at least one other relative. They all stare, ask questions, and examine the prospective bride’s looks. Then they make her recite poetry and prove she can cook.

Even though they advise and look out for Bibi, the women in the building still think that she was not their responsibility, and in their private moments they are thankful for not having this burden. After another severe seizure, this time on the banks of the fish pond, a group of husbands escorts the sick woman home. Bibi’s cheeks are bruised and nicked, her “hair was matted, her elbows caked with dirt, and a small piece of one front tooth was missing. We followed behind, at what we assumed to be safe distances, holding our children by the hand” (168). This is the first time the husbands are mentioned; they take control while the women follow behind, unable to do anything for Bibi, but protecting their children from any unpredictable aggression.

Things get worse when Haldar’s wife becomes pregnant. She is convinced that Bibi is “contagious like the pox”, and that her mere presence “would infect the unborn child” (167). Thus, she begins to wrap shawls around her tumid belly, and gives Bibi separate soaps and towels. Haldar and his wife refuse to have her back in the flat, so Bibi will have to sleep in the storage room. She claims she does not mind and sees it like a chance to set up house on her own. Bibi remains optimistic, telling the women that “[t]he world begins at the bottom of the stairs. Now I am free to discover life as I please” (170). Nevertheless, the neighbors start to boycott Haldar’s shop, and eventually manage to drive him and his wife out of business and out of town.

In contrast with the conclusion of “A Real Durwan”, in this story the community stands by the childlike, helpless woman, and banishes the mean relatives. They even repair the shutters of the storage room, and attach a sheet of tin to the doorframe, so that she can have some privacy: “At every opportunity we reminded her that we surrounded her, that she could come to us if she ever needed advice or aid of any kind. For a time we sent our children to play on the

roof in the afternoons, so that they could alert us if she was having another attack. But each night we left her alone” (171). And Bibi stops going out altogether, obstinately turning down every invitation from the neighbors, proving that she is indeed discovering life on her own terms. Months go by and she retreats into a prolonged silence, no longer coming out of her lodging. As opposed to the beginning of the story, when she would go out in search for a prospective partner, now she refuses to leave the former storage room. It is surprising, therefore, that the women find her one morning about four months pregnant, and her self-imposed segregation turns out to have indeed given her the space to do what she ‘pleases’. She breaks all the codes, becoming a mother without being a wife. And yet, this community still supports her.

Although several possibilities are suggested, including the option that the pregnancy might be the result of an unreported crime, Lahiri leaves Bibi’s impregnation a mystery up to the readers to solve. Her character delivers a son and this leads to a radical transformation and to an almost miraculous healing. The women help her deliver the baby and teach Bibi how to feed and bathe her own son. But she fully recuperates immediately after giving birth, has the storage room whitewashed, and arranges other things so it now resembles a proper residence. Moreover, she sells Haldar’s old inventory at half price, and uses the profits to restock the shelves:

In this manner she raised the boy and ran a business in the storage room, and we did what we could to help. For years afterward, we wondered who in our town had disgraced her. A few of our servants were questioned, and in the tea stalls and bus stands, possible suspects were debated and dismissed. But there was no point carrying out an investigation. She was, to the best of our knowledge, cured. (172)

Not only does she become a woman capable of taking care of herself, but she also proves able to accomplish the task of being a single mother, thus defying Indian canons and the others’ expectations. Since no man wants to marry her, actually no man is ever seen in her presence, Bibi takes matters in her own hands and becomes miraculously pregnant. And it turns out that motherhood cures her of her unidentified physical malady at the same time.

Although she does not leave the building, Bibi flourishes once she is allowed her independence and is faced with the responsibility of caring for another human being. Not depending on the others anymore, financially or emotionally, she has room to mature and raise a child. She is capable, against all odds, to translate the cultural codes of her country, negotiate her identity, and overcome her subaltern status.

*

“Sexy” is a story that juxtaposes two extramarital affairs. Miranda, a Midwestern white woman living in Boston, is involved with Dev, a married Indian who immigrated to the United States. Meanwhile, an unnamed man of Indian descent living in Canada cheats on his wife with a young Londoner he meets on a plane. The two apparently parallel stories will come together at one point, through the agency of a seven year-old boy. Thus two men cheat in this story, both of Indian origin; this seems peculiar since in almost all the other stories penned by Lahiri husbands are faithful and committed to the duty of keeping a united family in a foreign country. In “Hell-Heaven” from *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), Lahiri’s second collection of short stories, readers also come across a man who cheats, but on his American wife with an Indian woman.

The story debuts with Laxmi, a married Indian-American, telling her younger work colleague, Miranda, about her cousin who is cheated on by her husband. Apparently he fell in love with a woman he sat next to on a flight from Delhi to Montreal. Instead of flying home to his wife and son, he got off with this woman at Heathrow. So Laxmi is on the phone from work for hours trying to comfort her cousin. She tells Miranda that she feels most sorry for their son, Rohin, who has not gone to school since finding out about the situation. However, skipping school for a few days will not do him any harm since the boy is “something of a genius. He has a Punjabi mother and a Bengali father, and because he learns French and English at school he already speaks four languages. I think he skipped two grades” (*IOM* 84). Rohin fits into the ‘model minority myth’ of very intelligent and highly successful first- and second-generation Indians abroad. In addition to the transnational component he has to integrate into his life, young Rohin is also faced with his father’s infidelity; both these elements make him mature quicker than other children his age.

But Miranda, too, is a young woman involved with a married Indian man whom she has met at a mall. During her lunch break from work, Miranda goes to the cosmetics department because she likes “walking through the cramped, confined maze, which was familiar to her in the way the rest of Boston was not” (85). She is lonely in this big city and smells offer her a sense of familiarity. On that particular lunch break she notices a man holding a slip of paper covered in a feminine handwriting. Although he is not wearing a wedding ring, it is obvious he is buying products for a woman. The man is tanned, has black hair and a moustache, and is elegantly

dressed. Miranda thinks he must be a foreigner and wonders where he is from, her guesses including Spain and Lebanon. However, when he says that a certain cream smells like pineapple, she is not able to discern any accent. The saleswoman then recommends an anti-wrinkle cream to Miranda, dabs some of it her face, and applies a blusher as well. Miranda glances at her glowing face in the mirror; she “has silver eyes and skin as pale as paper, and the contrast with her hair, as dark and glossy as an espresso bean, caused people to describe her as striking, if not pretty” (87). She pays by credit card and the saleswoman thanks her by calling her name. The man follows her towards the exit and remarks that part of her name is Indian: “Mira. I have an aunt named Mira” (88). Dev’s first words connect her name to his Indianness and his family, thus revealing his origins.

They walk together toward Park Street station, and she asks if the cosmetics he has just bought are for his aunt. But he holds her gaze and replies that they are for his wife who is going to India for a few weeks. Then he adds, rolling his eyes, “She’s addicted to this stuff” (88). So Dev and his wife are Indian-Americans, maintaining tight links with relatives in their home country but also accommodating American products.

They start seeing each other, and for Miranda “without the wife there, it didn’t seem so wrong” (88). Dev is quite Westernized: he works in a bank, reads *The Economist*, and takes Miranda out to fancy restaurants. Plus, he is charming and careful, unlike the boys she dated in high school and college. He is “the first always to pay for things, and hold doors open, and reach across the table in a restaurant to kiss her hand. He was the first to bring her a bouquet of flowers so immense she’d had to split it up into all six of her drinking glasses, and the first to whisper her name again and again when they made love” (89). And most of all he is the first man to have complimented her on her long legs and to have called her ‘sexy’.

Therefore, upon finding out he is Bengali, Miranda takes an interest in what she initially thinks is a religion. Lahiri describes her facial features as ‘narrow’, and apparently so is her knowledge about other cultures. But she is eager to learn and asks Dev to point out the place in India called Bengal on a map from *The Economist*. She is a provincial, who does not own an atlas “or any other books with maps in them” (84). He shows her the city of his birth, and the city where his father was born, hinting to their deep roots back in India. Afterwards he dismisses her further questions about his background in a rather patronizing way: “One of the cities had a box around it, intended to attract the reader’s eye. When Miranda asked what the box indicated, Dev

rolled up the magazine, and said, ‘Nothing you’ll ever need to worry about,’ and he tapped her playfully on the head” (84). When he leaves her apartment on Commonwealth Avenue to go back to his house in the suburbs, he tosses the magazine in the trash. Miranda retrieves it and memorizes the borders of Bengal, the bay below and the mountains above. She turns the page, hoping for a photograph of the city where Dev was born, but all she can find are graphs and grids.

She takes this newly-found Indophilia further when she walks into an Indian restaurant in Central Square, orders a plate of *tandoori* chicken and tries to memorize words like ‘delicious’ and ‘water’ and ‘check, please’ from the menu. But the phrases do not stick in her mind, so from time to time she goes to a bookstore, where she behaves like a child who tries to learn the Bengali alphabet. She attempts to transliterate the Indian part of her name, ‘Mira’, but fails, her letters looking more like numbers or triangles. After several tries she still “wasn’t sure if she’d written Mira or Mara”, but “somewhere in the world, she realized with a shock, it meant something” (97). Her name connects her to Dev and his homeland, and throughout their relationship she is absorbing information about his ethnic heritage.

She is clearly not mature yet, and just a few days after their first meeting Miranda already ingenuously wishes she had a picture of her and Dev tacked to the inside of her cubicle, like the one of Laxmi and her husband in front of the Taj Mahal. The two are seated on a white stone bench, the husband’s arm is draped over her shoulder, his knees leaning toward her. Miranda asks what the Taj Mahal is like, and Laxmi answers it is the most romantic spot on earth, “[a]n everlasting monument to love” (92). Laxmi and her husband sometimes argue over trivial things like what to have for dinner, but theirs is the only functional marriage in the short story. Miranda wants to confess that she is having a relationship with a married man, if only because Laxmi is Indian. But she does not tell the truth because her colleague threatens: “If my husband so much as looked at another woman I’d change the locks” (92). Another time during lunch, Laxmi reports the status of her cousin’s marriage and announces: “If I were her I’d fly straight to London and shoot them both” (97).

Nobody in Boston or elsewhere knows about their affair, so Dev and Miranda go out a lot: to the movies at Nickelodeon, where they kiss the whole time; to Davis Square where they eat pulled pork and cornbread; to a Spanish bar where they sip sangria. They even go together to choose a poster of water lilies for Miranda’s bedroom, maybe because when his wife returns,

their relationship is going to be restricted to Sunday afternoons and to the intimate space of her apartment. Dev shows her the city of Boston as if he were the local, the American, and she were the foreigner, the immigrant. One Saturday, after a concert at Symphony Hall, he takes her to his favorite place in the city, the Mapparium at the Christian Science center. Here they stand inside a room made of stained-glass panels,

which was shaped like the inside of a globe, but looked like the outside of one. In the middle of the room was a transparent bridge, so that they felt as if they were standing in the center of the world. Dev pointed to India, which was red, and far more detailed than the map in *The Economist*. He explained that many of the countries, like Siam and Italian Somaliland, no longer existed in the same way; the names had changed by now. (...) He showed her the deepest spot on earth, seven miles deep, above the Mariana Islands. They peered over the bridge and saw the Atlantic archipelago at their feet, craned their necks and saw a giant metal star overhead. (90)

It seems they are standing in the “center of the world,” and Boston becomes the cosmic axis symbolically bringing two strangers together. However, it is all just an illusion, as sounds are altered because of the acoustics, and proportions are distorted because of the glass panels. Similarly, in their affair they seem able to cross borders and boundaries, but they are not. Dev, of course, points first to India, while Miranda wonders in which city Dev’s wife is and looks for London (where she knows another affair is going on). She realizes the farthest she has ever been is the Bahamas, and cannot find it on the glass panels. Dev then asks her to stand at one end of the bridge, and despite the fact that they are thirty feet apart she can hear him whisper “You’re sexy” (91) very clearly. She feels the words “under her skin, under her winter coat, so near and full of warmth that she felt herself go hot” (91). He mingles the geography ‘lesson’ with a reference to sex appeal, so her desire for cultural knowledge and transnational mobility becomes inextricably tied to her sexual desire for him.

Realizing that their relationship is based on her attractiveness, Miranda goes back to the mall and buys “things she thought a mistress should have” (92). Thus, she gets a pair of black high heels with small buckles, a satin slip, and a knee-length silk robe. She also buys an elegant cocktail dress made of a material that matches her eyes. In the fitting room, an older woman praises the silver dress Miranda has chosen by saying: “He’ll want to rip it right off you” (93). Miranda imagines the two of them at an exquisite restaurant in the South End where Dev once ordered foie gras and a soup made with champagne and raspberries. She pictures herself in the cocktail dress, and Dev in one of his suits, kissing her hand across the table like a gentleman.

But the next time he comes to her apartment he is dressed in gym clothes. His wife has returned and his excuse for leaving home on Sundays is that he goes jogging along Charles River. Miranda opens the door in the knee-length robe, but Dev does not even notice it; he carries her over to the bed, wearing sweatpants and sneakers. Later, when she puts it back on to go and get him an ash tray, he complains that she is depriving him of the sight of her beautiful legs, and demands that she take it off. For the “hegemonic migrant” (90), as Alessandro Monti calls Dev, she is just an attractive white body to own and control. So the next Sunday Miranda wears jeans, stashes the lingerie in the back of a drawer, and hangs the silver dress in her closet, with the tag still on. “Often, in the morning, the dress would be in a heap on the floor; the chain straps always slipped off the metal hanger” (*IOM* 93), as a symbol of her shattered romantic and cosmopolitan dreams. Instead of being worn out to fancy places and then slipping from her shoulders, the dress is hidden in the secret space of the wardrobe. It stands for an identity Miranda desires and imagines but cannot accomplish, at least not as long as she is Dev’s mistress.

Still, Miranda looks forward to Sundays, and she agrees to see him according to his timetable, under his conditions. In the mornings she goes out to buy things he likes to eat, such as pickled herring, and tortes of pesto and mascarpone cheese. They eat in bed and make love on sheets covered with crumbs. Dev sometimes tells her stories about his childhood in India, with servants, and cricket games played by a lake. At eighteen he was sent by his family to college in upstate New York “during something called the Emergency”, and “it took him years to be able to follow American accents in movies, in spite of the fact that he’d had an English-medium education” (94). He has had a painful acculturation, and he claims he is still lonely in the United States. He admires Miranda for she, too, has moved to a city where she knows no one, instead of remaining in her hometown. Indeed, before meeting him she was alone and went to movies on her own, or to drinks with Laxmi who was always in a hurry to meet her husband afterwards. Before going back home, Dev takes a nap of exactly twelve minutes, and explains that in India everyone is used to taking naps since it is so hot that people do not leave their homes until the sun sets. During his sleep, Miranda keeps her eyes on the clock, or looks at him and thinks he is perfect. While she seems to be infatuated, he treats her as a sexy outlet for his loneliness and displacement.

Apart from Laxmi and Dev, the only Indians Miranda has ever known were the Dixits, a family with three children, who lived in the neighborhood where she grew up. Mr. Dixit used to go jogging in his everyday shirt and trousers, but wearing a pair of cheap Keds. Every weekend they would pile into their car and go away, nobody knew where. Americans make fun and ostracize this Indian family at all levels:

The fathers complained that Mr. Dixit did not fertilize his lawn properly, did not rake his leaves on time, and agreed that the Dixits' house, the only one with vinyl siding, detracted from the neighborhood's charm. The mothers never invited Mrs. Dixit to join them around the Armstrongs' swimming pool. Waiting for the school bus with the Dixit children standing to one side, the other children would say 'The Dixits dig shit', under their breath, and then burst into laughter. (95)

The Dixits are not just unassimilated, but they are *personae non gratae* in the all-American neighborhood gathering around the Armstrongs. Even their house stands out as ugly. One year the neighborhood children are invited to the birthday party of the unnamed Dixit girl. Miranda remembers vivid images from that visit. She is struck by "a heavy aroma of incense and onions" (95) and by the pile of shoes heaped by the front door. Then her eyes fall on a terrifying painting of the goddess Kali, described as "a naked woman with a red face shaped like a knight's shield" (95). Every detail in this painting inspires power, but in a ruthless, even savage way. Thus, she has "enormous white eyes that tilted toward her temples, and mere dots for pupils. Two circles, with the same dots at their centers, indicated her breasts. In one hand she brandished a dagger. With one foot she crushed a struggling man on the ground. Around her body was a necklace composed of bleeding heads, strung together like a popcorn chain" (95-6). Lahiri ends the description in a playful note, claiming the goddess stuck her tongue out at Miranda. Unaware of the girl's shock, Mrs. Dixit invites her to have some cake. This is a mutual cultural misunderstanding: Miranda, who is a nine-year old American girl, obviously has no knowledge about Hinduism and its divinities, whereas Mrs. Dixit does not offer any explanations because Kali is part of her culture and she does not see how an American can be scared by her portrait.

For months afterwards Miranda is too frightened "even to walk on the same side of the street as the Dixits' house, which she had to pass twice daily, once to get to the bus stop, and once again to come home. For a while she even held her breath until she reached the next lawn, just as she did when the school bus passed a cemetery" (96). It shames her now that she was complicit to these forms of racism, and when she and Dev make love, Miranda sees "deserts and

elephants, and marble pavilions floating on lakes beneath a full moon” (96). In her naïveté, she has exchanged one cliché with another.

When Dev tells her his wife resembles an actress in Bombay named Madhuri Dixit, the funny name coincidence makes her heart stop at the thought that she might be the Dixit girl from the neighborhood, but she remembers her name started with P. A few days later she goes to an Indian grocery store which also rents movies to look for a picture of the Bollywood screen icon whose name she has misspelled in her Filofax “Mottery Dixit” (99). A video is playing on television, featuring “a row of young women in harem pants”, who are “thrusting their hips in synchrony on a beach” (98). She gazes at the covers of the videotapes and takes in racialized representations of feminine beauty. These women are wearing “skirts that sat low on the hips and tops that tied like bandannas between their breasts. Some leaned back against a stone wall, or a tree. They were beautiful, the way the women dancing on the beach were beautiful, with kohlr rimmed eyes and long black hair. She knew then that Madhuri Dixit was beautiful, too” (99). The white woman’s fascination with these exotic ‘others’ may be, in part, a reparative act for her past racist attitude. It may also be inscribed in her recently found neo-orientalism connected with Dev.

Madhuri Dixit is Bollywood’s first major female superstar, and in the 1990s her performance in the song and dance “What is underneath your blouse?” marked the controversial emergence of the “sexually assertive female body on the Bollywood screen” (Reddy 106). Dixit performs alongside another woman and her “vampish sexiness - her erotic autonomy - exceed(ed) the national injunctions of chaste heterosexual womanhood/couplehood that have so pervasively structured the conventions of Bollywood romance genre” (Reddy 107). Despite censorship of that video, middle class Indian women identified with Dixit’s overt sexuality and this is probably what Miranda tries to do as well. While Dixit’s ‘sexy’ body has become a ‘global brand’ of South Asian public cultures, Reddy argues that “Miranda ultimately cannot, and more importantly does not know how to, harness Dixit’s public pleasure and power as part of a transnational subjectivity. In this way, the story productively fails to produce or guarantee uncritical forms of global belonging, such as those that flash up in the scene in the Mapparium” (109).

As the plot comes to its denouement, Laxmi’s cousin takes her son to her parents’ place in California, and they have a weekend layover in Boston. Her husband has decided he wants a

divorce. Miranda agrees to babysit Rohin while Laxmi takes her cousin to a beauty salon. The seven year-old boy has a thick fringe over his eyes which have dark circles under them, so that he looks “haggard”, and older than his age. But as soon as he enters he wants to play a game: Miranda should name a country for which he has to identify the capital. He is in a competition with a boy at school to memorize all the capitals and he is determined to win. He scolds her when she asks questions that are too easy, like the capital of India for instance. Rohin’s interest in geography is tightly linked to his Indian background. As a child whose Indian parents had settled in Canada, who is now traveling to the United States with his mother while his father has moved to England, he is struggling to make sense of the vast transnational component in his life. Memorizing world capitals seems to him a suitable method. Although he is the child and Miranda the adult, he undeniably has more geographical knowledge than his host. In fact, he proves very mature for his age, comparable to Lilia, the other transnational child character in the book. The difference between them is that Lilia only gets information about American history and geography from school and has to discover notions about the rest of the world at home, on her own, whereas Rohin studies world geography in school and travels extensively himself which adds first-hand experience to his knowledge.

Later, when he goes into the bathroom and finds a cream against puffiness, he informs Miranda that his mother has puffiness, too: “She says it’s a cold, but really she cries, sometimes for hours. Sometimes straight through dinner. Sometimes she cries so hard her eyes puff up like bullfrogs” (*IOM* 104). Surprisingly, he has already figured out that adults hide things from him and from each other. Soon, Rohin announces he is bored and goes to Miranda’s bedroom where he inspects her closet and finds the cocktail dress fallen off its hanger. He asks her to put it on, and then declares: “You’re sexy” (107), echoing Dev’s words in the Mapparium. She is startled, and asks the boy what the word means; at first he is reluctant to explain, saying it is a secret. Eventually he whispers: “It means loving someone you don’t know” (107). Miranda feels the words under her skin, but instead of going hot, this time she feels numb. She recalls the way she felt at the Indian grocery, the moment she knew that Madhuri Dixit, whom Dev’s wife resembled, was beautiful.

Vanita Dharam Reddy concludes that “what causes Miranda to feel ‘numb’ (muted shock) rather than ‘hot’ (embarrassed flattery) – is her realization that despite her best efforts to try on the accents of ‘Indianness’ – to Indianize her name, to learn the Bengali alphabet, etc. –

she cannot approximate the gendered and racialized logics of Madhuri Dixit's body" (101). In fact, Miranda experiences a crisis in her own sexuality and images of the Indian actress's body prevail in her mind over the word 'sexy' that is used to describe her. She is jealous of the beauty of Dev's unseen wife, and juxtaposes her beauty to that of Madhuri (also unseen because she has not found a picture), perhaps fantasizing that she would take her place.

The repetition of the word 'sexy' by another Indian male is interesting, particularly since Rohin, too, has shared some geographical knowledge with the American woman. According to Alessandro Monti, this is "a highly symbolic act of temporary transferred power, one that even includes diachronic summaries of colonial and postcolonial sequential duration" (93). Indeed, the boy mentions India, while Dev explains that countries like Siam and Italian Somaliland have different names now. In postcolonial times it is the Indian man who possesses the body of an American woman and teaches her about cartography.

Then the two affairs intermingle in a subtle yet strange way, when Rohin continues: "That's what my father did. (...) He sat next to someone he didn't know, someone sexy, and now he loves her instead of my mother" (*IOM* 108). Despite his maturity, Rohin is still a child, so a few minutes later he falls asleep on her bed, just like Dev, but for more than twelve minutes. Miranda puts the dress back on the hanger and imagines the quarrels Rohin must have overheard in their house in Montreal, with his mother desperately inquiring whether the other woman is sexy. She would have cried and asked "How could you love a woman you don't even know?" (108) As Miranda imagines this scene she starts to cry herself, realizing that she cannot continue the affair. Although she thought they had bridged the cultural differences, for her lover she is simply a sexy woman he does not want to get to know. In the Mapparium that day it seemed to her that all the countries were close enough to touch, that space was fluid and borderless, allowing her to negotiate a transnational identity. But Monti points out the Sanskrit name 'Mira' can either mean "the ocean, the sea" or indicate "a limit, a boundary" (94). As the second interpretation of her Indianized name suggests, Miranda is limited in the endeavor of crossing boundaries.

On Sunday Dev calls to let her know he is on his way to her apartment, but she lies that she has a cold and tells him not to come. She asks if he remembers what he whispered to her in the Mapparium. He laughs quietly, and does not reply, but suggests they should meet the following Sunday. She decides she is going to see him one more Sunday, perhaps two. Then she

is going to tell him “the things she had known all along: that it wasn’t fair to her, or to his wife, that they both deserved better, that there was no point in it dragging on” (*IOM* 110). But the following Sunday it snows, so he cannot leave the house pretending to go jogging, and the next she goes to the movies with Laxmi. On the third week Miranda goes for a long walk down Commonwealth Avenue, past the restaurants where Dev kissed her, and all the way to the Christian Science center. The Mapparium is closed that day, and despite the open ending, readers get a feeling that their affair is a closed chapter too.

In the last scene Miranda sits alone on one of the benches in the plaza outside the church, “gazing at its giant pillars and its massive dome, and at the clear-blue sky spread over the city” (110). Miranda no longer is the small-town girl from the beginning of the story. She is now more comfortable with the big city in New England and more at home with cultural diversity. Her relationship with Dev has opened up the world of cultural translations. And a young Indian-Canadian boy, wiser than his age, has made her see the juvenile, egotistic nature of the affair she was so fascinated with. She gazes at the church and at the sky in a sort of apology for her sin, and clear skies seem to lie ahead for Miranda.

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In “Mrs. Sen’s” the title character both resists and makes efforts to adapt to American society. On the one hand, her elaborate daily rituals of Indian food preparation show she is clinging to her ethnic identity. On the other hand, her repeated (albeit failed) attempts to learn how to drive do prove she is trying to compromise and cross the bridge between cultures. Hers is a physical, but also a cultural and emotional exile.

Mrs. Sen is about thirty, and she has joined her husband in an unnamed coastal town in America. She takes care of an eleven-year old boy called Eliot, who filters the third-person narrative. Eliot is the only American child in the book, except for Dora from “When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine”. Due to his close relationship to an Indian woman he will develop a deeper understanding than Dora of this foreign culture. Michael W. Cox has asserted that Eliot serves “as a focal point or catalyst for intercultural contact” (120), as he records Mrs. Sen’s difference. His mother found Mrs. Sen’s announcement outside a supermarket: “Professor’s wife, responsible and kind, I will care for your child in my home” (*IOM* 111). During their first

meeting, Mrs. Sen introduces her husband as if they are only distantly acquainted, saying “Mr. Sen teaches mathematics at the university” (112). In other words, as Laura Anh Williams points out, “rather than possessing an autonomous and self-defined identity, she is defined through her husband’s name and employment” (73).

She is also dependent on him since she does not drive, despite the fact that Mr. Sen is giving her driving lessons and is putting pressure on her to get her license. Mrs. Sen apologizes to Eliot’s mother for being a slow student, explaining that back ‘home’ they have a chauffeur. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why she resists driving in the United States: she is frozen in a mentality that views people who drive as belonging to the lower social classes. Eliot’s mother asks: “And that is all ... in India?” and she answers: “Everything is there” (*IOM* 113), implying from the onset that nothing is here.

However, her family back in India keeps asking her to send pictures of her new life, assuming she lives like a queen in a palace. In reality, she is stuck in the house, not having any place to present the “saris of every imaginable texture and shade, brocaded with gold and silver thread” (125) which fill her closets. She has thus been uprooted from her comfortable milieu, and constrained to live in a university apartment located on the fringes of an unfamiliar campus. The house is, according to Mrs. Sen, clean and safe for a child, although to her it feels foreign. Thus, the lobby has “unattractive squares of tiles”, and inside the living room they have a plush carpet, as well as other “mismatched remnants of other carpets (...) positioned in front of the sofa and chairs, like individual welcome mats anticipating where a person’s feet would contact the floor” (112). It seems new and uninhabited, since the lampshades besides the sofa are still wrapped in the manufacturer’s plastic, and the television set and the telephone are covered by pieces of fabric. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Sen wear shoes inside (Indian habit), but their pairs are lined on the shelves of a small bookcase by the front door. A little puzzled in the beginning, Eliot soon learns to respect the rules of the house, so he also removes his shoes at the entrance and places them on the shelf.

Eliot detects other peculiar things about his new babysitter, such as her scent of mothballs and cumin, and the crushed vermilion in the centered part of her braided hair. At first the American boy wonders if she has cut her scalp, or if an insect has bitten her there. But one day he sees her “solemnly applying, with the head of a thumbtack, a fresh stroke of scarlet powder” (117). She explains that she must wear this powder every day, for the rest of the days that she is

married, introducing him to Indian rituals. He asks if this is like a wedding ring, and she answers ironically, hinting to the instability of Western marriages, that it is like a wedding ring which one cannot lose in the dishwasher. In fact, even Eliot's parents are separated and do not keep in touch. His father lives two thousand miles west, while his mother is a single American woman, driving to the office every day, working to support herself and her child. She leaves her son in the care of a married Indian woman, carefully dressed in traditional wear, unable to drive but working in the house all day. She does not have any children of her own, yet she takes excellent care of the American boy. And this is exactly what Eliot needs: a mother figure to offer him affection.

Mrs. Sen starts assuming the role of a traditional Indian matriarch and is always cooking or preparing snacks for Eliot and her husband. Jennifer Ho comments that: "food is a critical medium for compliance with and resistance to Americanization, a means for enacting the ambiguities of an Asian-ethnic identity that is already in a constant state of flux" (qtd. in Williams 77). Eliot's previous babysitters, a university student named Abby, and an older woman called Mrs. Linden, are both described as the opposites of Mrs. Sen, since they are careless with culinary ways: the first one sips whiskey-spiked coffee from a thermos, and the second one refuses to prepare any food for Eliot containing meat. Whenever Eliot's mother comes to pick him up, Mrs. Sen insists that she should eat something small. So she sits awkwardly on the sofa in the living room, keeping "her knees pressed together, the high heels she never removed pressed into the pear-colored carpet" (*IOM* 118). Eliot compares his mother to Mrs. Sen and surprisingly concludes that the former looks odd, "[h]er cropped hair, a shade similar to her shorts, seemed too lank and sensible, and in that room where all things were so carefully covered, her shaved knees and thighs too exposed" (112-3). He watches the two adult women, contrasts the different backgrounds they come from and is translating between cultures. East meets West as the two women sit together in Mrs. Sen's living room, and the encounter is neutrally mediated by a lonely American boy.

For Eliot, his babysitter's otherness is not a negative thing. He perceives her difference, but the way in which she cares for him is more important than her looks or peculiar habits. His experience is dissimilar to that of Rohin, whose mother is Indian and Miranda, the other woman he comes in contact with, is American. Yet both boys attempt to make sense of two distinct cultures. Eliot's mother always says that Mrs. Sen's food is delicious, but later in the car she

comments she does not like the (Indian) tastes. Moreover, after they get home she pours herself a glass of wine and eats bread and cheese. When they order pizza she leaves Eliot to clean the leftovers as she goes on the deck to smoke, all habits which Mrs. Sen could not even fathom. For the immigrant woman, food and the process of preparing it are crucial, whereas for the American they bear little importance. Eliot's mother is the very antithesis of Mrs. Sen. This dichotomous portrayal of American and Indian women may be too reductive: the former are 'all' supposed to be self-assertive, career-oriented, and cold, whereas the latter are necessarily traditionalist, nurturing, and motherly. However, Mrs. Sen's devotion to cooking and to spending time indoors unequivocally reveals her deep estrangement from American culture.

Eliot and his mother live year-round in a beach house; by September it is already cold in this house, so they have to bring a portable heater whenever they move from one room to the other, and to seal the windows with plastic sheets. The beach is barren since the only neighbors who stay on past Labor Day, are a young married couple. They do not have children, and Eliot no longer finds it interesting to gather broken mussel shells in his bucket, or play alone on the deserted beach. By contrast, "Mrs. Sen's apartment was warm, sometimes too warm; the radiators continuously hissed like a pressure cooker" (114), so it feels like a home. At the beach house he is cold and lonely, at 'Mrs. Sen's' he enjoys the warmth of a family. He particularly enjoys watching Mrs. Sen chop things, seated on newspapers on the living room floor, using a blade "that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas" (114). In fact, she has brought it from overseas, and the following detailed description shows its pivotal importance for the main character:

The blade was hinged at one end to a narrow wooden base. The steel, more black than silver, lacked a uniform polish, and had a serrated crest, she told Eliot, for grating. Each afternoon Mrs. Sen lifted the blade and locked it into place, so that it met the base at an angle. Facing the sharp edge without ever touching it, she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices, and shreds. She could peel a potato in seconds. At times she sat cross-legged, at times with legs splayed, surrounded by an array of colanders and shallow bowls of water in which she immersed her chopped ingredients. (114)

While she is performing this daily routine, Mrs. Sen keeps an eye on the television and an eye on Eliot, but she never seems to keep an eye on the blade she is expert in handling. Nevertheless, she is very careful not to hurt Eliot, so she does not allow him to walk around while she cuts the vegetables, but asks him to sit on the sofa and browse through comic sections of the newspaper

or eat small snacks. Actually, she is so careful that “[s]he would have roped off the whole area if she could” (115).

However, once she breaks this rule and asks Eliot to fetch a plastic bowl from the kitchen. But as he approaches, she cautions: “Careful, oh dear, be careful (...) Just leave it, thank you, on the coffee table, I can reach” (115). Small language mistakes appear when she is nervous or excited, aiming to show she is not at ease with either the language or the culture. Apparently in India there is such a blade in every household, therefore Mrs. Sen reaches across continents and reconnects with her homeland while using it. She tells Eliot that whenever there is a wedding or a large celebration, her mother gathers all the neighborhood women with blades just like hers, and then they form an enormous circle on the roof of their building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night. She reminisces it is impossible to fall asleep those nights because of the women’s lively chatter.

Mrs. Sen is obviously homesick, she longs for the animated community she had in India. She has a hard time coping with the loneliness in the individualistic American society where Mr. Sen “has brought” her. Still, she keeps trying to socialize with Eliot’s mother, and insists that she should eat before she leaves with Eliot. She treats the American woman as a guest, not as a person with whom she has a contractual relationship. But Eliot’s mother does not like Mrs. Sen’s flavored food, hence “any possibility of female companionship of the kind shared by the women chopping vegetables is thwarted” (Mitra 2006: 194).

In truth, loneliness is a pervading idea in this story. Eliot is lonely in the beach house, his mother is a solitary person, who has occasional affairs, while Mrs. Sen feels uprooted from her homeland and isolated in her suburban American house. Once she asks the boy: “Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?” (*IOM* 116) She feels the need for human connection and almost cries out for someone to rescue her from the unbearable loneliness: “At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone. But 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). By now Eliot knows that when she says ‘home’, she means India, not this apartment where she sits chopping vegetables every day. He thinks of his own home, and remembers that on Labor Day their neighbors threw a party to which they were not invited, so his mother called and asked them to keep it down. Consequently, he tells Mrs. Sen that neighbors might call if they heard her screams, but only to

complain that she is making too much noise. Quintessentially, that is the main difference between the Indian and the American societies, one that Mrs. Sen cannot (and perhaps does not want to) accommodate. In contrast to Indian communities in which people feel the responsibility to participate in the lives of others, Americans are always careful not to intrude in their neighbors' 'business'. Noelle Brada-Williams rightly concludes that "the American model of polite behavior depicted in Lahiri's work is to be wholly in one's own world and to maintain the smells, sounds, and emotions of that world so that they do not encroach upon another individual's life. Mrs. Sen's notion of community is the opposite" (459). Basically she longs for the care and support such a group offers Bibi Haldar, for example.

Each afternoon, Mrs. Sen waits in a grove of pine trees for the school bus to drop Eliot off. She always gives him a sandwich or a snack while walking to the car, and then she practices driving her toffee-colored sedan for twenty minutes. Eliot knows she dreads the roar of the ignition because she places her hands over her ears to block out the sound as she presses her slippered feet to the gas. The ritual continues, as Mrs. Sen adjusts the driver's seat and the rearview mirror, and turns on the radio to a station that plays symphonies. She once asks Eliot if Beethoven is playing, "pronouncing the first part of the composer's name not 'bay', but 'bee', like the insect" (*IOM* 120), falling into one of the usual language traps. She circles the apartment complex a few times, manipulating the automatic gear shift "as if it were an enormous, leaky pen, and backed inch by inch out of the parking space" (120). The car is as unfamiliar to her as the brick buildings which look "all identical, embedded in a communal expanse of log chips" (119). The whole American urban reality feels foreign and unwelcoming to her. For a woman so careful not to hurt Eliot while they are in the house, Mrs. Sen is quite careless when she is outside and behind the wheel:

She was continuously distracted. She stopped the car without warning to listen to something on the radio, or to stare at something, anything, in the road. If she passed a person, she waved. If she saw a bird twenty feet in front of her, she beeped the horn with her index finger and waited for it to fly away. (...) Slowly they crept past the swing set, the laundry building, the dark green trash bins, the rows of parked cars. Each time they approached the grove of pine trees where the asphalt loop met the main road, she leaned forward, pinning all her weight against the brake as cars hurled past. (120)

The cars symbolize the foreign American society, making her afraid and insecure. They seem to be invasive, as opposed to the people who never intrude to another's privacy. She is terrified to get on the main road, but luckily she is not allowed there without Mr. Sen. As if he were the

adult, and she the child, Eliot explains that she has to wait until no one is coming, then turn and speed up fast. He thinks that when his mother is driving everything seems so simple, the road being “just a road, the other cars merely a part of the scenery” (121). However, he notices how the same stream of cars made Mrs. Sen’s “knuckles pale, her wrists tremble, and her English falter” (121). Her statement “Everything, this people, too much in their world” (121) shows she is overwhelmed and unable to integrate. Ashutosh Dubey argues that “her stubborn refusal to learn to drive can be seen as a subconscious (...) resistance to the dictated terms of this new world” (24).

The boy suggests that if she gets her license she could go places. He adds she could go anywhere, but Mrs. Sen has the argument ready: “Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?” (*IOM* 119) It turns out driving is useless to her since she would not be able to drive back to her homeland anyway, and that is her only goal and most ardent desire. Her husband insists for her to drive because he knows how important mobility is for an American. He is striving to assimilate, while she rejects this option altogether. I agree with Alfonso-Forero who argues that by rejecting physical mobility within the United States, Mrs. Sen is actually opting for a static identity (2011: 149). In fact, despite her occasional attempts to ‘scream’ and reach out for connection, she also rejects the dialogue between the two cultures and the possibilities of a more fluid sense of self.

Eliot soon realizes that only two things make Mrs. Sen happy: receiving a letter from India and cooking fresh fish. After the daily driving practice she unlocks the mailbox, but asks Eliot to reach inside, while she childishly shuts her eyes and shields them with her hands in expectation. The boy cannot comprehend her anxiety, especially since his own mother collects mail so infrequently that their electricity was once cut off for three whole days because she did not pay the bill. When he finds a blue aerogram Mrs. Sen is so ecstatic that she embraces him. After she finishes reading she immediately calls Mr. Sen’s office and reads it out to him in their own language which seems “riotous to Eliot’s ears” (*IOM* 122). He has the sensation that she is no longer present in the room and that “the apartment was suddenly too small to contain her” (122). She does not cook that day, but they walk to the university cafeteria and eat French fries. She tells him that her sister has had a baby girl, but by the time she gets to see her, depending on Mr. Sen’s tenure, she will already be three years old. By then her own aunt will be a stranger, and it saddens her to think that her niece will not know her face. At the same time she realizes

Eliot is acquainted to such loneliness already due to the distant relations in the American society and in his family. She concludes: "You are wiser than that, Eliot. You already taste the way things must be" (123). Mrs. Sen, too, is like a child who has to 'taste' the foreign ways of this country. We are not told for how long she has been living here, but perhaps she has not had her own baby yet because she misses her family and cannot even conceive giving birth so far away from them.

The other thing that makes Mrs. Sen happy is whole, fresh fish from the seaside. One evening she serves Eliot's mother a tuna croquette, explaining that it should be made with a fish called *bhetki*, and that it is very frustrating to live so close to the ocean and not to have fresh fish. Eliot's mother suggests she should try the supermarket, but Mrs. Sen shakes her head and dismisses the idea: "In the supermarket I can feed a cat thirty-two dinners from one of thirty-two tins, but I can never find a single fish I like, never a single" (123).

In summer she likes to go to a market by the beach, and although the fish she buys here still does not taste like the one in India, at least it is fresh. She is a woman who has grown up eating fish at least twice a day, because in Calcutta people eat "fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky" (123). They eat the tail, the eggs, and even the head, which sounds quite outrageous to the American salesman. Thus, fish is the tool of nostalgia, but also the symbol of her alienation. Madhuparna Mitra claims that "it is the quest for fish that emboldens her, makes her assertive and decisive, but also leads to the (minor) tragedy of the story's ending. The story raises this question about the immigrant experience: at what point does the desire to preserve one's native culture become counterproductive or even destructive?" (2006: 193) Indeed, Mrs. Sen probably reaches that point.

When her grandfather dies, she refuses to practice driving or to cook because she mourns his death according to Indian customs. She merely prepares some crackers with peanut butter for Eliot, and then sits reading old aerograms she keeps in a shoebox. Absent-minded, she paces the American apartment where she is confined and listens to a tape with people talking in her own language. It was a farewell present from her family, and Mrs. Sen identifies each speaker; her mother sounds more serious than the others, and Mrs. Sen translates for Eliot what she is saying: "The price of goat rose two rupees. The mangoes at the market are not very sweet. College Street is flooded" (*IOM* 128). Then she explains that these are all things that happened the day she left

India. But the fact is that she has never really left India, she still lives in an imaginary, mythic homeland. Similar to Mr. Pirzada, for her life happens elsewhere.

After a week she starts cooking again, a sign that she is out of mourning. Mr. Sen calls to take her and Eliot to the seaside and for the occasion Mrs. Sen puts on a red sari and red lipstick, and rebraids her hair. After knotting a scarf under her chin, she arranges her sunglasses on top of her head, and puts a pocket camera in her purse. As Mr. Sen backs out of the parking lot, he puts his arm across the top of the front seat, so that it looks as if he has his arm around his wife (a rare sign of affection between the two). This time he comes into the fish shop with them, and they buy so much mackerel, butterfish, and sea bass, that Eliot has to carry one of the bags. Afterwards they cross the street to a restaurant and eat two baskets of clam cakes. Mrs. Sen's "face was flushed, her lipstick faded, and she laughed at everything Mr. Sen said" (129). This is the only scene in the story when she is described as enjoying herself in America. They walk on the shore and the wind is blowing strongly so Mrs. Sen compares the waves to saris drying on a clothesline, and laughs again. She takes a picture of Eliot and Mr. Sen then asks her husband to photograph her and Eliot, as she presses the boy against her checkered coat. Finally the camera is given to Eliot to take a photo of the couple. The boy waits for them to move closer together, but they do not. Nor do they hold hands or put their arms around each other. However, they both smile "with their mouths closed, squinting into the wind, Mrs. Sen's red sari leaping like flames under her coat" (130).

Back in the car, warm at last, everyone seems happy, but after a few miles Mr. Sen pulls over and asks his wife to drive. She takes a long while adjusting her sari and sunglasses. As usual, she turns on the radio, saying it helps her concentrate. The road is empty, and for about a mile she drives well, although much slower than the other cars that passed her. The town approaches, and Mr. Sen tells her to switch lanes as she will have to turn left at the rotary, but she does not. He shuts off the radio, asking if she is listening to him. But still no reaction from Mrs. Sen. Cars start beeping their horns, and she beeps in response defiantly. Then she pulls without signaling to the side of the road and says, while resting her forehead on the steering wheel: "No more. (...) I hate it. I hate driving. I won't go on" (131). If the blade (called *bonti*) symbolizes her Bengali identity, "her vexed relationship with the car represents the failure to forge a successful Bengali-American self" (Mitra 2006: 194). While she transports the *bonti*

across oceans, she fails to learn to drive, thus not exploring the second part of the hyphen and remaining an immigrant outsider.

After this incident she stops driving, but decides to go and pick up the fish from the market by bus. On their way home, an old woman keeps watching them, “her eyes shifting from Mrs. Sen to Eliot to the blood-lined bag between their feet” (*IOM* 132). I am indebted to Christina Bertrand for pointing out the fact that the old American woman is described in terms of black and white: she has a “black overcoat” and is holding a “crisp white bag” in her “colorless hands” (*IOM* 132). Mrs. Sen is probably wearing one of her colorful saris, certainly has her vermilion dot, and is carrying a “blood-lined bag”. Bertrand notices that these “juxtaposed visual images prepare the reader for the chasm of cultural difference that exists between the two [women]” (36). Thus, when the old lady gets off the bus she complains to the driver about the suspicious smell of Mrs. Sen’s bag. Not only loud noises but also strong smells are bothering Americans. “Unbeknownst to her, Mrs. Sen has committed a social faux pas: in America, you do not bring an unidentifiable bloody object onto a public bus, unless you want to endure suspicious looks and nasty comments” (Bertrand 36-7). The driver then assumes that Mrs. Sen does not even speak English, so he addresses the American boy directly, telling him to open the window. He silences Mrs. Sen and makes her attempts to compromise futile. In fact, it appears that neither part is open to cross-cultural communication.

So, the next time the people from the market announce that some halibut has arrived on the boats, Mrs. Sen calls her husband at work. Because he does not answer, she takes matters into her own hands. She announces Eliot that they are going to get the fish, and she settles into the driving seat. She intends to make a tasty stew with the fish and some eggplants, and this motivates her to drive. It is as if she were symbolically driving to Calcutta in order to get the ingredients and cook a traditional dish. She drives around the asphalt loop several times, each time pausing by the grove to observe the traffic on the main road. Eliot thinks she is just practicing as usual, but suddenly she gives a signal and turns. After only a mile she makes a left turn too early, and although an oncoming car manages to swerve out of the way, Mrs. Sen is so startled by the sound of the horn that she loses control of the wheel and hits a telephone pole.

The accident symbolizes both the fact that she cannot drive to India, like she would have wanted, and that her chances to assimilate in America are completely erased. Eliot comes out without a scratch, while Mrs. Sen has cut her lip, and the car’s fender needs to be straightened.

When a policeman arrives and asks for her license, she is only able to reiterate the sentence from the opening of the short story: “Mr. Sen teaches mathematics at the university” (*IOM* 134). This indicates her lack of self-confidence and even of self-identification. Her husband arrives at the scene and speaks at length to the policeman, but on their way back he does not say a word to Mrs. Sen. He seems indifferent to his wife’s difficulties with acculturation, and appears unaware of the community and privileges she has given up to join him in the United States. He is too focused on his own integration in the university system, and too insensitive to his wife’s emotional needs.

When they get to the apartment, Mrs. Sen prepares a snack for Eliot, and instructs her husband to give him a Popsicle if he is still hungry. This improper meal shows how disturbed she is after the accident. She goes into the bedroom and shuts the door. When Eliot’s mother comes to pick him up, Mr. Sen apologizes on behalf of his wife for the accident and offers a check reimbursing that month’s payment. She confesses in the car that she is relieved and satisfied with the arrangement. From that afternoon on, Eliot is given a key which he wears around his neck, and is cut off not only from cultural difference but also from close human connection. He is told to let himself into the beach house after school and call the neighbors only in case of an emergency. His mother reassures him (and herself): “You’re a big boy now, Eliot” (135), pretending he has matured overnight. As for Mrs. Sen, she is left crying alone (like a child) behind a shut door.

Bidisha Banerjee suggests the fact that her cut lip represents “the silencing of her voice from that day onward” (2007: 177). She claims that patriarchy (through the agency of the insensitive Mr. Sen) and racism (the incident on the bus and Eliot’s mother who does not like her) have eventually stifled Mrs. Sen’s feeble efforts to assimilate. She also points out an interesting cultural misreading which only adds up to the above stated conclusion. The policeman who arrives at the scene of the accident thought the Indian woman had also cut her scalp (like Eliot in the beginning), “but it was only the vermillion” (*IOM* 134). It is evident then that there is no space for her to belong to. Divorce is not an option either for this Indian woman, so she has to keep acting like a good wife to an unsupportive man.

In my opinion Mrs. Sen is the only example in the book who does not manage to translate. However, integration can sometimes be a slow process, often spanning over generations. Some people never assimilate, which is why I believe it is important that Lahiri has

also included such an ‘untranslated’ personage in her gallery, thereby avoiding the danger of homogenizing the Indian-American diaspora. Mrs. Sen clings to Indian food, music, and letters from home, and blocks out American culture. Unlike other Indian female characters from this volume, such Mala for instance, she does not move past the level of recreating Indian ways in the household and is incapable to incorporate American customs in her routine. The only genuine connection she makes in the story is with an eleven-year old boy who does not judge or contest her Indianness. In the end even this fragile relationship is severed because of an irrational act she performs. She will probably go out of the house even more seldom, and the accident puts an abrupt end even to the small ‘community’ she shared with Eliot. Even though there is little physical damage, she has intruded in the life of other drivers in a way that will not be tolerated in America.

For Mrs. Sen, the experience of immigration is almost entirely negative and distressing. Hence, she is in a perpetual state of uncomfortable transit, unable to translate into the host culture while preserving elements from her own. For Eliot’s sake she does try to bridge this gap, but ultimately her attempts fail. She is confined to the house, and the walls of her room represent walls of the mind, borders she cannot cross. Maybe if she had a child of her own she would get out of her room, then of her house, and make more valiant attempts at negotiating the American outdoor space that she dreads. Motherhood might be the only cure for her malady of displacement.

*

In “This Blessed House” a newly married Indian-American couple keep finding Christian objects ‘hidden’ in different corners of the house they just moved into together. The first one is an effigy of Christ, which Twinkle discovers behind an unopened vinegar bottle in a cupboard. Sanjeev, who is sorting the packing boxes they still need to open, tells her to get rid of both. His wife says she could cook something with the vinegar, and the “idiotic statue” (as he calls it) could be worth something. He feels the need to state the obvious to her, namely that they are not Christian. But she shrugs and replies: “No, we’re not Christian. We’re good little Hindus” (*IOM* 137), thus parodying the stereotypical image that all Indians must also be Hindus. Then she playfully plants a kiss on top of Christ’s head, and places the statue on the fireplace mantel. In this way, Joel

Kuortti argues, Twinkle is “resisting a confined, predetermined view of culture and herself” (210) and approaching identity from a more inclusive intercultural and interreligious stance.

By the end of the first week they have “discovered” a number of objects. I think Lahiri’s choice of verb is significant for several reasons. First of all, the two are settling in a house that has previously been inhabited by other lodgers and they have to uncover its secrets and make it into their home. Secondly, because Twinkle and Sanjeev are of Indian descent, the act of ‘discovering’ acquires colonial resonances. Rather, it suggests a reverse colonization and Joel Kuortti argues that “the people who had previously been suppressed gain the position of autonomy if not superiority” (212). Thirdly, as they are finding seemingly invaluable trinkets, the newly-weds are in fact learning valuable things about each other.

Like “A Temporary Matter”, this story is also narrated in third person, largely from the husband’s perspective. So, Sanjeev studies the rather kitsch items on the mantel and is baffled by the fact that each is so silly and clearly lacks any sense of sacredness. After only a week, the shelf already displays “a sizable collection of Christian paraphernalia” (*IOM* 137), including:

a 3-D postcard of Saint Francis done in four colors, which Twinkle had found taped to the back of the medicine cabinet, and a wooden cross key chain, which Sanjeev had stepped on with bare feet as he was installing extra shelving in Twinkle’s study. There was a framed paint-by-number of the three wise men, against a black velvet background, tucked in the linen closet. There was also a tile trivet depicting a blond, unbearded Jesus, delivering a sermon on a mountaintop, left in one of the drawers of the built-in china cabinet in the dining room. (137)

He is also puzzled that Twinkle, who normally displayed good taste, is so charmed by these meaningless objects which irritate him outright. Despite his repeated protests, Twinkle continues to behave as if she were on a treasure hunt, and eagerly looks for other objects as they are ‘taking over’ the house. When she comes across “a larger-than-life-sized watercolor poster of Christ, weeping translucent tears the size of peanut shells and sporting a crown of thorns” (139), she is determined to hang it in her study. Sanjeev says he will temporarily tolerate the little biblical menagerie, but categorically refuses to have the poster in the house. They are throwing a housewarming party soon and he does not want colleagues from work to see it. Twinkle has the last word though, offering to put it behind the door.

The weekend before the actual party they are raking the lawn and Twinkle finds “a plaster Virgin Mary as tall as their waists, with a blue painted hood draped over her head in the manner of an Indian bride” (146). This is an interesting comparison, which paradoxically mingles Christian and Hindu symbols. Twinkle insists that they should place it on the lawn

because “She’s so lovely” (147), it “would be bad luck not to”, and “[e]very other person in this neighborhood has a statue of Virgin Mary on the lawn” so they will “fit right in” (146). An annoyed Sanjeev repeats that they are not Christian and he does not want the people he works with to see the statue on their lawn. He cares about what his American colleagues will think while she seems to care about what the American neighbors will think (“We’ll fit right in”).

Later that evening, Twinkle is having a bath, with a blue mask on her face, mimicking the Virgin Mary statue. Sanjeev comes in and announces he is going to remove the Virgin and take it to the dump. She stands up, drops the book of sonnets she is reading in the water, says she hates him and will not allow him to remove the statue: “This is our house. We own it together. The statue is part of our property” (149). Then she descends the winding staircase, leaving sloppy wet footprints along the parquet floor, and starts to cry. Again he is the one who backs off, as she sobs into his chest, dirtying his shirt with the now leaking blue mask. Reddy believes this scene “parodies both national religious dominants – Christian and Hindu – as valorized and sacrosanct” (130), and Kuortti claims that the objects are markers of general sacredness, appropriated, re-presented, and re-interpreted by Twinkle who is a post-colonial subject working “towards giving the lie to the foundation of the colonial project” (213). Her struggle to keep and display the Christian objects can also be interpreted as a feminist resistance on her behalf. Therefore, Sanjeev is pushed into a compromise: the statue will be placed in a recess at the side of the house, “so that it wasn’t obvious to the passersby, but was still clearly visible to all who came” (*IOM* 149-50).

Sanjeev is thirty-three, and after graduating from MIT he moved from Boston to Connecticut to work for a firm. He is being considered for a position of vice president, has a secretary of his own and a dozen people under his supervision. He considers himself a mature, accomplished married man, and is eager to prove that during the housewarming party. He is very organized and thorough, a typical urban middle-class professional, obsessed with having a successful career. While embracing various landmarks of Western culture, Sanjeev also clings to some Eastern, masculinist ideas about having a ‘good’ wife by his side. This is why he feels threatened by Twinkle’s spontaneity, flexibility, and childlike behavior. Her attitude towards the Christian items is perceived as another threat, this time to his cultural purity/identity. When they find the poster of Jesus Christ, Mahler’s Fifth Symphony is playing. Sanjeev loves classical music and always reads the liner notes to understand the music better. He has read that Mahler

actually proposed to his wife by sending her a portion of the score: “Although there were elements of tragedy and struggle in the Fifth Symphony, he had read, it was principally music of love and happiness” (140).

However, the music does not seem to be in agreement with the relationship between him and his wife. Eloquently, Twinkle finds the symphony boring and she mockingly waves her cigarette around Sanjeev’s head, “as if it were a conductor’s baton” (139). She is twenty-seven and her name is Tanima, but she likes to be called by her American nickname, coming from a well-known nursery rhyme. It suits her perfectly, since she is not yet mature. Even her facial features are girlish and not “settled into some sort of permanent expression” (142). But she is spontaneous (after a dinner in Manhattan she insisted that they dance a tango on the sidewalk), and seems to ‘twinkle’ in every situation. She is doing a master’s at Stanford and is at home all day working on her thesis on an Irish poet whose name is not revealed and whom Sanjeev had never heard of. She is not bothered by all the things that need to be done in the house, but is the type of person “content with whatever clothes she found at the front of the closet, with whatever magazine was lying around, with whatever song was on the radio – content yet curious” (141). She is the total opposite of her husband: “excited and delighted by little things, crossing her fingers before any remotely unpredictable event, like tasting a new flavor of ice cream, or dropping a letter in a mailbox” (142).

Sanjeev cannot understand her enthusiasm; in fact, [i]t made him feel stupid, as if the world contained hidden wonders he could not anticipate, or see” (142). Thus, her frivolity makes him feel uncertain of his intelligence, and ultimately, of his masculinity. Despite his upper-middle class social status, at home he does not manage to be ‘in control’. Moreover, he is described as having a feminized appearance: “In the mirror of the medicine cabinet he inspected his long eyelashes – like a girl’s, Twinkle liked to tease. Though he was of average build, his cheeks had a plumpness to them; this, along with his eyelashes, detracted, he feared, from what he hoped was a distinguished profile” (140). He is of average height and it irritates him when Twinkle wears high heels. This description has prompted Reddy to compare Sanjeev to an effeminate Bengali *babu*, “a term that referred to an elite class of Western-educated Indians who functioned as mediators between colonial administrators and the rest of the Indian population [and] helped to consolidate white supremacy in the 19th century colonial India” (92). Of course, the colonizer was reassured in his masculinity by perceiving Indian men as emasculated. Initially

a term of respect, the word *babu* later came to “satirize the culture of the nouveau riche in Bengali society” (93). Hence, it started to be associated with Anglicized Bengali parvenus who sought upward economic and social mobility, which seem to be Sanjeev’s main goals, too.

It must be said here that Lahiri often focuses on the male characters’ point of view, in this collection of short stories but also in her novel *The Namesake* and in *Unaccustomed Earth*. I do not believe she is necessarily trying to feminize (Asian) men, rather she is suggesting that a gender balance is possible. It is true that her men sometimes take up roles that are traditionally ‘reserved’ for women, while her female characters are often empowered. But in this way she is inviting readers to reject strict, traditional gender role divisions in which the Indian man is an oppressive patriarch and his wife a submissive partner.

After only two months of marriage, other things about Twinkle start to annoy Sanjeev, such as the way she sometimes spits a little when she speaks, or leaves her undergarments carelessly at the foot of their bed rather than depositing them in the laundry hamper. Sometimes he thinks “with a flicker of regret of the snapshots his mother used to send him from Calcutta, of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without consulting a cookbook” (*IOM* 146). He longs for a traditional Indian woman, but still he chose to marry this nonconformist Indian-American. In fact, they had only met four months before at the insistence of their parents. Twinkle’s parents, who lived in California, and Sanjeev’s, who still lived in Calcutta, had maintained a close friendship. Across continents they arranged the occasion at which Twinkle and Sanjeev were introduced. At the birthday party of a common friend they are seated next to each other, and agree that the American spareribs, egg rolls, and chicken wings all taste the same. Yet they are both successfully ‘translated’ in the American society, have a persistent fondness for Wodehouse novels, and a common dislike for the sitar. Later Twinkle confesses that she was charmed by the way Sanjeev had dutifully refilled her teacup during this conversation, and so they begin to phone and visit each other.

Sanjeev is lonely, has an excessively generous income for a single man, and has never been in love. But he is tired of returning to an empty condominium each night and of attending parties where the other men all went accompanied. Therefore, one afternoon in a movie theater in Palo Alto, he answers ‘yes’ when she asks if he loves her, and presumes she loves him too. Now he has a pretty wife, “from a suitably high caste, who would soon have a master’s degree” and ponders “What was there not to love?” (148) Pragmatic yet insecure, he reassures himself of

his feelings with a checklist. Twinkle, on the other hand, has recently been abandoned by an American who had failed to be an actor, which probably hastened her decision to marry an affluent fellow Indian-American after a brief distance relationship. Although she is by no means a traditional Indian woman, she gives in to the urgings of their matchmakers and has something like an arranged marriage. The wedding takes place in India, in a rainy August, and there are hundreds of guests whom they barely know.

The two characters are also sketched through food references. For instance, Twinkle is “not terribly ambitious in the kitchen” (143), but prefers to buy preroasted chicken and potato salad sold in little plastic containers from the supermarket. She is Lahiri’s only female character who considers Indian food “a bother”, detests “chopping garlic, and peeling ginger, and could not operate a blender” (144). However, the stew she cooks with the vinegar is tasty, although she confesses she made it up while she was preparing it. She improvises with food, and claims that if she ever wants to cook the stew again she will remember the recipe. Apparently this is a reference to Lahiri’s mother who “owned no cookbooks, just as she owned no measuring cups or spoons. To this day, if friends ask how she made a particular dish, she mysteriously replies: ‘It’s nothing, really, you simply take all the ingredients and put them in the pot’” (“Long Way Home” 83).

Sanjeev is puzzled, once more, by his wife’s spontaneity and casual approach to food which, as we have seen, is usually taken very seriously by Indians and Indian-Americans. He, on the other hand, has some culinary knowledge, although his tastes are not terribly adventurous. For example, his fondest moments in Boston are those in which he would eat the same meal every time he went out to an Indian restaurant. On weekends he sometimes “seasoned mustard oil with cinnamon sticks and cloves in order to produce a proper curry” (*IOM* 144). The fact that he finds his wife’s stew delicious does show willingness to work on their relationship. During the meal, however, she covers the bread basket with a dishtowel that has the Ten Commandments printed on it. She smiles, squeezing his knee under the table, and says: “Face it. This house is blessed” (144). Indeed, Twinkle’s dish turned out miraculously tasty (considering she invented the recipe and normally does not cook at all) and it might prefigure a change in her attitude towards domestic responsibilities. Her husband would clearly want that, so perhaps the religious talismans and the presumed blessedness of the house will enable her to change in this respect.

Before leaving for India to have the wedding, Sanjeev found the house on his own. He believes it is appropriate for setting up a family and for inhabiting for a number of years, not just temporarily. Thus, besides the good price and the fact that it is in a neighborhood with a fine school system, he also likes its sturdy architecture. He is impressed

by the elegant curved staircase with its wrought-iron banister, and the dark wooden wainscoting, and the solarium overlooking rhododendron bushes, and the solid brass 22, which also happened to be the date of his birth, nailed impressively on the vaguely Tudor façade. There were two working fireplaces, a two-car garage, and an attic suitable for converting into extra bedrooms if, the Realtor mentioned, the need should arise. (145)

Vanita Dharam Reddy argues that in this story, like in Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), the house is a "metaphor for the production of racialized masculinity" (93). Both Sanjeev and Mr. Biswas chase "successful embourgeoisement in the diaspora" (93), in the form of property ownership. Charmed by this idealized domestic space, Sanjeev decides that "he and Twinkle should live there together, forever" (*IOM* 145) and does not notice some conspicuous religious signs. Although the architecture of the house is to his taste, classical and impressive, Twinkle will soon decorate it with her playful, nonconformist spirit. The house is both an indicator of their bourgeois status, meant to reassure Sanjeev of his firmly rooted diasporic identity, and a territory where the couple negotiates their relationship.

They have invited about thirty people for the housewarming party. Actually all the guests are Sanjeev's acquaintances: mainly people from the office, but also a few Indian couples in the Connecticut area who had regularly invited him, before he married Twinkle, to supper on Saturdays. He had little in common with any of them, but attended their gatherings to eat Indian food, gossip, and discuss politics. Sanjeev is lonely in America, but the Indian diaspora includes him. Twinkle, on the other hand, knows no one in Connecticut, except for another ex-boyfriend who works in a pottery studio. The menu for the big party consists of champagne, samosas from an Indian restaurant, and rice with chicken, almonds and orange peels prepared by Sanjeev himself. He is nervous, and fears his bourgeois aspirations might be jeopardized once his guests notice Twinkle's kitsch collection displayed on the mantel. He still hopes they will be fascinated with "the lovely bay windows, the shining parquet floors, the impressive winding staircase, the wooden wainscoting, as they sipped champagne and dipped samosas in chutney" (150).

Douglas, a new consultant at the firm, and his girlfriend Nora, are the first guests to arrive. Sanjeev introduces his wife Tanima, but she insists they should call her Twinkle. The tall

and blond Americans remark it is an unusual name, but Twinkle shrugs and mentions a Bombay actress, Dimple Kapadia, who has a sister named “Simple”. The Americans raise their eyebrows and nod simultaneously, then inquire whether Sanjeev and his wife are Christian. They had noticed the statue on the lawn, and Sanjeev has to reply politely that there are Christians in India, but they are not. His quick disidentification with Christianity is not followed by identification with Hinduism, once again unsettling the stereotypical image of religious Indians in the diaspora. Vijay Prashad has coined the phrase “U.S. Orientalism” for this attitude that sees “desi culture [as] fundamentally a sort of religious culture” (qtd. in Reddy 129), and Hinduism as a marker of authentic Indianness. It follows that, Twinkle’s persistent excavation and display of the Christian fetishes while also being indifferent to Hindu objects/practices counter this narrative of U.S. Orientalism.

Within minutes, the house fills “with bodies and conversations and unfamiliar fragrances” (*IOM* 151). The women wear short black dresses, high heels, and sheer stockings. Some of the Indian women have donned their finest saris, whereas the men are dressed in jackets and ties. They bring numerous presents, and it is bewildering for Sanjeev “that it was for him, and his house, and his wife, that they had all gone to so much care” (152). Everyone congratulates him on his imminent promotion as vice president, on the house, the food, but most of all, his wife:

People devoured the samosas, and dutifully admired the freshly painted ceilings and walls, the hanging plants, the bay windows, the silk paintings from Jaipur. But most of all they admired Twinkle, and her brocaded *salwar-kameez*, which was the shade of a persimmon with a low scoop in the back, and the little string of white rose petals she had coiled cleverly around her head, and the pearl choker with a sapphire at its center that adorned her throat. (152)

Prabal, an unmarried professor of physics at Yale says his wife is ‘wow’, and Sanjeev remembers he had used the same word for Sophia Lauren and Audrey Hepburn. Then Sunil, another man, plays with her nickname, asking if her last name is “Little Star”. Thus, Twinkle wears an Indian outfit and shines among Sanjeev’s guests, who form a circle around her at all times and laugh at her anecdotes. Her “hectic jazz records” (152) are played instead of the classical music Sanjeev would have preferred. Meanwhile, he is busy opening more bottles of champagne, replenishing the samosas he keeps warm in the oven, “and explaining for the fortieth time that he wasn’t Christian” (152).

Conventional gender roles are reversed: it is the man who serves the food and frets in the kitchen, while the woman entertains witty conversations. It is Twinkle who gives guests the 'grand tour', and discloses that every day is like a treasure hunt in their house (as if Sanjeev were as passionate about this activity as her). Instantly, the whole party starts "combing through each of the rooms, opening closets on their own, peering under chairs and cushions, feeling behind curtains, removing books from bookcases. Groups scampered, giggling and swaying, up and down the winding staircase" (153-54), behaving like children caught in Twinkle's game. When she announces that the only part of the house they have not yet explored is the attic, all these well-dressed, sophisticated guests start climbing the ladder in the hallway. Sanjeev is the only one who does not go up, but remains at the top of the main staircase, listening to footsteps, laughter, and objects thundering over his head. These are loud, unpleasant sounds for his ears accustomed to Mahler and Bach. He does not feel any desire to follow them, instead fantasizes about the ceiling collapsing, and about "the sight of all the tumbling drunk perfumed bodies crashing, tangled, around him" (154).

He looks around at the mess left behind by the guests: glasses, plates, napkins abandoned in every corner. He notices that Twinkle had discarded her shoes, and arranges them in the doorway of the master bedroom. It occurs to him that with a flick of his hand he could snap the ladder back on its spring into the ceiling, in this way trapping everyone in the attic. He thinks of how simple it would be to erase his wife's presence, assert his masculinity, and have the house all to himself. He could quickly

sweep Twinkle's menagerie into a garbage bag and get in the car and drive it all to the dump, and tear down the poster of weeping Jesus, and take a hammer to the Virgin Mary while he was at it. Then he would return to the empty house; he could easily clear up the cups and plates in a hour's time, and pour himself a gin and tonic, and eat a plate of warmed rice and listen to his new Bach CD while reading the liner notes so as to understand it properly. (155)

He even nudges the ladder slightly, but it is firmly planted against the floor, so he does not act upon this thought. Instead, he helps Twinkle keep her balance as she descends, and relieves her of a huge silver bust of Christ which weighs about thirty pounds. Its description marks a slight shift in Sanjeev's attitude: "It had a patrician bump on its nose, magnificent curly hair that rested atop a pronounced collarbone, and a broad forehead that reflected in miniature the walls and doors and lampshades around them. Its expression was confident, as if assured of its devotees, the unyielding lips sensuous and full. It was also sporting Nora's feather hat" (156). Despite this

satirical last remark, it is obvious that the bust possesses the distinguished and sensual profile Sanjeev could only dream of. He hates the bust's immensity, "its flawless, polished surface" (156), and the fact that it is in his house, and he owns it. Nevertheless, he acknowledges its undeniable value: "Unlike the other things they'd found, this contained dignity, solemnity, beauty even. But to his surprise these qualities made him hate it all the more. Most of all he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it" (157). Once more, his masculinity is symbolically under threat.

Twinkle asks if they could display it on the mantel just for that night, but he knows that for the rest of their days together she would keep it on the center of the mantel: "Each time they had guests Twinkle would explain how she had found it, and they would admire her as they listened. He gazed at the crushed rose petals in her hair (...) at the sparkly crimson polish on her toes. He decided those were among the things that made [people] think she was wow" (157). Bonnie Zane reads this scene optimistically. According to her, Sanjeev realizes that a life-partner is "not a static contributor to a home's order" (108), but a person whom one constantly discovers and gradually learns to love. Vanita Dharam Reddy, on the other hand, interprets Sanjeev's fantasy as a transmutation of the statue's social value into the value of Twinkle, thus "inserting them both into [a] logic of fetishization" (91). Twinkle - the fetishist who collects and displays Christian objects - becomes the fetish in her husband's imagination. All the adjectives used to describe the bust are now juxtaposed to the woman, leading Sanjeev to be more pleased with his 'trophy wife' than he was in the beginning of the evening.

Either way, he is the one who walks behind Twinkle into the living room, carrying the massive silver face, "careful not to let the feather hat slip" (*IOM* 157), content that the party is a success and his wife contributes to his social prestige. Twinkle is not the Indian bride he had envisioned, but she might be a blessing in disguise for Sanjeev. Although they both have hyphenated identities, he is the one who seems to hold more tightly to the Indian end of the hyphen as far as marital relationships are concerned. Yet, the final scene probably indicates he will loosen this grip and commit to "a more companionate model of marriage" (Zane 108).

The ending remains open, but I agree that it is optimistic, particularly since Twinkle seems willing to absorb some of his values and precaution in her turn. In the final scene, he tells her where he has put her shoes. But, unlike the time when they went out in Manhattan and she wobbled on high heels, this night she says she will not put them back on because her feet are

killing her. She may have sensed the fact that he is uncomfortable with his height and does not want to expose him in front of the guests. Therefore, the premises are there for the couple to reach a balance in their relationship. The fact that they both love ‘this blessed house’ also indicates that they are trying to make things work. Laura Anh Williams concurs with this positive reading: “Like her impromptu dinner, impossible and impractical but more delicious than his own ‘proper curry’, her spike-heeled shoes and her infatuation with the religious trinkets reflect a relationship to food, objects, and culture that is flexible and constructive, and that may contain the transformative potential for their marriage” (77).

Twinkle is sketched as a cosmopolitan and eclectic character. She prefers the American nickname to her Indian name; she has had several lovers, writes a dissertation on an Irish poet, listens to jazz, and does not like to cook Indian food. Although her links with her Indian heritage seem fragile, she agrees to marry a fellow Indian-American she barely knows in a traditional ceremony organized in their parents’ homeland. She is not a submissive wife but in the end she seems willing to compromise in order to make her marriage work. The way in which she integrates the Christian objects in their home points to her open-mindedness and acceptance of cultural and religious diversity. She does not intend to convert to Christianity, but is curious why the previous owners have left all these objects behind and even wonders whether they were “born-again” (*IOM* 137). This is her way of relating to the house: since it was not an empty space, she is creatively looking for ways of incorporating the ‘discoveries’ and of translating between cultures.

Sanjeev is a more recent migrant, with stronger ties to India where his parents still live. Although he has a Western attitude at work, he is far more traditionalist than his wife and sometimes appears unwilling to translate or negotiate within the walls of his home. Nevertheless, he learns to compromise and acknowledges the value and beauty of the massive bust. Hence, he pushes the boundaries of his diasporic identity and seems inclined to live happily in this blessed house, amidst all the tokens of an alien faith and culture.

*

“The Third and Final Continent” rounds up the book and balances the first story. Jhumpa Lahiri has described the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* as containing resonances of her own family’s

tale of migration. If Mrs. Sen's trials as a transplanted wife reflect her mother's experience (Williams 77), "The Third and Final Continent" points to her father who has stated that his whole life is in this story. Like Mr. Lahiri, the unnamed narrator is a university librarian who immigrates first to England and then to the United States, where he eventually settles.

The narrator leaves India in 1964 with a certificate in commerce and very little money. He sails for three weeks on an Italian cargo vessel, in precarious conditions next to the ship's engine. He crosses the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean, before reaching England. In London he attends lectures in economics and works at the university library. He shares a house in Finsbury Park with at least a dozen other poor Bengali bachelors, all seeking to educate and establish themselves abroad: "We lived three or four to a room, shared a single, icy toilet, and took turns cooking pots of egg curry, which we ate with our hands on a table covered with newspapers" (*IOM* 173). On weekends they lounge barefoot in pajamas, drinking tea and smoking Rothmans or they go to cricket games at Lord's. At times, even more Bengalis come to the house, fellow countrymen they meet in random places around London, and they eat, chat, and play Indian music on a reel-to-reel. The narrator will miss this solid Indian community in his first few months in America.

In 1969, when he is thirty-six years old, his family arrange for him to marry. Around the same time he is offered a full-time job in the processing department of a library at MIT. The salary is "generous enough to support a wife" (174), and it is a great honor to be hired by such a famous university, so he prepares "to travel farther still" (174). This time he has enough money to go by plane, first to Calcutta, to attend his own wedding, then to Boston. During the second flight he reads *The Student's Guide to North America*, and learns that Americans drive on the right side of the road, they call "a lift an elevator and an engaged phone busy" (174). The guidebook also warns that the pace of life in North America is different from Britain, and that over there "Everybody feels he must get to the top. Don't expect an English cup of tea" (174). While still in the air, above or 'in-between' continents, an Indian is thus absorbing English stereotypes about the American lifestyle. As the plane begins its descent over Boston Harbor, the pilot announces the weather and time, but also the fact that President Nixon has declared a National Holiday because two American men had landed on the moon. Several passengers cheer and holler 'God bless America', and one woman starts to pray. So the Indian narrator symbolically lands in America on July 20th, the day Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin make it to

the moon. It follows that in this story not only does Lahiri use the space of several houses and cities in order to reflect processes of cultural translation, but she also metaphorically parallels a journey into outer space to the process of immigration.

The narrator spends his first night in America at the YMCA in Central Square, Cambridge, Massachusetts. It is walking distance from MIT, and close to the post office and a supermarket called Purity Supreme. The room, however, is small and contains only a cot, a desk, and a small wooden cross on one wall. Moreover, the street noise is almost intolerable, making the space extremely uncomfortable:

A bare window overlooked Massachusetts Avenue, a major thoroughfare with traffic in both directions. Car horns, shrill and prolonged, blared one after another. Flashing sirens heralded endless emergencies, and a fleet of buses rumbled past, their doors opening and closing with a powerful hiss, throughout the night. The noise was constantly distracting, at times suffocating. (175)

After an agitated first night in this hostile new world, he reports to his job at Dewey Library which is described as a beige fort-like building. He also opens a bank account, rents a post office box, and buys a plastic bowl and a spoon at Woolworth's, a store he recognizes from London. His is a double translation, because after moving from India to England, where the cultural shock is softened by the big Bengali community, he now has to get used to a new country, this time without any support. When he goes to Purity Supreme he converts ounces to grams and compares prices to things in England, before he buys a carton of milk and a box of cornflakes. This is his first meal in America, a continent where even the simple chore of buying milk is different (in London milk bottles are delivered each morning to the door). In a week he adjusts, more or less. He still eats only milk and cornflakes, morning and night, alone in his room. The food indicates he is like an infant trying to grow up in a new country and culture, without the guidance of his parents.

In the evenings he reads the *Boston Globe* in a spacious room downstairs. Although he tries to put up with the noise until his wife joins him, in six weeks' time, he comes across an advertisement announcing a free room with immediate occupancy, in a house on a quiet street, for eight dollars per week. He calls the number and a woman with a "bold and clamorous" (176) voice demands if he is from Harvard or Tech, adding she only rents rooms to boys from these institutions. He works at 'Tech', so he sets out to see the accommodation. He wears a coat and a tie, and is nervous because he had never lived in a home with a person that was not Indian.

The house is off-white, with a dark brown trim, and is surrounded by a chain-link fence. Unlike the stucco row house he had lived in in London, this one is fully detached, and covered with wooden shingles. A tiny, extremely old woman, with a mass of snowy hair gathered on top of her head, opens the door. She is wearing a long black skirt and a white shirt edged with ruffles at the throat and cuffs. She looks fierce, talks in a very loud voice, and gives commands. The first order is for him to lock the entrance door and fasten the chain. She insists that: "This is the first thing you shall do when you enter, is that clear?" (178) Her family name, 'Croft', also suggests a 'fenced or enclosed area'. Judith Caesar decodes the old woman's attitude:

She locks out a world she no longer understands, and these locks make her feel secure. She apparently never leaves the house, but she is certainly not a prisoner there. Rather, she controls her contact with the outside world by letting in boarders she approves of and by reading and listening to the radio. She controls both her boarders and her borders. The walls of her house are the walls of the self, but it is an integrated and contained self that takes in what it needs from the outside world – her daughter, news, her boarders. (2005: 53)

After locking the door as he is told, the narrator examines the old Boston house. Next to the bench on which the lady is sitting, there is a small round table with a transistor radio, a leather change purse, and a telephone. There is also a parlor lined with bookcases, and a piano with its top down, piled with papers. He finds out that the woman gave piano lessons for forty years in order to raise her children after her husband died. Upstairs there are five rooms; the one he is to inhabit is scarcely furnished, having a twin bed, a brown oval rug, a basin with an exposed pipe, a chest of drawers, a toilet and a tub. After inspecting the view - a small back yard, with a few fruit trees and an empty clothesline - he decides to take the room, and the landlady informs him that he can use the kitchen at the back of the house, accessible thorough the parlor. However, he is to have no 'lady visitors'. Although he protests, announcing for the first time he is a married man, she remains intransigent.

On their first encounter, the old woman slaps the space beside her on the bench and tells him to sit next to her. Then she intones: "There is an American flag on the moon!" (*IOM* 179) He thinks of the articles he has read in the *Boston Globe*, talking at length about the astronauts who have traveled "farther than anyone in the history of civilization" (180). He recalls reports about how the two explored the moon's surface, gathered rocks in their pockets, and planted a flag in lunar soil. They described the surroundings as "a magnificent desolation", and their colonizing voyage "was hailed as man's most awesome achievement" (180). The narrator realizes that he,

too, has traveled farther than anyone in his family and his is also an astounding achievement. The woman repeats the fact that there is a flag on the moon and adds “Isn’t that splendid?” (180) She asks him to say ‘splendid’, and this is going to be their daily ritual. Every night when he returns from work he sits next to his landlady on the bench, she declares there is a flag on the moon and he says it is splendid. This nightly encounter lasts for about ten minutes, until the elderly lady falls asleep. It always reminds him of his wedding ceremony, during which he had to repeat after the priest endless Sanskrit verses that he barely understood. These words joined him to his wife, as the word ‘splendid’ will bond him to Mrs. Croft and ultimately link him to the United States. Nevertheless, he does not have the heart to tell her that the astronauts have taken the flag down before flying back to Earth.

When the first week’s rent is due, he puts eight dollar bills in an envelope, and goes to the piano to place the money on the ledge, as she had indicated. But since he never sees her walking about, he assumes she has difficulties with mobility, so instead of leaving the money he gives it to Mrs. Croft directly. She appreciates his manners, typical of nineteenth century formal politeness, and will describe him as a ‘gentleman’ to her daughter. This gesture connects them, although the architecture of the house prevents them from being physically connected: Mrs. Croft cannot climb stairs, and he only descends if he has to. However, in the space of this house “he is able to make an imaginative connection with America. (...) He can go into his room, shut the door, and be alone to imagine an American world where he can belong, to create a romanticized space removed from his own personal past” (Caesar 2005: 53-4). Paradoxically, then, in this story the conventions, the locked doors, and the narrow staircase make a connection possible between an old American woman and her Indian lodger. Handing her the money directly does not seem an unusual or very intimate gesture, but the narrator understands that anything more would represent an intrusion. He also understands “that the eight-dollar rent is merely a gesture, an assertion that this is her territory, like the flag on the moon; she rents the room not for the money, but for the excuse it provides for human contact on her own terms” (Caesar 2005: 55).

Mrs. Croft’s daughter, Helen, inspects his room every Sunday, as if looking for signs of change. She is an elderly woman herself, who lives in Arlington, Massachusetts, and comes every week to bring her mother groceries, to clean and cook for her. She tells the narrator Cambridge is a very international city and she seems comfortable with ethnic difference. At this

point Mrs. Croft shouts from downstairs, ordering the two of them to descend since “[i]t is improper for a lady and a gentleman who are not married to one another to hold a private conversation without a chaperone” (*IOM* 186). Helen retorts that she is old enough to be his mother, and asks: “What would you do if you actually left the house one day and saw a girl in a miniskirt?” (186) Mrs. Croft proclaims she would have her arrested. Although she is fascinated with the idea of progress and with the fact that Americans have ‘colonized’ the Moon, there is still much in the twentieth century she dislikes and wants to shut out.

She is 103 years old, and the narrator is mortified to hear her age. He remembers how widowhood had driven his own mother insane. His father died when the narrator was still a teenager, and his mother “refused to adjust to life without him; instead she sank deeper into a world of darkness from which neither I, nor my brother, nor concerned relatives, nor psychiatric clinics in Rashbihari Avenue could save her” (187). But Mrs. Croft is different. She is still lucid, able to take care of herself and warm the soup Helen cooks for her. Although she seems vigorous, the narrator worries that something bad might happen to her. What would kill her, Helen insists, is anyone offering to help. Despite his concern, he tries to convince himself that he is not her son and that, apart from the rent money, he owes her nothing. But, when he finds a furnished apartment and rents it in preparation for Mala’s arrival, he is somewhat disappointed that Mrs. Croft does not display any emotion at his departure: “I was only a boarder, a man who paid her a bit of money and passed in and out of her home for six weeks. Compared to a century, it was no time at all” (191).

His marriage to Mala had been arranged by his older brother and his wife. He regarded the proposition as a duty expected of him, as it was expected of every Indian man. He was told “she could cook, knit, embroider, sketch landscapes, and recite poems by Tagore, but these talents could not make up for the fact that she did not possess a fair complexion, and so a string of men had rejected her to her face” (181). At twenty-seven, her parents had begun to fear that she would never marry, so they decided “to ship their only child halfway across the world in order to save her from spinsterhood” (181). Thus, the two are complete strangers, and for the five days they share a room and a bed before his departure for America, she turns her back to him and cries because she misses her mother and father. In fact, they both behave like orphans longing for their parents. He does nothing to console her, but reads the guidebook anticipating his big journey. Moreover, he cannot help thinking of the room and the bed on the other side of the wall

which had belonged to his mother. Six years before, as he was preparing to leave for London, he had watched her die on that bed. His brother could not bear it, so he had to assume the role of the eldest son and touch “the flame to her temple, to release her tormented soul to heaven” (182). Nevertheless, his mother’s ravings are still haunting him from the next room, and this is another reason why he cannot love his wife in his parents’ house. There seems to be a wall between the two spouses, wall which will only tumble in another house, in a faraway country.

Before Mala moves to Boston, he regards her arrival as he would the arrival of a coming month, or season. It is “something inevitable, but meaningless at the same time” (189). However, an incident slightly changes his perspective. One day while walking to work, he notices an Indian woman wearing her sari (this iconic garment of Indian femininity) with its free end nearly dragging on the footpath, and pushing a child in a stroller. She crosses paths with an American woman with a small dog on a leash. The dog starts to bark, then seizes the end of the sari between its teeth. The American woman scolds the dog, appears to apologize, and walks away quickly, leaving the Indian woman to fix her sari, and quiet her crying child. The city appears inimical to the Indian female ‘other’, and it dawns on him that he will have to protect Mala from the unpredictable dangers of this unfamiliar urban environment. He would have to buy her snow boots and a winter coat, warn her about the streets she should avoid, and tell her how to wear her sari (sign of her exotic cultural difference that might get her into trouble).

At the airport he recognizes Mala immediately. The free end of her sari is “draped in a sign of bridal modesty over her head. (...) Her thin brown arms were stacked with gold bracelets, a small red circle was painted on her forehead, and the edges of her feet were tinted with a decorative red dye” (191). He makes no affectionate gesture, but asks whether she is hungry, speaking in Bengali for the first time since his arrival in the United States, and then takes her to the apartment he had rented. For the first time in America he eats with his hands and something other than milk and cornflakes, namely some egg curry she prepares. But a week later they are still strangers in an impersonal living space. He is still not used to coming home to an apartment that smelled of cooked rice and finding that the bathroom was always clean, with two toothbrushes lying side by side. Discreetly, Mala tries her best to bridge the gap between them and immediately steps into the role of a ‘good’ wife. She wakes up before he does and prepares breakfast, expecting him to eat rice as most Bengali husbands do. Yet he tells her he only has cornflakes and milk, and the next morning she prepares it for him. Despite her efforts, he cannot

get used to her fragrance of coconut oil, or the delicate sound her bracelets make as she moves about the apartment they now share.

At the end of the first week, however, he suggests going for a walk. Mala respectfully puts on a clean silk sari and extra bracelets, and coils her hair as if going to a party or at the cinema. Instead, he leads her down the quiet street where he had lived for a month and they stop in front of Mrs. Croft's house. Helen opens the door because her mother has fallen off the bench and broken a hip, so they find her lying on a bed in the parlor. She tells him she called the police after she fell, and without any hesitation this time, he cries out 'splendid'! Mala laughs, her voice "full of kindness, her eyes bright with amusement" (195). He had never heard his wife laugh before. He introduces Mala as his wife and Mrs. Croft demands if she knows how to play the piano. Mala answers no, and the old lady orders her to stand up from the bench then.

For the first time he feels sympathy for his wife, and remembers his first days in London, "learning how to take the Tube to Russell Square, riding an escalator for the first time, being unable to understand that when a man cried 'piper' it meant 'paper', being unable to decipher, for a whole year, that the conductor said 'mind the gap' as the train pulled away from each station" (195). Their experiences of immigration merge, uniting them in the process. Like him, "Mala had traveled far from home, not knowing where she was going, or what she would find, for no reason other than to be my wife. As strange as it seemed, I knew in my heart that one day her death would affect me, and stranger still, that mine would affect her" (195).

Mrs. Croft, who had probably never seen a woman in a sari before, appreciates Mala's long dress and formal manners, and declares she is a perfect lady. The husbands look at each other and smile, and a bond is now created between them in this American house. They are like children who need the 'motherly' blessing of an elderly American woman lying on her death bed in order to be able to take in the new culture. Interestingly, the narrator felt compelled to leave his own mother's house, a haunted residence where he and his wife would have remained strangers, but Mrs. Croft's house feels familiar. The narrator admits that this is the place where their marriage truly begins:

I like to think of that moment in Mrs. Croft's parlor as the moment when distance between Mala and me began to lessen, although we were not yet fully in love, I like to think of the months that followed as a honeymoon of sorts. Together we explored the city and met other Bengalis, some of whom are still friends today. We discovered that a man named Bill sold fresh fish on Prospect Street, and that a shop in Harvard Square called Cardullo's sold bay leaves and cloves. (196)

Unlike Mrs. Sen, Mala is satisfied with the fresh fish provided by Bill, showing she is willing to adapt and blend elements from both cultures. And unlike Mr. Sen, the narrator is supportive of his wife in this undertaking. Together they often walk to the Charles River to watch boats drift across the water, and have ice cream in Harvard Yard. They buy a camera to document their life together, and he takes pictures of Mala posing in front of the Prudential building, so that she can send them to her parents. They get to know each other and get accustomed to the American city simultaneously. Although the narrator was the first to set foot in Boston, he has not been able to discover the city until his wife joined him and a bond was established between them.

But all of this is only possible after the intervention of Mrs. Croft as catalyst. In fact, all the real connections in the story are created on her domain, in her house. Thus, “Mrs. Croft, enclosed within the literal walls of her home, is the Vesta, the goddess of the hearth, the spirit of the place, and she is the crone of Jungian archetype, dispensing paradoxical blessings and wisdom”, as Caesar observes (2005: 56). Two Americans have reached the moon, two Indians have reached America, and these apparently disparate events are brought together in Mrs. Croft’s house. So a few months later, when the narrator reads about her death in the newspaper, he is deeply moved: “Mrs. Croft’s was the first death I mourned in America, for hers was the first life I had admired; she had left this world at last, ancient and alone, never to return” (*IOM* 196).

About twenty years later, the couple still passes by her house. It is an emblem of Americanness, a space where the past and the present come together, but also a space where the two Indians have discovered each other and the fact that America embraces them with all their differences. This leads Judith Caesar to conclude that “in Lahiri the house is where the spirit of America resides” (2005: 58). Now the narrator and his wife live in a town around twenty miles from Boston, on a tree-lined street similar to Mrs. Croft’s. They own a big house with a garden in which they grow tomatoes (symbol of their successful transplantation). From the small, noisy room at YMCA, though Mrs. Croft’s small but quiet room, the narrator now lives in a house he owns and has grown roots in America. Therefore, he affirms he has “not strayed much further”, and he and Mala are American citizens now. They still visit Calcutta every few years, but together they have decided to grow old in their adoptive country. He works in a small college library, and Mala no longer wears the end of her sari over her head. A discreet, almost invisible presence throughout the story, I believe Mala has traveled an even longer way than her husband. Faced with the double burden of adapting to a new country while having to recreate and preserve

traditions from the old, she silently succeeds in negotiating a balanced life and a happy family. I would say she opens the way for Ashima, the wife and mother from *The Namesake*, in that she starts from the sacred space of the home and then moves to the outside and explores Boston, ready and willing to mix old and new until she obtains a transcultural identity. Lahiri's women constantly negotiate and adapt traditional gender roles, and most of them achieve great results.

The couple has a son who attends Harvard, so they often drive to Cambridge to visit him or bring him home for a weekend. Together they eat rice with their hands, and speak in Bengali, "things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die" (*IOM* 197). Although perfectly integrated, it is important to them to pass down to their American-born son certain essential Indian cultural signifiers, and thus ensure continuation of ancestral traditions for as long as possible. Whenever they drive to Harvard they take Massachusetts Avenue, and although the narrator barely recognizes the buildings now, he never misses Mrs. Croft's house. He shows his son the very first house in which he lived in America, and mentions that the landlady was 103. But their son, as a representative of the second generation of Indian-Americans, is astonished not at Mrs. Croft's age, but at how little his father paid rent back then, "a fact nearly as inconceivable to him as a flag on the moon was to a woman born in 1866" (197). Nevertheless, in his son's eyes he can see the ambition that hurled him across the world. Although he will probably not immigrate, his father encourages him to always push his limits: "I tell him that if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer" (197).

Interestingly, Lahiri uses here the verb 'to survive' which I have shown in my "Introduction" is linked to Bhabha's ideas of living on the borderlines. The narrator has translated in order to survive in a foreign world, and the tale ends on a very confident note:

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. (*IOM* 198)

The story and book thus conclude with examples of successful cultural translation. The American 'happy end' reverses the possible break-up in the first story. However, by placing Shukumar and Shoba's story first, Lahiri hints at the ways in which the characters from "The Third and Final Continent" could have fallen apart as a couple. But they do not, and their son,

although absent because he studies in a different city, is safe and comes home every so often. Sometimes they drive to see him and make sure he preserves a sense of his Indianness.

Therefore, their flourishing relationship, as well as their accomplished transplantation, is both ordinary and extraordinary at the same time. Besides, the narrator is anonymous therefore one could assume that his experience is universal and it paves the way for others to follow. Moreover, while the American astronauts only spent a few hours on the moon, and this was celebrated as a ‘giant leap for mankind’, the narrator and his wife are ‘ordinary heroes’ who took small steps but managed to spend the rest of their lives on new soil while preserving valuable traces from their originary culture. Despite the trials of migrating across continents, theirs is an immigrant’s greatest achievement.

As Amitav Ghosh has noted in his essay “The Greatest Sorrow”, “[a]n immigrant’s story is usually a narrative of arrival, not departure...” (qtd. in Neutill 11). Most narratives from Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* are diasporic tales of adaptation and growth, of a constant quest for balanced cultural translation. By rounding up the book with an optimistic example of two Indians who do not look back to their point of departure as much as they focus on the country of arrival, Lahiri shows how ultimately immigration is a positive, enriching experience.

Judith Caesar also wrote that Lahiri goes beyond traditional mainstream American fiction and hyphenated American fiction, in the sense that in her world, “the past is not a revenge tragedy that will never play itself out” (2003: 91). Instead, her first- and second-generation characters come in contact with difference, and most of them are able to filter the best elements from both cultures. Thus, Mala skillfully navigates cultural boundaries and adjusts as much as necessary. Shoba also does that until she decides to reject (maybe only temporarily) her Indianness because she thinks she has failed at this end of her hyphen. Twinkle, too, seems at ease with her double identity, and is enthusiastic about the ideas and values of other people. The numerous children featured in this volume show openness and curiosity towards foreign cultures. Lilia, Eliot, or Rohin try to understand difference and embrace it with their unbiased minds and souls. Therefore, unlike many minority American writers, Lahiri “depicts being bicultural as a blessing – a mixed blessing, assuredly, but a blessing” (Caesar 2003: 91).

Although some of the female characters from this collection are not willing (Mrs. Sen) or able (Mina Das) to fluently translate between the two different worlds, overall the book deepens the readers’ understanding of the Indian culture. Most characters who immigrate and strive to

transcend various boundaries actually manage to do so. Perhaps the most important 'lesson' for readers is that cultural translations go both ways and all characters, from ages seven to one-hundred-and-three, are capable of performing them and come out enriched.

Chapter 2

Transnational Belonging in *The Namesake*

Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), takes up many of the themes tackled in *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). The topics are roughly the same: immigration, assimilation, family relations, traveling, and an abiding tension while translating between Indian/Bengali and American cultures leading to fraught identity-formation processes. Hailed as an ethnic 'Bildungsroman' (Song, Concilio, De), *The Namesake* tells the coming-of-age story of Gogol Ganguli, the American-born son of Indian immigrants, spanning from his birth in 1968 to adulthood in the year 2000. Lahiri examines the social and, most of all, the psychological stages he goes through while dealing with his hyphenated status and eventually developing a transnational identity. In fact, all the main characters in the novel straddle multiple nation-spaces and cultures, blending elements from past and present in their efforts to forge a sense of identity. This identity is fractured, but by denying a single, homogeneous notion of self it actually acknowledges "the individual's affiliations to multiple nations and/or cultures" (De 2010: 12).

Consequently, Lahiri's characters become hypermobile global citizens, comfortably negotiating several spaces while transcending traditional geographic, social, and political boundaries. Therefore, I will argue that while it still includes numerous instances of cultural translations, her second book slowly moves the focus towards the hybridity of second generation characters. Moreover, she picks up the thread of the last story in *Interpreter of Maladies*, namely "The Third and Final Continent", and looks at the transnational potential of some of her first-generation immigrants and most of their children. Ashoke (Gogol's father) and Ashima (his mother) are more rounded versions of the narrator and his wife, Mala, in the above mentioned short story.

The Namesake is also a 'Familienroman' because it features four generations of the Ganguli family, in different corners of the world. The first generation is represented by Gogol's great-grandparents: his great-grandfather teaches Ashoke (his grandson) how important it is to read and his great-grandmother sends Ashima (her granddaughter) a letter containing what was supposed to be Gogol's 'good name'. Although the letter never reaches the American continent and Gogol never actually meets his great-grandparents, their influence definitely stretches from India to the United States in decisive ways. Gogol's grandparents never leave India either and

equally play a role in their grandchildren's development. Lahiri's main focus, however, is on the third and fourth generations of Gangulis. The immigrant couple, Ashima and Ashoke, shuttle back and forth between India and the United States, struggling to keep in close contact with their Indian background and insisting that their children do the same. At the same time, they work towards building a good, prosperous life in the adoptive country. The fourth generation is represented by Sonia and Gogol who are born in the United States but are often taken by their parents on long trips to India. As they mature, they also travel across the United States and to cities in Europe. Thus, readers follow Gogol, the protagonist, from his mother's womb to the symbolic womb of his room, to which he returns in the last scene of the novel and finds a link with his father and his Indian roots. His representations of India are always filtered through an "American prism" (Cabaret 333), nevertheless they constitute an important element of his identity.

The novel constantly plays with pairs (two countries and continents, two major cities - Calcutta and New York, two cultures, two names, and two identities) in order to project a recognizable narrative of the Indian-American experience. Its explicit intertextual reference to Nikolai Gogol's story "The Overcoat" (1842) provides another link which literally sets the scene for Gogol Ganguli's absurd troubles with his name. At first glance the two writers seem to have little in common, but I will show how Lahiri has woven the classic Russian author and his text into her novel. Moreover, critic Carmen Concilio claims that Lahiri's text echoes the first chapters of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759), and she also sees a parallel to Salman Rushdie's use of the same text in his groundbreaking work *Midnight's Children* (1981). According to Concilio, the reference in both works "pertains to the narrative mode of the carnivalesque: a case in point being the hero's birth, the comic choice of his name and the subsequent double or split personality of the subject, and the theme of orphanhood conveyed through a comic and ironic style" (90).

Interestingly, Lahiri has been added to the list of Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' alongside Kiran Desai or Chitra Davakaruni (see Jha and Katrak qtd. in Bhalla 182). Although all these successful female writers of Indian descent pursue a realist (rather than magical realist) approach to fiction, they continue Rushdie's patrilineage in constructing a transnational literary tradition. Jhumpa Lahiri fuses her American literary ancestry (she mentions Hemingway and Raymond Carver) with her love for the Russians (Chekhov, Nabokov and, obviously, Nikolai

Gogol), and with elements from Bengali culture. In *The Namesake* she specifically identifies her characters as Bengali, thus placing her work in a more ethnic context. Indian national identity is much newer than regional ones, and Sanjukta Dasgupta informs us that “the resident or non-resident Indian will invariably prioritize his or her regional identity and culture” (2007: 76) over the national one. At the same time, however, the varied influences mentioned above give Lahiri’s oeuvre a global dimension, and contribute to her unique mode of expression in which the writing style “is the meaning, not merely the means of conveying it” (Caesar 2007: 107). Caesar explains that Lahiri observes minute details of physical reality in order to imply the characters’ inner struggles.

Although the plot gravitates around the relationship between father and son, thus reenacting the “patriarchal and heteronormative tropes of the term ‘diaspora’” (Gopinath qtd. in Bhalla 2008: 192), I will demonstrate how Ashima, the wife and mother, stands out as a paramount character. Overcoming her status as ‘subaltern’ immigrant woman, she has the strength and ability to successfully negotiate two very distinct worlds and take in the best of each. National identity thus becomes a fluid concept even for a character presented in rather clichéd terms, easily recognizable by Indian-American readers. In fact, Lahiri has been criticized by Tamara Bhalla for perpetuating certain gender, class, and ethnic stereotypes in order to capture the complexities of the immigration process. However, Bhalla concedes that *The Namesake* remains “a watershed text of South Asian American experience because it stages the impasse of ethnic authenticity so completely” (2012: 109). That is why other scholars have dubbed Lahiri “a documentalist of the immigrant experience” (Goldblatt, Dubey).

Natalie Friedman, on the other hand, shows how the immigrant novel has changed, and claims that Jhumpa Lahiri is part of a group of contemporary ethnic American writers who no longer place assimilation at the heart of their stories, but focus on the children of immigrants and their conflicted plural identity “as it manifests itself in America and in the shrinking global community” (112). She thus moves beyond the stereotypical pursuit of the American Dream, and presents the second generation of Indian-Americans as cosmopolitan characters, belonging to a network of global travelers, simultaneously straddling the socio-political landscapes of Boston, New York, Paris, or Calcutta. Her characters are constantly traveling (common trope for immigration), and this has prompted Friedman to state that Lahiri fuses two literary genres - the immigrant and the travel narrative - in order to show how children of immigrants have gained a

certain power which “comes from economic and class ease, not from a sense of ethnic identity that is part of some mythic melting pot” (115).

The narrative voice also ‘travels’. The third person narration opens from the perspective of Ashima, then shifts for a short while to Ashoke, before focusing on Gogol’s development for most of the novel. At one point the omniscient narrator turns briefly to the perspective of Moushumi (Gogol’s wife), before returning to Ashima and Gogol in the closing sections. This “wandering narrative structure” (Friedman 113) gives insight into the subjectivities of four characters, while also pointing to the unfixed, mobile nature of contemporary migrants. I am arguing that the resulting pluralist identities of these ‘world travelers’, to use Maria Lugones’s phrase (qtd. in Soja 131), are best illustrated by the way in which they negotiate diverse spaces and places.

After dealing with these issues in the novel, towards the end of this chapter I will move to an analysis of how some of them are rendered in the filmic adaptation of *The Namesake* (2007). It is essential to see how different artistic genres represent the Indian diaspora in the United States, particularly since Indian film plays a key role in South Asia itself and in the imaginary of viewers worldwide. Without claiming expertise in cinema studies, I will attempt an overview of how Mira Nair, the film’s director, expresses the importance of space in her work. Thus, the film frequently switches from New York City to Calcutta and back, leaving the spectator with the impression that two apparently very different cities actually have many things in common. However, this ease of traveling between two worlds does not fully render the difficulties both of the first generation of immigrants to adapt in the ‘host’ environment, and of the second generation to integrate their parents’ values and culture.

Ashima: From Alien to Transnational Character

The novel debuts with Ashima Ganguli cooking in an apartment in Central Square in Cambridge, two weeks before her first child is due. The year is 1968, probably chosen by Lahiri because of its utmost importance for American history. Firstly, it is the year in which the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 became law, sealing the arrival of non-Western, educated professional men to pursue education and employment in the United States. The Act reverses the legal discrimination that had been enforced for half a century in conformity with the Asian exclusion laws of 1917 and 1924 (see Bhalla 2008: 26 for more detailed information). Concomitantly,

Great Britain increased immigration control in the 1960s, culminating with the 1971 Immigration Act that put an end to primary migration (see Cabaret 2010: 343-4). Therefore, skilled Indians turn to the United States instead of migrating to the former colonial center, and this results in the formation of what is usually called a ‘model minority’ (see Brennan 2011: 4), namely a category of upwardly mobile immigrants who fit neatly into American society. This idea suggests, on the one hand, that America is a welcoming society, rewarding hard work. On the other hand, it implicitly casts this ‘good’ minority (with its work ethic and family values) as a model for other ethnic/racial groups (such as African Americans, for instance, particularly since this myth developed in the 1960s).

Secondly, 1968 brought about the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, as well as massive street protests against the Vietnam War and other significant social movements that cannot be left out of any survey of post-1960s policies and attitudes towards race and ethnicity in the United States.

Thirdly, by 1968 the second wave of the women’s movement had gained significant ground, and Ashima probably benefits from that, even if indirectly. It is important, then, that Lahiri’s novel should open with an immigrant Indian woman, wife of an Indian academic, giving birth to their first-born in 1968 in a Boston hospital. According to Sue Brennan, the hospital is a biopolitical space which serves as a site of control and cultural assimilation, “where individuals are subjected to disciplinary regimes aimed producing ‘healthy’ and self-sufficient citizens of the nation” (6). Hence, the national political and social milieu unquestionably contributes to identity formation processes, and Ashima’s delivery in the American medical institution represents her first solid link with the host country.

It is apparent from the very first scene that Ashima is defined by her status as expatriate wife and (future) mother. Married off to a doctoral student in electrical engineering at MIT, she follows him to the United States, but after eighteen months she is still terribly homesick and slow to accustom to American ways. Throughout her pregnancy she craves for a strange combination of Rice Krispies, Planters peanuts, and chopped onion, to which she adds salt, lemon juice and green chili pepper. This ‘concoction’, in Lahiri’s term, reminds Ashima of a snack she used to buy on Calcutta sidewalks, but it is a “humble approximation” (*Namesake* 1), a savorless replacement, because in the American version, “as usual, there’s something missing” (1). Although she is desperately trying to replicate parts of India in her kitchen(s) in America, she has

to combine ingredients at hand here in order to prepare popular Indian dishes. Immigrants usually preserve their culinary ways in an attempt to articulate their difference and to maintain a strong connection with the homeland. Laura Anh Williams argues that: “These articulations are acts of subjectivity-making and self-assertion, expressions of desire and yearning which participate in a literary tradition connecting the Asian American immigrant experience with a visceral, embodied experience of difference” (78). But the same immigrants also integrate new elements into their cooking - cereals and peanuts in Ashima’s case, testifying to their gradual acculturation.

As Ashima approximates her favorite snack, she reaches for another onion and goes into labor earlier than expected. She calls out to her husband who is studying in the bedroom, but does not address him by his name, Ashoke, because tradition requires a Bengali wife not to do that. In fact,

Ashima never thinks of her husband’s name when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is. She has adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety’s sake, to utter his first. It’s not the type of thing Bengali wives do. Like a kiss or caress in a Hindi movie, a husband’s name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over. (*Namesake* 2)

So instead of saying his name, which is so intimate that it has to remain unuttered, she uses an interrogative which “translates roughly as ‘Are you listening to me?’” (2) Lahiri does not mention what this interrogative is, but her metaphor informs the reader of the difficulties she, as an Indian writing in English, probably has to overcome while narrating her story. Words and their meanings are sometimes ‘untranslatable’, just like the food Ashima is trying to prepare. At the same time, one of the major themes of the novel, naming, is introduced by referring to Bollywood’s traditionalist stance when it comes to the portrayal of relationships.

If Ashima can somehow replicate elements of the home culture in her apartment, she can hardly do that in the space of the hospital she is taken to. She shares the maternity ward with three American women and registers some essential differences between their relationship with their husbands and hers with Ashoke. The American men tell their wives ‘I love you’ and these are words she has never heard, nor does she expect to hear from her own husband because “this is not how they are” (3). She is scared and wishes she could talk to the other women, but by now “she has gathered that Americans, in spite of their public declarations of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand-holding on the street and lying on top of each

other on the Cambridge Common, prefer their privacy” (3). Their community is inaccessible to Ashima metaphorically, but also literally, as she is separated from them by a curtain. There is nothing comforting in the whiteness of the room either, so her mind wanders to India again, where tradition says the woman should go back to her parents’ house to give birth. She is told by the doctor to time the contractions herself and she does so on her wrist watch, a bon voyage gift from her parents. This inevitably sends her thoughts to India and her family, so she calculates Indian time on her hands - nine hours and a half ahead in Calcutta. Just as in the case of the title character from “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, the second story from *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Ashima’s life also happens on the Indian subcontinent first. Going through a crisis in the unfamiliar, impersonal space of the hospital, Ashima calculates the time lag on her Indian watch which enables her to travel mentally to a familiar space of utmost intimacy – her parents’ residence in Calcutta. In this way, Lahiri deploys a Bakhtinian ‘chronotope’, “the textual union of time and space as it is manifested through objects, persons, places” (Brennan 2).

Since it is already evening in Calcutta, Ashima pictures her parents in their house on Amherst Street enjoying their after-dinner tea, and her younger brother, Rana, studying for an exam. She knows that soon her mother will be untangling her waist-long hair, while her father will be drawing some illustrations for the *Desh* magazine while listening to the Voice of America. Ironically, “American seconds tick on top of her pulse point” (*Namesake* 4) and interrupt this flash forward bringing her back to the lived space of the hospital. Fragmented images of “a blue strip of the Charles River, thick green treetops, cars gliding up and down Memorial Drive” (5) are juxtaposed to the previous imagined scene. Hence, the temporal and spatial dimensions of assimilation supersede Ashima’s own sense of time and space.

In Massachusetts it is eleven in the morning and Ashima is reassured by the American doctor, who looks “gauntly handsome in a Lord Mountbatten sort of way” (2), that they are “expecting a perfectly normal delivery” (5). The satirical reference to India’s colonial past (the former British colonizer symbolically helps an Indian woman deliver an American baby), might partially explain why nothing actually feels normal to Ashima in the United States. In addition, she cannot accommodate the idea of motherhood in a foreign land, and is actually terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, and “where life seems so tentative and spare” (6). Family members should be at her side and in their absence “the baby’s birth, like most everything in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true” (25). She pities her son

for entering the world already deprived of the extended family's affection, his birth occurring in a place most people enter to suffer or die. As we have seen in the case of *Interpreter of Maladies*, allegories of birth and death are commonly used by Lahiri to reflect the migrant's situation, correlated with the trope of children/childhood. Thus, Ashima is "astonished by her body's ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmother and all her great-grandmothers had done. That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still" (6). Children of immigrants represent continuity with ancestors, but discontinuity and renewal as well. The immigrant woman bears a double burden: that of giving birth and that of making sure the link between past and future is not lost. Ashima undergoes all the stages women before her had undergone, yet she has to go through them alone in a faraway country. Therefore, what is perfectly natural for women worldwide becomes 'nothing normal' for lonely, uprooted Ashima Ganguli.

After the baby boy is born, Ashima and Ashoke decide to let the maternal grandmother choose the name of the family's first *sahib* (which literally means 'Englishman'). Trying their best not to cut the umbilical cord with the motherland, they are confidently waiting for a letter she has mailed, containing two names: one for a boy and one for a girl. Ashima has always had a special relationship with her grandmother, the only person who encouraged her to be brave and enjoy the adventure of migrating across continents. Before leaving, she advises her granddaughter: "Do what I will never do. It will all be for the best. Remember that. Now go" (38). In the film she optimistically reassures Ashima that a new life, full of joy and happiness is waiting for her. But her letter gets lost in the mail, exposing the limits of transnational communication, and symbolizing that the community at home can hardly influence life in the country of destination. The immigrant cannot continue to live in the imaginary space of the motherland, and the new country gradually pulls him or her in. The letter is forever suspended in-between continents, foretelling the baby's complicated identity quest. Rüdiger Heinze considers the significance of the travel trope in postcolonial theory, and concludes "it is ironic that, at the heart of Gogol's problematic name and identity, something is lost during travel" (194). An 'original' name does exist, but it is never disclosed, so it is both a presence and an absence at the same time.

In Calcutta, Ashima had been studying for a college degree in English before she was married. She even tutored neighborhood children, helping them memorize lines from the British

poets Wordsworth and Tennyson. One day after tutoring, Ashoke is waiting in the sitting room to meet her. At nineteen, she is in no rush to be a bride and would rather continue her studies than perform domestic tasks. Before entering the room, Ashima stops in the hallway and is unable to resist the urge of literally stepping into his shoes which were unlike “any she had ever seen on the streets and trams and buses of Calcutta, or even in the windows of Bata” (*Namesake* 8). The shoes are made of brown leather, have black heels and off-white laces, and are made in the U.S. Getting into Ashoke’s shoes is the closest thing she has ever experienced to the touch of a man, and her heart races as the “lingering sweat from the owner’s feet mingled with hers” (8). One of the crisscrossing laces has missed a hole, and this little sign of negligence gives her strength to enter the room, meet the owner of the shoes, and ‘walk’ henceforth on a common path with him.

The suitor is slightly plump, wears thick-framed black glasses, and has a moustache and a beard. He looks scholarly, but still youthful, with “an elegant, vaguely aristocratic air” (8). His father does all the talking, reporting that his son has graduated first from two prestigious institutions, and is pursuing a PhD in America. Ashima is put to the test and has to recite a few stanzas from Wordsworth’s “The Daffodils”, before being asked if she is willing to fly on a plane and move to Boston, a city she has never even heard of, characterized by severe, snowy winters.

Tellingly, she only learns her suitor’s name after the betrothal, and two weeks later she is already married. Eight thousand miles away from her hometown and from her family, however, she gets to know him and falls in love with him. Indeed, Lahiri sketches the two characters as halves of the same individual, united until Ashoke’s death. Their common initials, A.G., also point to this unity. In the United States Ashima perfects her cooking, and ethnic food provides her with the opportunity to establish an intimacy with the partner that was chosen for her. She quickly learns that he likes salty food, his favorite dish being lamb curry with potatoes, and for the rest of Ashoke’s life she will continue to cook for him. The only two instances in the book when she stops this activity are when she is pregnant with Sonia, their second child, and when they move to Calcutta for eight months. With Sonia she feels dizzy all the time, the smell of food making her sick, so every Sunday Ashoke is forced to prepare a week’s worth of chicken curry and rice which he eats with Gogol. Even the young boy concludes that it “is odd to see his father presiding in the kitchen, standing in his mother’s place at the stove” (54). When they move to Calcutta she spends all her time visiting relatives and friends, shopping at the New Market, going

to movies, or simply wandering freely around her hometown, so she has no time to waste in the kitchen. Besides, relatives are always willing to prepare delicious meals for them. After Ashoke's death, she symbolically stops cooking for eleven days as a sign of mourning. She is frequently shown in the other scenes in the book as attempting to transfer Indian cuisine into American domestic spaces. This may seem like a rather limiting and stereotypical characterization of an Indian woman: she is the obedient daughter who respects her parents' choice of a husband, the devoted wife who follows Ashoke to a foreign continent, and the loving mother who dedicates her life to raising two children. Yet in the denouement of her story I believe Lahiri breaks off with these clichés.

After the first difficult months abroad, Ashima starts to enjoy talking to Ashoke about the events of her day while lying next to him in bed every night. She describes at length her walks along Massachusetts Avenue, the shops she visits, and the pistachio ice cream cones she treats herself to in Harvard Square. Ashima is discovering the American city on her own while her husband is at work. Hers is a gradual emancipation, a movement from the inside to the outside, at first tentatively exploring the neighborhood and then the rest of the city. No longer confined to the house, she now records some rather negative impressions of the outside. For example, the shingled houses in the area are all "the same shape and size and in the same state of mild decrepitude, painted mint, or lilac, or powder blue" (30). This architectural monotony mirrors her homesickness and confirms her initial reactions. A year and a half before, when she first stepped outside into the frigid and piercing New England chill, she registered "[l]eafless trees with ice-covered branches. Dog urine and excrement embedded in the snowbanks. Not a soul on the street" (30).

It is intriguing that Lahiri reverses hackneyed images of dirty Indian urban spaces in another fragment: "The gray of the roof, the gray of cigarette ashes, matches the pavement of the sidewalk and the street" (29). Across the street there is a "musty shop that sells the newspaper and cigarettes and eggs, and where, to Ashima's mild disgust, a furry black cat is permitted to sit as it pleases on the shelves" (29). American landscapes look as gray to a foreigner's eyes as Indian places do. Years later when they travel by train to Agra, Gogol notices the grayness of the Indian landscape. On the streets of Calcutta he is unsettled by the sight of short, dark men pulling rickshaws, and of families boiling rice and shampooing their hair on the sidewalk. Ashima's gaze records the urban American scenery in gray tones, echoing her loneliness in the periphery,

whereas Gogol's gaze does the same with the Indian setting, showing he does not feel at home at all there.

Public American space is discouraging, but the privacy of the apartment itself is also disappointing. Although positioned only ten minutes by foot to Harvard and twenty to MIT, and thus centrally located, the first apartment Ashima experiences here has three rooms all in a row without a corridor, and is nothing like the houses she has admired in *Gone With the Wind* or *The Seven-Year Itch*. These staple American movies she has watched at cinemas in India have created an imaginary space which does not match the real space. On the contrary, the apartment is small and dark, cold and drafty in winter and intolerably hot in summer. The dark brown curtains are described as dreary, and the roaches emerging at night from the cracks in the tiles of the bathroom deeply disturb Ashima. But she never complains to Ashoke, nor does she write to her parents that America is not what she had expected, not wanting to worry or upset them. In her letters she includes only good things, such as the cooking gas available nonstop, or the hot tap water in which she can bathe and the cold water that is safe to drink.

Their landlords, the Montgomerys, who occupy the other two floors of this dull house, expose the big differences between their respective cultures. Alan is a sociology professor at Harvard, but he likes to be called by his first name and goes to work in rubber flip-flops. This causes Ashoke to remark that even rickshaw drivers dress better than professors here. Coming from a high class Indian family, Ashoke always wears suits to work and looks down on the American informality of dress and manners. For Akaky Akakievich, Nikolai Gogol's nonpersonage, the new coat represents social status and a certain notoriety (though short-lived) in St. Petersburg. For Ashoke Ganguli, too, clothes symbolize social position. Alan's wife, Judy, wears denim shorts and usually dresses just like her daughters, Amber and Clover. Judy has given birth to them at home with the help of the midwives of the women's health collective where she works. Therefore she disapproves of Ashima's decision to deliver her baby in the hospital, revealing an involuntary exchange in roles: in accordance with her traditions, the Indian woman should have given birth at home, but the American woman actually does so because of her personal convictions.

One night Alan and Judy go out and ask Ashima to check on the girls. She remembers their apartment with horror: there were "piles everywhere, piles of books and papers, piles of dirty plates on the kitchen counter, ashtrays the size of serving platters heaped with crushed-out

cigarettes” (32). The girls sleep together on a bed piled with clothes. To Ashima’s disgust, there are numerous, mostly empty whiskey and wine bottles on the refrigerator. The piles of stuff show the negative consumerist side of American society, even in the house of peace activists. At the end of the novel, when Ashima sells the house and decides to divide her year between India and America, she too has piles of things to pack or give away, ‘collected’ during the three decades spent here. This messy apartment is just above the Gangulis’ and has a symmetrical design, yet it is a different world altogether. The Montgomerys could afford a housekeeper to tidy up their place, but do not get one. Ashima, on the other hand, had servants do the housework in India, but now is compelled to sweep the floors, cook, wash clothes and shop for groceries herself. Nevertheless, she keeps the apartment clean and tidy, in total opposition to the one upstairs.

The Montgomerys are New Age Buddhists, nonconformist and open-minded people. They are friendly and generous to the Gangulis, bringing them some old baby clothes, as well as the girls’ crib and pram. But at Gogol’s annaprasan, the rice ceremony, Judy eats a shrimp cutlet and whispers to Alan: “I thought Indians were supposed to be vegetarians” (39), showing there are certain stereotypes about their neighbors that they cannot shake off. Later on Lahiri unveils more instances of American superficiality in her novel, especially expressed through wrong assumptions or bad jokes.

After returning to the apartment as a mother, Ashima feels overwhelmed by the responsibility of taking care of the baby and the house, and urges Ashoke to finish his degree so that they could return to their homeland. He feels guilty for having brought her here, aware that she is lonely and often cries while rereading old letters from her parents. She is depressed for days on end, until one afternoon she pulls herself together and takes her son out for the first time, on a ‘trip’ to Purity Supreme to buy a bag of rice. To her surprise, she is stopped on the street and in the aisles of the supermarket by perfect strangers, all Americans, “suddenly taking notice of her, smiling, congratulating her for what she’s done” (34). They ask about the baby’s age, sex and name. They do not comment on the boy’s rather peculiar first name, Gogol, chosen by Ashoke. So unlike the Indian woman from “The Third and Final Continent” who is attacked on the street by an American’s dog, Ashima is complimented on her baby and begins to take pride in devising a daily routine of raising her child without the family’s help.

Every morning she gets dinner out of the way, and then wanders up and down the streets which have become familiar by now, running errands, or simply sitting with Gogol in Harvard Yard. Of course she still cooks Indian food, sings Bengali songs to her son, and sees pieces of her family on his face: her mother's eyes, her father's lips, or her brother's smile. But readers get the feeling that motherhood facilitates her gradual translation into the host culture, and that she is starting to live on 'American time'.

Her initial impossibility to communicate with the other women in the maternity ward is slowly overturned as she settles into a comfortable familiarity, starts interacting with people from the American neighborhood, and goes in and out of the house at will. One day she even goes shopping in downtown Boston, pushing Gogol's stroller for hours in the basement of Jordan Mash, and buying presents for her loved ones in India. Busy with the pram, and in panic that she will miss the station where she has to get off, Ashima forgets the presents on the train. But her stuff is returned the next day, connecting her to America in a way she has not thought possible. Later when she tells this story at dinner parties, Indian friends concur: "Only in this country" (43), acknowledging American fairness and organization.

As Gogol grows, so does their circle of Bengali acquaintances who act as a substitute for the relatives left behind in Calcutta. The families they befriend all have the same structure: the husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, or engineers, embodying the 'model minority myth'. They have benefitted from the 1965 Immigration Act, and have brought their wives with them to the United States. But their spouses are "homesick and bewildered" (38), and they turn to Ashima for recipes and advice. She gives them tips about where in Chinatown they can buy carp, and what ingredients they can use as replacements for the ones that cannot be found in supermarkets. She is already adapted enough to know these things and has an extraordinary capacity to move easily between the two cultures. Thus, she is a biological mother to Gogol and a cultural one to the women in this Bengali community, easing their transplantation into American soil.

The Gangulis visit these families on weekends, eating familiar foods, talking about Indian films and politics, but also arguing about the politics of America, a country in which they are not eligible to vote. They are all invited for Gogol's rice ceremony, and on that occasion Ashima cooks for six days. The ritual is meant to introduce the baby to solid food, but also to predict what 'career' he is going to pursue. The boy, dressed as an infant Bengali groom, opens his

mouth obediently for each course but refuses to choose any object from the plate. Family and friends insist he pick the money, the pen, or the soil, thus already projecting onto him their expectations that he succeed in society. Yet by refusing to choose any object and thus failing to give any hint of his future profession, Gogol in fact refuses “to reflect back to others what they expect of him” (Song 256-57). Later on, he confirms what he indicated as a baby: he stubbornly resists going to MIT, something his parents would have ardently desired, but creates his own professional path and becomes an architect.

In 1971, the Gangulis move to an unnamed university town outside Boston where apparently they are the only Bengali residents. Ashoke now has his dream job: assistant professor of electrical engineering at the university, while Ashima is lonely once more, and the relocation to the suburbs feels more brutal than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been. She is shocked to discover the ‘unfriendly’ features of this town: the fact that it has no sidewalks, street lights, or means of public transportation. She does not want to learn how to drive the new Toyota they now own, so she is stuck in the house again. Since there are no stores nearby, she cannot even go shopping anymore. When she does venture outside, her walks are restricted to the university campus where on rainy days there is nothing to do but watch television in the student lounge. She sometimes roams the town’s historic district, “a brief strip of colonial architecture visited by tourists on summer weekends” (48). It has “a white steepled Congregational church, a stone courthouse with an adjoining jail, a cupolaed library, a wooden well from which Paul Revere is rumored to have drunk. In winter, tapers burn in the windows of homes after dark” (48). But all these landmarks of New England history and culture mean nothing to Ashima who struggles with the foreignness of the setting, alone and depressed because there are no other Bengali residents in the area. The quotation above is a direct reference to the country’s history of immigration, and the Gangulis are the first Indian ‘colonizers’ to reach this site.

Meanwhile, Ashoke is not bothered by the precarious living conditions in either apartment. Spending more time at work than at home, he enjoys the sweeping view from his fourth-floor office overlooking the quadrangle surrounded by vine-covered brick buildings. On pleasant days he takes his lunch on a bench, and listens ‘to the melody of bells chiming from the campus clock tower’ (49). As Brennan points out, the university is an American institution which functions as a key spatial and temporal setting for assimilation of Indian male immigrants willing to become part of the model minority and conform to American values and requirements

(12). Immigration is not such a painful process for a man, and the distinct way in which the husbands perceive the same setting proves it.

Thus, a combination of factors plays out differently for men and women in the migration cycle. Alfonso-Forero writes that the Indian division between *ghar* (the home, an inherently spiritual and female space) and *bahir* (the outside world, inherently male and dominated by material pursuits), “positions women as the guardians and propagators of Indian culture” (2007: 853-54). It follows, then, that the ‘duty’ of women is to preserve Indianness inside American homes. While the Indian man thrives professionally, for the Indian woman, usually a housewife, immigration provides limited options for development. In *The Namesake*, Ashoke has his own office in the university building and gives lectures to American students, thoroughly enjoying his work, while Ashima’s only ‘job’ is to make *samosas* once a week and sell them at the international coffeehouse. Womanhood and motherhood in a foreign land involve exclusion for Ashima who is a mere visitor in the public areas of educational institutions, and does not have access to the spaces that grant her husband many privileges. By telling the story from her female character’s point of view Lahiri exposes the gendered nature of seemingly democratic spaces like those of universities. Hence, Ashima places her *samosas* “next to the linzer squares baked by Mrs. Etzold, and baklava by Mrs. Cassolis” (*Namesake* 50). These other ‘ethnic’ women are probably also wives of academics, leading Ashima to conclude that for women immigration is like a lifelong pregnancy:

Though no longer pregnant, she continues, at times, to mix Rice Krispies and peanuts and onions in a bowl. For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that 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. (49-50)

In her case, as we have seen in the opening hospital scene, the travails of giving birth coincide with her efforts to fashion a new self in an alien land. The acculturation process is long and painful, mostly undergone alone by the diasporic woman who appears caught in a state of limbo. Lahiri reveals a gendered perspective on otherness, with the migrant woman (irrespective of geographic origins as the culinary details above imply) being subjected to a double bias before finally being empowered. The “pity and respect” that natives simultaneously pay her seem to

suggest that assimilation does bring in its tail some public recognition, but Ashima first has to go through the pains of pregnancy and transplantation alone.

After two years spent in the second apartment, Ashima and Ashoke finally start looking for a house to buy. As I have shown in the theory section, Vijay Mishra convincingly argues that owning a house is the ultimate evidence of belonging for an immigrant. The Gangulis drive to all-American neighborhoods where the houses have lawns and dogs play on them, and choose a newly-built house on 67 Pemberton Road. Ashoke photographs every room and sends pictures to relatives in India, priding himself in the achievement of owning a house in America, in a neighborhood inhabited by Johnsons, Mertons, Aspris, or Hills. They have four modest bedrooms, one and a half bathrooms, and a one-car garage. They move by U-Haul, and are surprised to see how many things they now possess. They had come to America with a single suitcase, carrying a few weeks' worth of clothes, and now they already have old issues of the *Globe* in which they pack their plates and glasses. They buy most of the furniture and the appliances from yard sales, although Ashima is reluctant at first to introduce such items into her home, and ashamed at the thought of buying what had originally belonged to American strangers. But the house, at least, had not been inhabited by anyone before them. Moreover, Ashoke explains that even his chairman, who lives in an eighteenth-century mansion in the historic district, wears secondhand pants bought for fifty cents. In the film, their move is celebrated by Ashoke and some Bengali friends with lines such as "Welcome to Suburbia" and "Everything bought at yard sales".

When they move in, the grounds of the property are *terra incognita* as they have not yet been landscaped. They plant trees, shrubs and put in a lawn, leveling the uneven and dirt-covered yard. This symbolizes their gradual transplantation. After they make "this small patch of America to which they lay claim" (51) into their home, they start going for long drives without a destination in mind, exploring their new environment, including neglected dirt lanes, shaded back roads, or farms where one can buy pumpkins in autumn and berries in summer. Sometimes they even reach the beaches of the Northern Shore. They do not swim or sunbathe, but walk on the shore or fly kites. Enjoying this time spent together as a family, Ashima lifts her sari and places her feet into foaming, ice-cold water, joking and laughing with her son, visibly happier and more acculturated. As years go by, and "their lives in New England swell with fellow Bengali friends, the numbers of that other, former life, those who know Ashima and Ashoke not

by their good names, but as Monu and Mithu, slowly dwindle” (63). Physical distance also inevitably brings about a distancing from the community they left behind, although the Gangulis still seek the companionship of other expatriates. But it becomes clear that Ashima finally starts to settle in this third American home.

Apart from the Indian surname on the mailbox and the issues of *India Abroad* delivered there, their house, the garage, and the barbecue look identical to those of the neighborhood. They even nail a wreath to their door in December, and Ashima has learned to roast turkey for Thanksgiving, to color boiled eggs for Easter, and to decorate an artificial tree for Christmas. Not only is the house a typical American one when viewed from the outside, but American rituals also infiltrate its interior. Gogol and Sonia love Christmas, and much prefer it to the worship of Hindu deities Durga and Saraswati. However, during pujos (sacred Hindu rituals) the children are dragged to a hall overtaken by Bengalis, where they have to throw marigold petals at a cardboard effigy of a goddess and eat vegetarian food. This celebration cannot compare to Christmas, when they hang stockings on the fireplace mantel, receive heaps of presents from Santa Claus, and stay home from school. Gogol and Sonia love mayonnaise, tuna fish, and hot dogs, so now Ashima prepares sandwiches with bologna or roast beef, as well as an American dinner once a week. Hamburgers prepared with lamb are other culinary and cultural concessions she makes at her children’s insistence. Of course Ashima and Ashoke do not eat these American foods. She still wears only saris and Bata sandals, but Ashoke learns to buy ready-made clothes, exchanges his fountain pen for ballpoints and his Wilkinson blades for Bic razors bought six to a pack. So they both do their best to mix elements from the two cultures, and they develop different ways of adapting to life in America.

Two decades later, Ashima will have a part-time job at the local public library, will know how to drive, and will even have befriended some American women her age, most of whom also have grown-up children, some of whom live alone because they are divorced. Occasionally she invites these friends over for lunch at her house, or they go shopping to outlet stores in Maine. When Ashoke moves to Ohio on a scholarship for nine months, Ashima’s small family is spread in different corners of the United States: Sonia now lives in California, Gogol in New York, and she is left all alone in her house in Massachusetts. Despite the security system her husband installed before leaving, she always double-checks all the window locks and is startled by any sound she hears in the middle of the night. Her Indian-American children tell her

everyone should live alone at some point in their life, but Ashima “hates returning in the evenings to a dark, empty house, going to sleep on one side of the bed and waking up on another” (161). Once again, the space of the house adequately reflects her emotional state. Since there is no one to cook for, she eats simple meals on the sofa, in front of the television. Ashoke comes home every third weekend, and on these occasions she cooks as she used to, while he does the things she still does not know how to do, namely pay the bills, or put gas into the car.

On the evening she receives the news of her husband’s sudden death Ashima is sitting at the kitchen table, drawing Christmas cards and addressing them to their friends whose contact details she keeps in three different address books. Each entry forms a record of all the Bengalis she and Ashoke have known over the years, “all the people she has had the fortune to share rice with in a foreign land” (159-60). She still remembers the day she bought the first of these address books, and recalls putting down her parents’ address in Calcutta, her in-laws’ address in Alipore and Ashoke’s extension at MIT, writing his name for the first time in her life. Once a year, she still rereads all the letters she has ever received from her parents, mailed weekly across continents.

But on that day all signs are predicting that something bad is bound to happen: “It’s one of the things she’s always hated about life here: these chilly, abbreviated days of early winter, darkness descending mere hours after noon. She expects nothing of days such as this, simply waits for them to end. She is resigned to warming dinner for herself in a little while, changing into her nightgown, switching on the electric blanket on her bed” (163-64). Even the petunias in the window box “have withered to shuddering brown stalks that she’s been meaning, for weeks, to root from the soil” (164). She thinks Ashoke will do that when he comes home and that very moment he calls, saying he has driven himself to a hospital in Cleveland because of some stomach problems. In “A Temporary Matter” (the first story from *Interpreter of Maladies*), the withered ivy stands for the dying love between Shukumar and Shoba; here the withered plant foretells Ashoke’s imminent death.

A few hours later, Ashima calls the hospital and learns her husband has expired because of a heart attack. Initially the verb ‘expired’ only makes her think of library cards and magazine subscriptions, but soon the true meaning sinks in and she starts to shiver, the house feeling much colder. She gets up and walks through all the rooms, turning on all the lights. Then she switches on the lamppost on the lawn and the floodlight over the garage before returning to the kitchen.

Hindu rituals for death and grief require a lamp to be lit in order to light the way for the departed soul, and Ashima instinctively respects this tradition.

Gogol flies to Cleveland to identify the body and clean up the apartment his father had rented, but Ashima tells him not to bring home any of her dead husband's objects because "[i]t's not our way" (175). Upon his return to Boston, Sonia comes home too, and they mourn 'their way' together with numerous Bengali friends. Now a widow, Ashima erases the vermilion from her parted hair, puts on a white sari, and takes off her wedding bracelets. For ten days, she stops cooking fish or meat, preparing only rice and vegetables instead. Gogol and Sonia partake in this ritual of eating light dishes, the enforced absence of certain foods on their plates conjuring Ashoke's presence. On the eleventh day they invite friends from six states to an elaborate meal cooked as he had liked it best, marking the end of the mourning period. They have a religious ceremony in the living room, with Gogol sitting in front of a picture of his father, while a priest is chanting verses in Sanskrit.

Gradually, each of them assumes a task Ashoke had performed. Ashima spends hours on the phone changing the names on the bank account, the mortgage, and all the bills. Friends suggest she should go to India for a while to visit her brother and cousins. But for the first time in her life she "has no desire to escape to Calcutta" (183) and refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life and the country in which he died. Although she scatters Ashoke's ashes into the Ganges, her fondest memories of him are always going to be in the house on Pemberton Road.

Ashima faithfully observes the traditional Indian mourning habits, but she is not a traditional Indian widow. She is by no means a *sati* (a widow burned on her husband's funeral pyre), or a subaltern in Spivak's definition. On the contrary, Ashima is an empowered woman who deliberately chooses to abandon any permanent residence and travel back and forth between her homeland and her adoptive country, countering the myth of a redeeming homecoming. Thus, at the age of 53, she sells the house to an American family, the Walkers, and decides to divide her year into six months in India with her relatives and six months in the United States with her children. This is a solitary version of the plans she and Ashoke had made for retirement. In Calcutta she will have a room of her own in her brother's spacious flat, the first room ever intended for her exclusive use, but not a home: "True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (276).

She will make the journey all alone, but this no longer terrifies her, as she has learned to do so many things on her own. Although she still wears saris and puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once left Calcutta. Her documents (American passport, Massachusetts driving license, social security card) prove her official belonging, but they cannot capture what a long journey it has been for Ashima, and they do not tell the whole story of the changes she has undergone. Unlike other Indian women, she has not resisted driving or getting a job, but has tried her best to raise her children in a balance between India and America. She has used the experience of living abroad to her advantage, having gained access to things unavailable to women in her traditionalist home country and having become a transnational character *par excellence*. Immigration is empowering for Ashima, who in the end can afford to follow through with her plan of traveling regularly between Bengal and New England.

Hence, in the final scene of the book she is throwing a farewell party in the house on Pemberton Road. On the day before Christmas, in the year 2000, Ashima is making mincemeat croquettes, one of her specialties. However, “after all these years she has still not quite managed, to her entire satisfaction, to replicate” (277) the exact taste of Indian foods. The novel ends as it began: with Ashima cooking in her kitchen, doing her best to give her dishes a genuine Indian flavor. But, as the cycle is closed, readers know she is no longer the uprooted, miserable character she had been at the beginning. Lahiri uses another culinary analogy to show her character’s radical transformation. Normally cooking for parties leaves Ashima without an appetite, but on this night she is looking forward to serving herself and to sitting among her guests. For the past twenty-seven years she has lived and cooked in this house, a symbol of fixity and stability in the United States. Throughout her life in New England, she has been the one who gathered her family and all the Bengalis in the area together. They have all come to rely on her to organize holidays and to introduce traditions to those who are new, and with her gone, they will probably not meet as often or translate as easily. Her achievement is exceptional since she has managed to be a wonderful mother for her own children as well as a cultural mother figure for the community.

As she is packing for her departure, Ashima is now the one who has piles of things, like the Montgomerys used to. It both saddens and thrills her to whittle down her possessions “to little more than what she’d come with, to those three rooms in Cambridge in the middle of a winter’s night” (278). The bare walls remind her of the new house they had moved in and of

Ashoke taking pictures and sending them to India, proud of his American property. Now his photograph is on one of the walls, and she will only remove it before closing the door behind her for the last time. The Walkers are planning renovations, and Ashima feels “a moment’s panic, a protective instinct, wanting to retract her offer, wanting the house to remain as it’s always been, as her husband had last seen it” (275). This house, so crucial for both of them in the early years spent in the United States, becomes something she must let go of. But by cutting these physical, material connections she achieves greater freedom. Although she feels “horribly, permanently alone” (278), she looks forward to coming back one day as a grandmother, arriving in America with hand-knit sweaters and other gifts, then leaving a month or two later to be with her family in India.

Ashima realizes that for decades she has missed her life and family in India, but from now on she will miss the house, her job at the library, and the women she has bonded with. Over time she has acquired financial independence and access to different spaces. Consequently, she will miss driving, going to movies with Sonia, and other pleasant moments of the ‘unexpected’ life Ashoke had given her in America. She has found a perfect balance between retention of core Bengali components and integration of new cultural elements, and she has done so on her own terms. Unlike Mrs. Sen, she learns early on that blending these two cultures and constantly translating are necessary processes in order to survive. Thus, Mrs. Sen is the ‘expatriate’, in Bharati Mukherjee’s differentiation, while Ashima is the ‘immigrant’. According to Mukherjee, expatriation is a refusal to assimilate in the new country, a constant process of looking back to the homeland. Immigration, on the other hand, has ‘exuberance’ and it is “a set of fluid identities to be celebrated” (qtd. in Himadri Lahiri 3).

In the course of her life, Ashima has lived in five houses: two in India (her parents’ flat in Calcutta, and her in-laws’ house for one month before they headed West), and three in the United States, all on the East Coast (the house they rented in Cambridge, living below the Montgomerys, the faculty apartment on the campus, and the property on Pemberton Road). She counts the houses the way she counted Gogol’s fingers at birth: “One hand, five homes. A lifetime in a fist” (*Namesake* 167). If she once compared immigration to a ‘lifelong pregnancy’, I am arguing that at the end of the book Ashima has managed to give birth to a powerful, autonomous self. She slowly emerges from the first rented apartment in Cambridge, a small and dark place, uncomfortable and quite ‘unhomely’, in order to discover the neighborhood and then

the city of Boston. Gradually, she starts to interact with American strangers who stop her in the street or in supermarkets and ask questions about Gogol, acting polite and welcoming. The second American house she inhabits is also a temporary lodging, an overheated faculty-subsidized apartment in an unnamed university town. Ashima feels uprooted again, and for her “migrating to the suburbs feels more drastic, more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge” (49).

But two years later Ashima and Ashoke are finally ready to purchase a house and move to their third and final home in the United States. They choose this house together, and they do not look for a home in the historic district, but on ordinary roads, where the houses are standard American, built in different architectural styles such as cape, saltbox, raised ranch, or garrison. The Gangulis eventually decide “on a shingled two-story colonial in a recently built development, a house previously occupied by no one, erected on a quarter acre of land. This is the small patch of America to which they lay claim” (51), like colonizers of a newfound land. Ashima has lived here longer than in any other house in her life (including her parental home in Calcutta), and has shared beautiful moments with Ashoke and the children. Almost thirty years later her metamorphosis is complete and Ashima is ready to move on. More importantly, the rootless existence that lies ahead does not scare her anymore, but it is a path she has voluntarily created.

Ironically, the house is bought by an American professor new to the university where Ashoke used to teach. As one family’s story ends, another’s begins. The new owners intend to convert the sun deck into a den, knock down walls, and even modernize Ashima’s kitchen. Instinctively, she wants the house to remain as Ashoke has last seen it, as they have always known it. But so much has changed (Ashoke is dead, the children are grown-ups living on their own in other cities), and the small piece of land they once proudly ‘colonized’ no longer belongs to them. The Walkers will put their name on the mailbox, repaint the walls on which the Gangulis marked their children’s heights, and redecorate.

Though she is virtually homeless, Ashima only now starts living according to the meaning of her name “she who is limitless, without borders” (26), a transnational citizen without a permanent home, a resident nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Her mobility has increased throughout the novel, until space and real borders have collapsed completely. She has constantly and consciously negotiated her identity from the interstices, as Bhabha would call

them, opened up by the act of living between cultures. She is now all too aware that Calcutta, “the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign” (278), is not home anymore. And that after missing her relatives and her life in India for thirty-three years, from now on she is going to miss throwing parties for Bengalis in the Boston area. Most of all, she will miss the opportunity to drive by the engineering building where her husband once worked, like she still does at times.

Although everything in this country reminds her of Ashoke, she has gradually acquired the confidence and independence of an American woman. She no longer is the insecure young girl who at the beginning of the novel follows her husband into the unknown. She has learned to love him here, and together they have built a house and a good life (their arranged marriage grew into love and respect). Ashima has evolved unexpectedly from her traditional roles of wife and mother into a transnational figure who now inhabits a “Thirdspace” like the one described by Edward Soja. The ‘Thirdspace’ he theorizes is a creative recombination and extension of the ‘real’, material space, with the ‘imagined’ representations of spatiality. There is an extraordinary openness to this space, which stretches beyond physical and mental dimensions, while encompassing them at the same time. Lahiri’s female character becomes a world traveler who moves freely in this third space, actively negotiating her identity as ‘flexible citizen’. It seems to me that this phrase coined by Aihwa Ong (qtd. in Goh 2004: 8) describes Ashima perfectly.

As I have mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, Jhumpa Lahiri has been criticized by Tamara Bhalla for her limited, stereotypical representations of Indian women. In her PhD thesis, entitled *Between History and Identity: Reading the Authentic in South Asian Diasporic Literature and Community* (2008), she looks at the works of Chitra Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy, and Jhumpa Lahiri, all prominent writers of South Asian descent, and at the way in which members of a South Asian American book club receive and relate to these works. She argues that there is an acute necessity for a dialogical negotiation between lay and academic readerships. In the latter’s opinion, much of the fiction produced by representatives of the pan-ethnic group of South Asian writers “obscures class difference, reifies ethnicity, and generates a reductive East/West binary” (17) in which the ‘Orient’ symbolizes oppressive tradition, and the ‘Occident’ progressive modernity. However, the findings of her dissertation include the idea that lay readers “mobilize their interpretive desires for identification in an effort to strategically read beyond and through ethnic, cultural and gendered stereotypes” (17).

I believe this is precisely the case with the character of Ashima, who is much more than a mere repository of ethnic tradition abroad. After a lifetime of translating between Indian and American cultures, Ashima extracts and preserves the best features from both, opening up to an empowering transnational condition. In bringing this credible character to life, Lahiri has successfully carried out the mighty task of representing “issues of authenticity, exoticism, and cultural insularity in the lay and academic fields of reception” (Bhalla 18). Western readers might find her characterization simplistic and reductive, but I think they should keep in mind the fact that this character comes from the East and arrives in the United States in the 1960s. It is not an easy endeavor to translate from traditional gender roles, and she does much better than most characters from *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Ashima skillfully negotiates spaces and places, and deals elegantly with sensitive issues that set American culture in opposition to the Indian one. In the beginning the distinctions are blatant: Ashima gives birth in a hospital, and not at home like she would have done in her country of origin. She is appalled by the Montgomerys’ lifestyle, by the fact that they are ‘friends’ with their daughters, and by the naming process in America. When Gogol goes on a school trip to a cemetery she is outraged and cannot reconcile the fundamental differences as far as attitudes towards death are concerned. Later on Ashima has a hard time accepting the fact that her children have grown and they do not return home for all the holidays, and she even thinks “she has given birth to vagabonds” (*Namesake* 167). Having involuntarily parted with her own parents upon moving to America, her children’s independence and their need to keep their distance from her is something she cannot comprehend.

Relationships and marriage are also sensitive subjects. Generally, the Gangulis disapprove of Indian-American marriages. They do not want an American wife for Gogol, but after he and Moushumi (his Indian-American wife) separate, Ashima feels guilty for having set them up. At the same time she is also glad that they have not considered it their duty to stay in an unhappy marriage, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima’s generation had sometimes done. Representatives of the second generation “are not willing to accept, to adjust, and to settle for something less than their ideal of happiness. That pressure has given way, in the case of the subsequent generation, to American common sense” (276). Ashima admits that the fantasized unbreakable bond between individuals from the same country is just an illusion that should not be perpetuated. In this way she adheres to a more fluid pattern of ethnic affiliation. Gogol and

Moushumi's divorce becomes an example of 'common sense', a progress from restrictive Eastern mores to Western freedom and individuality. Therefore, Ashima does not oppose Sonia's decision to marry an American because she knows Ben (who is half-Jewish and half-Chinese) has brought happiness to her daughter, in a way Moushumi (despite her Indian descent) has never done to her son. Ben is thus introduced to the Bengali friends as the 'jamai-to-be', and he is willing to meet Sonia halfway and be translated into their culture. Their wedding takes place in Calcutta (a city Sonia hated as a little girl), on a day in January, just as Ashima and her husband were married nearly thirty-four years before.

In the end, Ashima is completely free and has evolved in many aspects. For her, happiness is no longer connected to a place, nevertheless keeping in close touch with children, relatives, and friends from and in different places does bring her happiness.

Ashoke: Comfortable in the Immigrant's Overcoat

Ashoke is sketched as a scholarly figure, a person who has always had a passion for reading, particularly Russian authors. In fact, images of people reading permeate Lahiri's novel. Sanjukta Dasgupta, among others, points out that Bengal is considered the cultural heart of India (2007: 75). With a high degree of literacy and numerous poets and writers originating from here, including Nobel Prize-winner Rabindranath Tagore, Bengalis consider themselves intellectually superior to the rest of the Indians. Thus, Bengalis love to read and they continue to do so after being transplanted to New England. For instance, Ashima reads the English classics in Calcutta and then Bengali novels in Massachusetts, before becoming a librarian and dealing professionally with a large variety of books. Gogol buys books of architecture and his girlfriends are booklovers as well: Ruth majors in English literature, while Moushumi only reads English classics in childhood and then turns this passion for reading into a career by pursuing a PhD in French literature.

One particular book, *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*, is an overarching presence in Lahiri's novel, as it is passed via three generations of men from Ashoke's grandfather down to Ashoke's son (his great-grandson). *The Namesake*, then, is a book about books that begins with a father reading Nikolai Gogol's short stories and ends with his son reading them. This book travels metaphorically from 1840s Russia to 1950s and 1960s India and to 1980s and late 1990s United States, transcending three continents and three very different cultures. And one particular

story from this book, 'The Overcoat', functions like a perfect *mise en abîme* for the entire Lahirian novel.

Since childhood Ashoke has had the ability to read while walking to school, or from room to room in his parents' house in Alipore, and even up and down the stairs. The Gangulis' privileged social position is illustrated by the big three-story house, but also by the fact that Ashoke's paternal grandfather is a former professor of European literature at Calcutta University (founded by the British in 1857). Coming from the most Anglicized of all Indian states, the Ganguli men are enabled by their colonial legacy to acquire Western education and travel abroad. Ashoke's grandfather used to read to his grandson for one hour each afternoon, mainly English translations of Russian classics, and urged him to read and reread all the Russians saying they will never fail him. A few years later, "while walking on some of the world's noisiest, busiest streets, on Chowringhee and Gariahat Road" (*Namesake* 12), Ashoke reads the British colonial canon (Dickens and Maugham), alongside Dostoevsky, Turgenev and Tolstoy, immersing himself in a third fictional space.

His grandfather's words came true in October 1961 when Ashoke is involved in a potentially fatal accident. Ashoke is twenty-two and a student at Bengal Engineering College. During a holiday he takes a train to visit his grandparents who had moved to Jamshedpur; his grandfather had gone blind and it is Ashoke's turn now to read out loud each afternoon. He carries a single book, Nikolai Gogol's short stories of course, and an empty suitcase since on this trip he will inherit his grandfather's library. Inderpal Grewal (qtd. in Dhingra & Cheung 2012: 36-7) establishes a clear link between Ashoke's grandfather's library and Amitav Ghosh's essay "The March of the Novel through History: The Testimony of my Grandfather's Bookcase" (1998). For Ghosh, the access of the Bengali middle-class to international literature (especially Russian) produced a paradoxical type of nationalist cosmopolitanism. The reading habits he describes are deeply gendered, and literary knowledge is viewed as a masculine articulation, as it is illustrated by the 'grandfather's bookcase', a trope used by Lahiri as well.

As the train pulls out of Howrah Station, Ashoke starts to reread "The Overcoat", his favorite story from the book. He had read it so many times that the spine of the hardbound copy had split, but he is still captivated "by the absurd, tragic, yet oddly inspiring story of Akaky Akakievich, the impoverished main character who spends his life meekly copying documents written by others and suffering the ridicule of absolutely everyone" (*Namesake* 14). He laughs

passionately at the account of Akaky's christening, "and the series of queer names his mother had rejected" (14). This sentence anticipates his own son's naming process in ways he could not foresee that night. However, he also pities this humble nineteenth-century Russian clerk, and is devastated when Akaky is robbed of his precious overcoat, catches a fever, and dies soon after. As he reads about the socially and politically disempowered man, "lost in the wide, snow-white, windy avenues of St. Petersburg, [he is] unaware that one day he was to dwell in a snowy place himself" (17). This is an interesting juxtaposition between the streets of 19th century St. Petersburg and those of 20th century Boston, Massachusetts. It shows, I think, how narratives enable human emotions to permeate any geographical boundary and connections to be formed across time and space. Paradoxically, though, the more Ashoke reads, the less the story seems to make sense to him. Likewise, to the readers of Lahiri's novel, the link between Gogol's masterpiece and her own literary creation is not apparent from the beginning.

So, why are these intertextual references significant for the interpretation of Lahiri's novel? First of all, *The Namesake* is a story about identity, just like "The Overcoat". Judith Caesar claims Akaky is a non-entity, merely copying out other people's writing, but this "very lack of identity is the source of his happiness" (2007: 104). When he buys a new overcoat, thereby acquiring both a 'material self' and a 'social self', people start noticing him, and he even gets invited to a party. Akaky develops a certain sense of identity, but soon after he is violently robbed and perishes alone and miserably. However, he returns as a 'bodily phantom' to haunt Kalinkin Bridge and steal overcoats from passers-by. From this fascinating and mysterious story Jhumpa Lahiri draws ideas about shifting and unfixed identities. Thus, her characters have plural, often contradictory identities, as they straddle several realities and spaces at once. Rüdiger Heinze concurs that the image of the overcoat "represents the continuously changing subject positions that we don, our 'identity choices' and cultural affiliations made in communicating with our surroundings" (197).

Secondly, as critics have observed, Lahiri shares with Gogol a preoccupation with the idea of the 'inbetween'. Sally Dalton-Brown argues: "For Lahiri, exile from one's birth or traditional culture results ontologically in a state of inbetweenness, or limbo, that is not necessarily a negative condition, but can be one of potential freedom" (333). In this 'deathlike' state of limbo, characters grasp the truth of life as inevitably fatal; and this understanding and acceptance gives way to liberation. Dalton-Brown continues that: "For Gogol's socially alienated

Akaky, inbetween the sense of being exiled from life, a ghost caught between life and death, limbo also turns out to be particularly liberating - a state of (uncanny) power that allows him to take revenge on those who tormented him while he was alive” (333-34). The critic links this inbetweenness with the Lacanian notion of Antigone’s living death, of being caught in a powerful state called ‘entre-deux-morts’. Carmen Concilio also suggests that the main link between “The Overcoat” and *The Namesake* is the preoccupation of both authors with the concept of the ‘inbetween’. Nikolai Gogol’s character, Akaky, is between life and death; an anonymous individual while he is alive, he is empowered after death and returns as a ghost to take his revenge. For Lahiri, this means the state of being stranded between cultures, focusing as she does on the struggles of Indians to adapt to life in America.

In the third place, Gogol’s book literally interferes with and influences Lahiri’s story. Akaky’s ghost haunts “a place deep in Ashoke’s soul, shedding light on all that was irrational, all that was inevitable about the world” (*Namesake* 14). In Lahiri’s narrative, ‘the irrational and inevitable’ happens in the middle of the night, 209 kilometers away from Calcutta. The train in which Ashoke is reading Nikolai Gogol’s story derails and Ashoke is nearly killed in the accident. Readers do not find out the cause of the derailment, but train violence is quite common in India as news reports have repeatedly shown throughout the years. Ashoke is thrust partway out the window, so badly hurt that he is unable to scream for help. Luckily, a few pages from the Gogol book fly out and the team of rescuers is able to spot him and extract him from the wreck. The Russian genius had indeed not failed him. In fact, he had saved Ashoke’s life.

Just before the accident, Ashoke talks to a man named Ghosh who has recently returned from England to India at the insistence of his homesick wife. He praises England, the country in which he had spent merely two years, but where his son was born. He idealizes it as a clean, organized dreamland, in stark contrast with dirty, chaotic India: “The sparkling, empty streets, the polished black cars, the rows of gleaming white houses, he said, were like a dream. Trains departed and arrived according to schedule. (...) No one spat on the sidewalks” (15). He urges Ashoke to “pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as he can” (16), while he is still young and free. The man had returned to his home country only to die in that train wreck, but his random meeting with Ashoke will definitely change the latter’s life.

For one year Ashoke lies in bed in his parents’ house, reading engineering books, but refusing to read the Russians or any other novels because “those books, set in countries he had

never seen, reminded him only of his confinement” (20). Ghosh’s advice haunts him, so once he is back on his feet he decides to walk away “as far as he could from the place in which he was born and he nearly died” (20) and continue his studies abroad. As Sally Dalton-Brown has argued, Lahiri’s characters journey across continents in a search for the self, “found ultimately through the courage of acceptance of ‘inbetweenness’ – achieved through acceptance of ‘death in life’, through awareness of life as accident, as always under threat” (336). Her characters must first learn to appreciate the fragility of life in order to discover the strength of their own self. As I have demonstrated above, this statement is true for Ashima (who discovers the frailty of life when she loses her husband, but this realization enables her to forge an independent, powerful self) and it is true for Ashoke as well (who is almost killed in the train wreck, but then finds the strength to start a new life abroad).

Hence, despite his father’s protests and his mother’s refusal to eat for three days, he embarks upon the journey to America. ‘Between two deaths’, he travels across continents in a search for his self, ready to access the interstitial space opened up by the experience of immigration as a positive, productive state. Because of the historical and political context I described earlier, Ashoke chooses America as his destination, and not England as Ghosh had done some years before. After he leaves India for good, Ashoke has to reconcile the target country’s culture with his home country’s ancestral traditions and values. The overcoat might then also function as a perfect metaphor for immigration: a migrant has to put on the cultural overcoat of the hostland in order to fit in.

The slight limp, claustrophobia, repeated nightmares, and Gogol’s prose will always remind Ashoke of the event that triggered the rest of his life. India is a perilous space, but he has come out of it alive, and while pacing the Boston hospital corridors, waiting for his son to enter this world, Ashoke thinks that he was born twice in India and a third time in America. He was thus given “[t]hree lives by thirty” (*Namesake* 21). The novel is fraught with metaphors about life and death, offering a beautiful meditation on existential matters. Ashoke thanks his parents and their predecessors for his first birth; and instead of thanking God in whom he does not believe he thanks Nikolai Gogol for his second birth. For his third he alone is responsible because he *chose* to be ‘born’ again in America. Nevertheless, emigrating is not a trifle for Ashoke either, despite the fact that he seems comfortable with his new status. The narrator reports that “[a]lthough it is Ashima who carries the child, he, too, feels heavy, with the thought

of life, of his life and the life about to come from it” (21). The way in which he escaped from the accident was a miracle, but his son and his life in America are personal achievements. Life is indeed dominated by chance (the ‘irrational’), and death (the ‘inevitable’), but human beings also have the freedom to act and change things along the way. Ashoke has taken life into his own hands and, like the narrator from “The Third and Final Continent”, has leapt into a new, open and free space.

Although both Ashima’s and Ashoke’s education had been in English, they experience a great cultural shock in the new land. For example, “Baby Boy Ganguli” needs a name for the birth certificate so he can be released from hospital. This official ritual puzzles his parents to whom it has never occurred to question Ashima’s grandmother’s selection and disregard an elder’s wishes in such a callous manner. When the doctor suggests they should name the baby after one of their ancestors, Ashoke thinks that this sign of respect in Western societies, this symbol of heritage and lineage, would be ridiculed in India: “Within Bengali families, individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared” (28). As David Kipen observes in his review of the novel, “[n]ames have always been contested territory in immigrant families” (2). On the one hand, they strive to embed ancestral traditions and values in their new life; on the other hand, they are aware names can hinder assimilation in the host country. However, the ‘perfect name’ occurs to Ashoke when Dr. Ashley says they might also name their son after a person they greatly admire. For the first time Ashoke thinks of the accident with gratitude rather than terror, as he whispers “Hello, Gogol” (*Namesake* 28). His wife approves, understanding that the name stands both for her son’s life, and for her husband’s.

When Ashima is going through post-partum depression combined with homeland nostalgia, Ashoke feels guilty for having brought her to America. But he remembers Ghosh’s confession who said coming back for his wife’s sake was his greatest regret. Therefore, one has the feeling that for Ashoke this option is totally out of the question. He is quickly acculturated, particularly since he easily fulfills his dream of becoming a professor. He thoroughly enjoys the official academic recognition he is getting and his newly-acquired social status. In fact, his ‘success story’ equals assimilation. Moreover, he is thrilled to be lecturing before a room full of American students, to be addressed ‘Professor Ganguli’ by the secretary, and to have his name written on the office door. While Ashima experiences loneliness and distress in their rented apartment, he greatly enjoys the view from his office, and takes pleasure in going to the library

and browsing through international newspapers. He reads about the US intervention in Cambodia, but also about Naxalites being murdered on the streets of Calcutta, and India and Pakistan going to war. Ashoke does stay informed about the political situation in his country, but, unlike the family from “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, he is not very concerned or involved. He is more preoccupied with browsing the aisles where the Russian literature is shelved. In this section he is always comforted by the sight of “his son’s name stamped in golden letters on the spines of a row of red and green and blue hardbound books” (49).

In 1982 he gives his son a rare edition of Gogol’s short stories for his fourteenth birthday, trying to connect him both to his namesake and to the outstanding Russian culture in the way his grandfather had done. He does not tell him the story of the accident, but expects his son to appreciate the gift. He only mentions a special kinship he feels with Nikolai Gogol due to the fact that the Russian writer also “spent most of his adult life outside his homeland” (77). But the teenager is totally unmoved; his only feeling is relief that he does not resemble the author physically. Before leaving the room Ashoke tells his son to keep in mind Dostoyevsky’s famous remark: “We all came out of Gogol’s overcoat” (78). In an online interview, Lahiri describes “The Overcoat” as a superb story, and claims to be haunted by it just like her character Ashoke is in the novel. She adds: “Without the inspiration of Nikolai Gogol, without his name and without his writing, my novel would never have been conceived. In that respect, this book came out of Gogol’s overcoat, quite literally” (qtd. in Dalton-Brown 333). Of course all of this makes no sense to fourteen year-old Gogol Ganguli who has neither read ‘the Russians’, nor has any urge of doing so. Ashoke adds vaguely that it will make sense to his son one day, but unfortunately he will not be alive anymore when it does.

The following year Ashoke is up for a sabbatical and chooses to move the whole family to Calcutta for eight months. Although during the stay Ashoke delivers lectures at Jadavpur University, he and Ashima act as if they were on a long vacation. The experience is narrated from a third-person point of view from Gogol and Sonia’s perspective. The children witness their parents’ quick, unusual transformation immediately after they land in India: “Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road” (81-2). Although Ashoke is conveniently translated into American culture, he still displays more confidence when going back to India as an accomplished representative of the

diaspora. What is more, he keeps close ties with other Bengalis in the United States, and permanently cooperates with Ashima in recreating an Indian ‘universe’ in their American house (turned into a protective womb from the foreign exterior world).

In truth, Ashima and Ashoke are stranded between two worlds: when they travel to Calcutta, they revert to their old selves, but, when they return to Massachusetts, they appear no different from their American neighbors. However, both are unsettled by the fact that their children sound just like Americans, so they send Gogol to Bengali lessons, where he learns to read and write his ancestral alphabet until he is able to cobble the intricate shapes into his (foreign) name. Gogol has always hated these boring lessons because they prevent him from attending a drawing class during which the students go for walks in the historic district where they sketch the façades of different buildings. Moreover, the handouts used for these lessons of Indian history and culture are printed “on paper that resembles the folded toilet paper he uses at school” (66). This is a degrading reference to India as poor, developing country, and it signifies that his parents’ attempts to indoctrinate him with Indian/Bengali culture ultimately fail.

Train accidents happen in America too, and Gogol is involved in one when he comes home for Thanksgiving one year. Gogol’s train is delayed for almost two hours because someone had jumped onto the tracks. Ashoke has been waiting at the station all this time, and when they get into the driveway he finally tells his son the story behind his name. Gogol is perplexed, makes great efforts to absorb the information and is unable to get out of the car. He asks if his sister knows, and Ashoke replies: “In this country, only your mother knows” (124). The absurdity of the situation and the lapse in communication is striking to Gogol who had meanwhile changed his first name into Nikhil. He wants to know if his father is reminded of the accident every time he thinks of his son. Ashoke reassures him that is not the case. On the contrary, Gogol reminds him of everything that followed, of the new and blissful life he built in America.

Ashoke dies in a hospital in Cleveland, away from his country of birth, but also from his house on Pemberton Road, the home he has inhabited for over twenty years. His life seems an embodiment of his name which means ‘he who transcends grief’. After narrowly escaping a tragic accident, he overcomes the drama and is ‘reborn’ on a different continent. Completely free and comfortable wearing the immigrant’s overcoat, Ashoke skillfully negotiates his inbetweenness, and apparently never looks back in regret. Sometimes diasporic overcoats do not

fit as well as they should, so they are discarded. But Ashoke ‘adjusts’ his as much as necessary for succeeding in his adoptive country and feeling fulfilled.

Gogol’s Namesake

From the very motto of the novel, taken from Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat”, Lahiri points to the fact that Gogol Ganguli’s story is inextricably linked to the story of his name. Thus, her Russian predecessor writes: “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”, and Lahiri’s narrative works towards the same outcome. “The Overcoat” also opens with the birth of its main character, but in his case it is the mother who chooses the name. She rejects all the choices presented by the baby’s godparents, and eventually decides to give him a saint’s name, which is the same one his father had carried. This is how Akaky Akakyevich (the patronymic which is created by taking the father’s name and adding the suffix meaning ‘son of’) comes into the world. Yet his naming indicates he is a mere copy of his father, not a full-fledged individual. The job he takes later on confirms his status of non-entity, as Judith Caesar has noted (2007: 104). In *The Namesake*, doctors suggest naming the newborn after someone in the family, but the Gangulis dismiss the alternative as a ridiculous Western habit.

Yet Gogol Ganguli’s names immediately mark his difference: his first name is Russian and his surname is the Anglicized version of an Indian name, prompting Karen Cardozo to highlight the fact that “both ‘Gogol’ and ‘Ganguli’ are an intertextual hall of mirrors signifying that there is no ‘there’ there – no single point of cultural origin” (18). At eighteen, he changes his first name into Nikhil (also of Indian resonance), a decision which opens up a space in which he can negotiate his notion of self. But his journey is circular, since at the end of the novel he realizes it is in fact the name of Gogol that has held the key to self-knowledge all along, and “he reconciles himself to his unique position as a diasporic individual situated on a strategic border zone between cultures” (De 2009: 36). Of course, ideas of naming and name-changing provide Lahiri with the perfect metaphors for the state of hybridity connected to migration.

While his parents wait for the letter from India to arrive, they are not very concerned about the question of their son’s name. The child has other, more stringent needs, such as “to be fed and blessed, to be given some gold and silver, to be patted on the back after feedings and held carefully behind the neck” (*Namesake* 25). Names are not so crucial in India where it is not

uncommon for years to pass before the ‘right’ name is found. Moreover, Bengalis recognize a major distinction between a pet name and a good name, thus in their nomenclature practice every single person has two names:

In Bengali the word for pet name is *daknam*, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments. Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood, a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated. They are a reminder, too, that one is not all things to all people. (25-6)

Lahiri goes on to explain that a good name, or *bhalonam*, is used for identification in the outside world, therefore “good names appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories, and in all other public places” (26). Ashima’s pet name is Monu, and Ashoke’s is Mithu; even as adults, these are the names by which their families call them. For this reason, letters from Ashima’s mother say ‘Ashima’ on the outside, ‘Monu’ on the inside. From the onset this gives them two distinct (not contradictory!) and simultaneous identities, an idea that Gogol will be unable to grasp until the novel’s conclusion. One does not have to choose in the sense of an either/or, but can embrace a both/and.

Lahiri’s pet name is Jhumpa; she has two good names, Nilanjana Sudeshna, but her kindergarten teacher decided to call her by her nickname which is easier to pronounce. Hence, she is all too familiar with the dichotomy brought about by this tradition. By explaining the difference at length and by placing many other references to the region she comes from, Lahiri tries to educate American/Western readers about specific Bengali customs and repudiate assumptions that Bengaliness equals Indianness. In the former’s tradition, good names represent “dignified and enlightened qualities” (26). As we have seen, Ashima means ‘she who is limitless, without borders’, and Ashoke, the name of an emperor, translates as ‘he who transcends grief’. Both names are highly appropriate for the characters that bear them. Pet names, on the other hand, are not recorded officially, only uttered among family members and close relatives or friends. Unlike good names, “pet names are frequently meaningless, deliberately silly, ironic, even onomatopoeic” (26). But Gogol’s pet name is recorded in his official birth certificate, causing subsequent confusion and identity-related dilemmas for him. In addition, it appears peculiar that two Bengalis should choose a pet name for their son born in America after a Russian writer’s surname.

Of course they mean to find a good name for Gogol, but several unfortunate events prevent the Gangulis from doing that: Ashima’s grandmother has a stroke and remains paralyzed,

unable to send another letter after they realize her initial one is still hovering somewhere between India and America, and Ashima's father dies so they have to travel to India urgently. Years go by and only when Gogol is five and starts going to kindergarten do they decide upon a good name: Nikhil. But he does not want to be called by the new name, nor does he understand why he should have a good name that his parents are not even going to use. In fact, the boy instinctively rejects his dual identity: "He is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know. Who doesn't know him" (57). The 'good' name had come to Ashoke while staring at the spines of Gogol's books in the university library, and he had rushed home to ask Ashima her opinion. He points out to her that this name is relatively easy to pronounce, "though there was the danger that Americans, obsessed with abbreviation, would truncate it to Nick" (56). However, 'Nikhil', meaning 'he who is entire, encompassing all', is connected to their Bengali heritage and also resembles Nikolai, the first name of the Russian Gogol. Although it all makes perfect sense to Ashima and Ashoke, they face the difficult task of explaining to little Gogol why he needs to have two names. They try to reassure him that all Bengalis have two names and that it is part of growing up and of their ethnic identity. Ashoke eventually dismisses the child's concern altogether by saying: "To me and your mother, you will never be anyone but Gogol" (57).

When Gogol is taken to elementary school, Mrs. Lapidus, his principal, pronounces 'Nikhil' differently from his parents, adding to the confusion. She makes the second syllable longer so that it sounds like 'heel', hinting to the fact that the 'name problem' is and will remain the boy's Achilles' heel. What is more, Ashoke addresses his son first as Gogol, then, before leaving, with Nikhil, and tries to explain the difference between the good name and the pet name to the woman. He insists that the "boy's good name, his school name, is Nikhil" (59), but Mrs. Lapidus notices that in the official documents he is registered as Gogol. Regarding the name Ashoke is very traditionalist and does not want to conform to American ways. After he is gone, the principal asks Gogol if he wants to be called by another name and he says no, so he is taken to the classroom where there is "a small universe of nicknames – Andrew is Andy, Alexandra Sandy, William Billy, Elizabeth Lizzy" (60). Obviously there is no other Gogol, but the only official ritual in class is "pledging allegiance first thing in the morning to the American flag" (60). Gogol will perform this ritual alongside his mates, identifying with American national symbols, assimilating in the homogenous, unquestioned 'melting pot' of his peers.

When Sonia is born they are better prepared and they do away with the pet name altogether, having learned that schools in America ignore parents' instructions and register a child under his/her pet name. For their daughter the good name and pet name are one and the same: Sonali, meaning 'she who is golden', showing willingness to adapt to American cultural norms while preserving some of the Indian ones. But, they soon begin to call her Sonu, Sona, and eventually Sonia, which "makes her a citizen of the world. It's a Russian link to her brother, it's European, South American" (62). It is even the name of the Indian prime minister's Italian wife, forecasting Sonia's transnational future. Unlike her brother, during her rice ceremony she refuses all the food but chooses from the plate both the dirt from the yard and the dollar bill. She threatens to put it in her mouth, prompting one of the Bengalis to exclaim she "is the true American" (63). Sonia shares all the childhood events with Gogol, but she is a background character, perhaps because she is the most 'American' member of the family and allegedly does not have to negotiate her ethnic origins as much as her brother. Hence, after the brothers go to college, Lahiri merely records news about her, without a major impact on the development of the plot.

As a young boy, Gogol does not mind his name and the fact that it is so rare that it never appears on key chains or refrigerator magnets. His parents explain to him that he was named after a famous Russian author, and "[t]hat the author's name, and therefore his, is known throughout the world and will live on forever" (66). In the beginning, the other students tease him by calling him 'Giggle' or 'Gargle', but after a while they shout "Go, Gogol!" during physical education class. Only Sonia will call him 'Goggles' for the rest of their lives, perhaps implying that he should correct his perspective on certain things.

By the time he is ten, Gogol has already been to Calcutta three times, and he remembers seeing his last name, Ganguli, in different places. He is astonished to see six pages full of Gangulis in the telephone directory. He even wants to rip out a page as a souvenir, to the amusement of one of his Indian cousins. Ashoke explains that "Ganguli is a legacy of the British, an Anglicized way of pronouncing his real surname, Gangopadhyay" (67). The colonizers have erased the suffix "-opadhyay" which signifies membership in the Brahmin caste. Dhingra and Cheung clarify that 'Gangopadhyay' means "teacher from the village of Ganga" (2012: 33), thus it is another reference to Ashoke's grandfather. But in America even Ganguli is mocked; Gogol discovers one day that their family name has been vandalized on the mailbox. Someone had

shortened it to 'GANG' and had scrawled 'GREEN' after it. Although apparently integrated in the neighborhood, their surname is forever a sign of otherness and 'nonbelonging'. The incident sickens Gogol, who runs back into the safe space of the house, certain of the insult his father must feel: "Though it is his last name, too, something tells Gogol that the desecration is intended for his parents more than Sonia and him" (*Namesake* 67). He is already aware that cashiers smirk at his parents' accent, that some salesmen prefer to address him directly, as if "his parents were either incompetent or deaf" (68). But Professor Ganguli is unmoved by such instances of American discrimination; he seems determined to acknowledge only the positive sides of his host country. He dismisses the whole thing by saying that it is only boys having fun, and immediately goes to the store to buy the missing letters.

Not long after this episode, Gogol is in the sixth grade and goes on a school field trip, first to a textile mill somewhere in Rhode Island, then to a small wooden house with tiny windows, placed on a large plot of land, which used to be the home of a poet. Inside the austere residence, students stare at the poet's inkwell set on his desk, at the soot-stained fireplace, and narrow bed. The final stop of their trip is the graveyard where the unnamed poet is buried. For a few minutes they wander from stone to stone, among thick and thin tablets, some of which are square and arched, others are black and gray, covered by lichen and moss. Inscriptions have faded on many of the stones, and Gogol, who has never set foot in a cemetery before, feels a chill. Then their teachers give them a name-related project that is going to make the hero all too aware of the chasm between Indian culture (burning the dead) and American habits (burying the dead), but also of his lacking American roots. The peculiarity of his name(s) becomes even more conspicuous to him after this experience. The students receive some sheets of newsprint and colored crayons and are asked to rub the surfaces of the gravestones in order to discover their own family names. Most children soon holler triumphantly 'Smith', 'Collins', or 'Wood', claiming "a grave they are related to" (69).

The cemetery is an example of Foucauldian heterotopia, being a Western space "connected with all the sites of the city, state or society or village etc., since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery" (Foucault 25). Until the end of the eighteenth century, graveyards were placed at the heart of the city, next to the church, but with the secularization of society they were moved to the outside borders of towns. This school trip is Gogol's cultural encounter with "the other city" (Foucault 25), where each Western family has a resting place.

Even before starting to work on the project, the American-born Indian knows that he is different from his colleagues and that he will not find his surname on any stone: “Gogol is old enough to know that there is no Ganguli here. He is old enough to know that he himself will be burned, not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will ever bear his name beyond life” (*Namesake* 69). He remembers seeing dead bodies of strangers carried by people through streets of Calcutta, corpses decked with flowers and wrapped in sheets. Although his displacement is not physical (having been born in the United States), he somehow feels he does not fully belong because he has to negotiate continuously between his family space (where Indian traditions are zealously upheld) and the American social space (with its different set of rules).

Gogol has no ancestral connection to this land or its history; nevertheless he takes the task seriously and walks to a “slim, blackened stone with a pleasing shape, rounded at the top before rising into a cross” (69), and rubs the newsprint. The name ABIJAH CRAVEN and the years 1701-1745 appear “magically” on his page. ‘Abijah’ is also a peculiar name, and Gogol wonders how it is pronounced and whether it belonged to a man or a woman. He goes to another small tombstone, and discovers ANGUISH MATHER, A CHILD. Trying to identify in a way with American culture, he imagines bones no larger than his own lying below the ground. While the other children (with strong roots) are quickly bored of the project and start chasing one another around the stones, he goes from grave to grave and brings to life more bizarre names: PEREGRINE WOTTON, EZEKIEL AND URIAH LOCKWOOD. One chaperone walks by and remarks that these names are rare nowadays. But Gogol likes these names, their “oddness” and their “flamboyance” (70). They are outsiders, just like him, so Gogol invents a kinship with these unknown people. Digging up the American immigrant past he tries to make sense of his present and future in the country repeatedly called ‘a nation of immigrants’, where during his lifetime he will remain part of a minority, an Indian-American. It occurs to Gogol that names die over time, that they perish just as people do, and all that is left to tell the personal history of these individuals are brief inscriptions on a headstone.

On the way back the other children either tear up their rubbings, or crumple and toss them at each other, while Gogol remains silent and guards his ‘discoveries’ carefully. At home, Ashima is outraged that American teachers take children to cemeteries in the name of art, and concludes Americans do not take death seriously. She says bitterly it is already bad enough “that

they applied lipstick to their corpses and buried them in silk-lined boxes” (70), and adds that in Calcutta “burning ghats are the most forbidden of places” (70). Consequently, she refuses to display Gogol’s rubbings in the kitchen, alongside his other drawings of a Greek temple, or of the public library’s façade. Her son was ranked first in a contest regarding these sketches, hinting at his future career as an architect. Ashima claims she could not possibly cook with names of dead people on the walls of her kitchen. Yet Gogol is attached to these names, and connects his own unusual, foreign name to the history of this land, establishing a future as an American through this connection: “For reasons he cannot explain or necessarily understand, these ancient Puritan spirits, these very first immigrants to America, these bearers of unthinkable, obsolete names, have spoken to him, so much so that in spite of his mother’s disgust he refuses to throw the rubbings away” (71).

By the age of fourteen Gogol has come to hate his first name, which he considers both absurd and obscure. He hates signing his name on the drawings he makes in class, or constantly having to explain that it does not “mean anything ‘in Indian’, (...) that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian” (76). Living with a Russian name, particularly during the Cold War, must indeed have been distressing for an adolescent. He would obviously have preferred a first name like Leo (Tolstoy), Anton (Chekhov), or Alexander (Pushkin), and is dismayed that his parents chose the strangest of namesakes. He is a teenager now, his body changing in unexpected ways, and the obscurity of his name makes him feel even more insecure. In fact, “[a]t times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, manages nevertheless to distress him physically, like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear” (76). Jayadev, the other Indian boy at school, can shorten his name to Jay and pass easily for an American. But Gogol cannot be shortened, and it “sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity and gravity. What dismays him most of all is the irrelevance of it all” (76), the fact that it is his father’s favorite author, not his. He is still unaware that had it not been for Gogol’s book, his father would have died and his lineage would have ended on that terrible day. However, Gogol does realize that it is his own ‘fault’ as well, because he could have accepted to be called Nikhil at school. In that case, he would have been Gogol only fifty percent of the time: “Like his parents when they went to Calcutta, he could have had an alternative identity, a B-side to the self” (76).

After he receives Nikolai Gogol's collection of stories for his birthday, the main character becomes even more miserable when he ponders that not only does he have a pet name turned into a good name, but he also bears a Russian author's surname turned into a first name. To his mind, this double difference marks his 'othering' and subsequent exclusion from American society in which he longs to assimilate. It also occurs to him that no one he knows in the world shares his name or the source of his namesake. Instead of being a positive thing, a sign of his uniqueness, the 'odd' name he bears feels like a heavy 'overcoat' to Gogol Ganguli. He is yet unable to accept and integrate his transculturality, but continues to yearn for a monocultural, mainstream American identity.

In high school they actually study Nikolai Gogol's short story "The Overcoat", which is listed after Faulkner and before Hemingway, therefore 'inbetween' two American iconic writers. As the teacher writes 'Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol' on the board, Gogol tries to convince himself that the whole situation is not so strange since "there is, after all, a William in the class, if not an Ernest" (90). He is embarrassed nonetheless, and then has to listen to a detailed biography of the writer, including the fact that he was an 'eccentric genius' who lived for a long period of time abroad, in places like Paris and Rome, but most of all, stressing that Nikolai Gogol's life "was a steady decline into madness" (91). The English teacher lists phrases like 'hypochondriac', 'deeply paranoid', 'frustrated man', and 'morbidly melancholic', in order to make a lasting impression on the minds of teenage Americans. He mentions that Turgenev once described his compatriot as a 'queer and sickly creature', and stresses that Gogol had few friends, never married, and is commonly believed to have died a virgin, details that must seem horrifying and incomprehensible to young, contemporary Americans. Gogol Ganguli blames his parents for never having told him any of these abnormal biographical details, but, luckily, his classmates seem indifferent and continue to copy the information obediently as the teacher goes on emphasizing the Russian writer's eccentricity, not his genius.

Everything culminates with data about how he starved himself to death as a result of a prolonged writer's block, severe depression, and mental decline: "In attempts to revive him on the day before his death, doctors immersed him in a bath of broth while ice water was poured over his head, and then affixed seven leaches to his nose. His hands were pinned down so that he could not tear the worms away" (92). Gogol, at the end of his tether, shuts his eyes while the whole class starts to moan. Eventually, the teacher disappears to have a cigarette, temporarily

releasing Gogol from his turmoil. The other students lament that the story is too long and hard to get through, that Russian names are difficult to pronounce. Nobody says anything to Gogol Ganguli, and he himself has not read the story, nor does he intend to. His attitude is ambivalent though. To his mind, reading the story would mean paying tribute to his namesake and accepting it somehow. Still, as he listens to his classmates complain “he feels perversely responsible, as if his own work were being attacked” (92). In the film the classmates mock him (“Hey Gogol, it’s your namesake”) and he makes an obscene gesture.

After refusing to date throughout high school, partly because of his awkward name, one night while his parents are out of town he goes to a party in a dorm. He introduces himself as Nikhil for the first time, to a girl simply called Kim. She repeats ‘Nikhil’, and adds that it is a lovely name. This gives him the courage to kiss her; it was thus not Gogol, but Nikhil who kissed for the first time. Rüdiger Heinze interprets this scene: “He is only able to make contact because he adopts a name which is formally his, but because it lacks a history seems not to belong to him. He can presumably fill its emptiness with whatever meaning he chooses” (195). It is an Indian name he has had since childhood, but because he has never used it until now, it is not connected to a cultural and personal past, which gives him the freedom to create any future.

So in 1986, at eighteen, Gogol finds himself in the waiting room at the dentist’s, flipping through an issue of *Reader’s Digest*, when he comes across an article called “Second Baptisms”. The article provides a whole list of famous people who have changed their names, including Bob Dylan, Gerald Ford, Molière and Leon Trotsky. Although the article does not mention it, Nikolai Gogol himself published under different pseudonyms before actually changing his name, that is “simplifying his surname at the age of twenty-two from Gogol-Yanovsky to Gogol upon publication in the *Literary Gazette*” (*Namesake* 97). But the article stresses that changing one’s name is a right belonging to every American citizen, and every year tens of thousands actually use it. Slaves renamed themselves once they were emancipated, and European immigrants had their names changed at Ellis Island. Ironically, by the time he moves to New York, Gogol has already exercised this right, and hereby reassured himself of his Americanness. Thus, in the waiting room he suddenly envisions ‘Gogol’ added to this list of names, and ‘Nikhil’ printed in tiny letters upside down. He talks to his parents about it, stressing that it is high time he had a good name. But his father points out that, in his case, the pet name actually became his good name long ago. Gogol protests that it is not even a Bengali name; it is a name which belonged to

a mentally-unstable Russian man, and because of this nobody takes second-generation Indian-American Gogol Ganguli seriously. This is a lie and Gogol knows that “the only person who did not take Gogol seriously, the only person who tormented him, the only person chronically aware of and afflicted by the embarrassment of his name, the only person who constantly questioned it and wished it were otherwise, was Gogol” (100). Still struggling with his individuality, Gogol feels as if his name were a medical condition he is determined to treat.

Resigned to the fact that in America anything is possible, Ashoke signs the change-of-name form. In India such a thing would be inconceivable, yet Gogol insists that he is going to bear a Bengali name from this moment on. So he goes to Boston, alone for the first time, and “gets briefly lost on his way to Middlesex Probate and Family Court” (97). This first symbolic journey on his own marks the beginning of a constant flux of traveling in Gogol’s life: from Boston to New Haven (during college years), from New York to Boston, and from New York to Europe. These voyages are added to those he was ‘forced’ by his parents to take when traveling to India and back throughout his childhood and adolescence.

The Boston courthouse is an imposing old brick building, with a beautifully carved plaster ceiling, and marble interior. Gogol has to empty his pockets as he steps through a metal detector, “as if he were at an airport, about to embark on a journey” (98). While he is impatiently sitting in the waiting room, Gogol practices his new signature. The judge motions Gogol Ganguli to approach the dais, and it saddens him a little that this is going to be the last time he will hear this name in an official context. Nevertheless, he is still convinced he has taken the right decision and that by changing his name he is actually correcting a mistake his parents have made. The judge asks why he wishes to have this name change, and he says he has always hated it, unable to find a plausible reason and unwilling to tell her the whole saga of his good name being lost in the mail, between continents.

Although the setting is imposing, in agreement with the cases normally presented here, Gogol’s name-changing procedure is “entirely unmomentous” (102), taking only ten minutes. The narrator records in a neutral tone that no one accompanies Gogol on this legal rite of passage. The novel documents several rites of passage, starting from birth(s), continuing with baptism(s), birthdays, graduation ceremonies, marriage(s), divorce, and death. And, of course, there is migration as a crucial ritual, metaphorically representing death but also rebirth. But Gogol’s self-naming is the most significant initiation, an event he has to undergo alone.

Afterwards he wanders the streets of Boston in this new ‘overcoat’, apparently a reborn man, like Akaky. But for his family he will always be Gogol, no matter what ‘overcoat’ he puts on. And the narrator will also continue to refer to him as Gogol, except for a very brief section when the narrative voice switches to Moushumi’s perspective.

Under the name of Nikhil he has his first sexual experience with a girl whose name he ironically cannot remember. Now a student at Yale and physically dislocated from his parents, he acts as if he were totally independent from them. Although the big move to New Haven coincides with the time of the name change, he is aware that his parents, their friends, and all his own friends from high school, will never call him anything but Gogol. So it is awkward for everyone (including Gogol) when his parents phone and ask to speak with Nikhil. It makes him feel that he is not related to them, not their child anymore. But at home ‘Gogol’ claims him again, illustrating Foucault’s opposition between family space and social space (“Of Other Spaces” 23). The conundrum of his two names and conflicting identities makes him feel “as if he’s cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different” (*Namesake* 105). His act of renaming himself automatically involves an unnamings, as he officially gives up Gogol, his birth name, for good. Aparajita De claims that “[h]is old and new names unassumingly embody the plurality of his diasporic identity. He is initially disconcerted by it (an individual inherently desires to be a synthetic and unified entity), and identifies his American location to be the *only* signifier of his identity” (2010: 15).

It is ironic that Moushumi (his future wife) is the only woman he has ever gone out with who has known him by that other name. Interestingly, although she has known him from childhood, she thinks of him and refers to him as ‘Nikhil’. At a party thrown by some of Moushumi’s friends Gogol does not fancy at all, there is a long discussion about names triggered by the fact that one of the guests is pregnant and thinking about possible names. Moushumi’s own name, she explains to a friend, means “a damp southwesterly breeze” (*Namesake* 240). She does not like it at all, rather argues that a foreign name like hers is a curse because no one can say it properly and it permanently underlines her difference. She has had the same problems as Gogol, hence their shared identity as children of immigrants. In school, for example, the students pronounced her name ‘Moosoomi’ and mockingly shortened it to ‘Moose’. Later, her lover Dimitri Desjardins calls her “Mouse”. The conversation gets to name changes, and Moushumi reveals Nikhil’s secret: that he had changed his. He is embarrassed, has to say out loud the name

he was born with, which after all these years “sounds as it always does, simple, impossible, absurd” (243). Unexpectedly, the former name comes back to haunt him. He feels betrayed, wishes he had never told her the story behind his naming, and is forced to explain to the guests that his father was a ‘fan’ and that is why he was named Gogol. Someone jokes that they should name their baby Verdi, deriding him, his father, and their heritage. He knows Moushumi’s cosmopolitan friends will not do “something so impulsive, so naïve, to blunder, as his own parents had done” (244). Someone says the perfect name will occur to the future parents in time, and Gogol bursts out proclaiming there is no such thing as a perfect name, and that human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen. The guests quickly change the subject, but for Gogol this moment marks the rupture from his wife.

Tellingly, in this scene she does not call him by any of his names, but refers to him as her husband. This episode contrasts with the opening one in which Ashima does not address her husband by his name either, but she does that out of respect for tradition and as a token of intimacy and affection, whereas this is not so in Moushumi’s case. Had she followed the Indian tradition she would not have exposed him in front of her American friends (notably, as a couple, they do not have any Indian friends). Although she likes the fact that he had changed his name because it made him somehow a new person, not the one her mother had mentioned, to her it is a trivial matter. More importantly, perhaps, Moushumi has kept her last name, not adopting Ganguli, “not even with a hyphen” (227), to Gogol’s disappointment. She publishes articles on French feminist theory and signs them Moushumi Mazoomdar, which is already long enough, so she does not want to change her surname. The underlying assumption, however, is that the relationship is not important enough for her. Again unlike Ashima, who has adopted Ashoke’s name and followed him across the world, Gogol’s wife does not commit herself entirely to the marriage. She does not want to be the submissive Indian woman/wife, and in this way she downplays Gogol’s patriarchal hopes: “Though he hasn’t admitted this to her, he’d hoped, the day they’d filled out the application for their marriage license, that she might consider otherwise, as a tribute to his father if nothing else” (227). The subsequent dissolution of their marriage ultimately stems from Moushumi’s reluctance to conform to the cultural expectations of the Bengali-American community (including her husband).

When Gogol finds out about her affair with Dimitri, he realizes that for the first time in his life another man’s name upsets him more than his own. Subtle analogies with names and

naming continue. Thus, after the break up, his time with Moushumi seems like a name he has ceased to use. He realizes that by changing his name “it had not been possible to reinvent himself fully, to break from that mismatched name” (287), and that his marriage has been a misstep as well. While he is disappointed by his past failures, Gogol is now at ease with the fact that his personality consists of several parts which are in dialogue with one another. His attempts to circumscribe one separate, pure identity have tormented him for too long. In the process he has renamed himself, removed himself from his family, and experienced several love relationships. But all of these have failed partly because he was not comfortable with his hyphenated status and plural identity.

An ABCD returns to the *desh*

As I have shown so far, Gogol has had to negotiate two very different cultures throughout his life, as well as a third brought about by his name. When he turns fourteen, for example, he has a party with his friends from school, with pizzas that his father picked up on his way home from work, a baseball game watched together on television, and some ping-pong played in the den. The next day they have another celebration, a Bengali one this time, to which forty people from three different states are invited. As usual, Ashima cooks for days beforehand, cramming the refrigerator with lamb curry and potatoes, luchis, channa dal with raisins, pineapple chutney, and sandeshes molded out of saffron-tinted ricotta cheese. However, she is much more comfortable with cooking all these dishes than she is with “feeding a handful of American children, half of whom always claim they are allergic to milk, all of whom refuse to eat the crusts of their bread” (72).

Thus, the father is responsible with the ‘American’ party (involving less food, not prepared in the house, and some sports), whereas the mother takes care of the ‘Indian’ celebration (involving plenty of food, all cooked in the house, numerous Bengali families with children who play hide-and-seek and watch *The Love Boat* and *Fantasy Island*). It is at this second party that Gogol meets Moushumi, a thirteen-year-old girl who has just moved with her parents from England to Massachusetts. They are new in this Bengali circle of friends, and Moushumi is different from the other Indian-Americans her age in that she speaks with a British accent, reads *Pride and Prejudice* (replaced by *Bonjour Tristesse* in the film) and proclaims she

detests American television. Gogol's only connection with English culture is represented by his love for The Beatles, hence he and Moushumi have nothing in common at this age.

When his parents announce they are all moving to Calcutta, Gogol "dreads the thought of eight months without a room of his own, without his records and his stereo, without friends" (79). He and his sister will be uprooted not only from the American environment to which they are used, but also from school. They leave on Christmas Day, with a massive collection of luggage, instead of staying home and opening gifts. They fly to London, Dubai and, finally, Calcutta. On past trips Gogol was thrilled to fly over so many countries, and he would trace their itinerary on the map in the seat pocket, feeling somehow adventurous. But this time he is frustrated that they always go to Calcutta where apart from visiting relatives there is nothing to do. He has already been to the planetarium, the Zoo Gardens, and the Victoria Memorial a dozen times. Having ticked the touristic sites, Gogol knows he will not feel at home in the foreign, faraway town. The only other city they have ever visited is London, but only during a layover of a few hours when their plane to India was delayed. So Gogol wishes they went to Disneyland or the Grand Canyon instead, stereotyped sites Lahiri uses in order to show how her protagonist insists on identifying only with his Americanness.

As they land on the tarmac of the Dum Dum airport, the air is "sour, stomach-turning" (81), and a row of relatives is "waving madly from the observation deck" (81), aunts and uncles and cousins whose pet names Gogol and Sonia will have to remember and whom they will have to kiss and hug once the doors slide open and they are no longer in transit. Their parents are instantly transformed: "Ashima, now Monu, weeps with relief, and Ashoke, now Mithu, kisses his brothers on both cheeks, holds their heads in his hands" (81). The children know these people, but they do not feel close to them. In fact, Sonia whispers to her elder brother in English that she is scared, takes his hand and refuses to let go. During the stay she will be his only ally, the only person to speak and sit as he does, to understand what he goes through. Although they sometimes fight over the Walkman and the collection of tapes recorded by Gogol in his room at home, they both feel an impossibility to adapt, and share "excruciating cravings, for hamburgers or a slice of pepperoni pizza or a cold glass of milk" (84). Both children desperately want to return to their house in America, the only place where the two very distinct cultures blend in an acceptable way.

From the airport they are taken by taxi, and the chaotic Indian city mirrors Gogol's discomfort. He recognizes the scenery, as they roll down VIP Road, past a huge landfill and into the heart of North Calcutta. However,

he still stares, at the short, dark men pulling rickshaws and the crumbling buildings side by side with fretwork balconies, hammers and sickles painted on their façades. He stares at the commuters who cling precariously to trams and buses, threatening at any moment to spill onto the street, and at the families who boil rice and shampoo their hair on the sidewalk (82).

When they eventually get to the flat on Amherst Street, where Ashima's brother now lives, curious neighbors look from windows and roofs. Everyone is staring at the 'American' children who "stand out in their bright, expensive sneakers, American haircuts, backpacks slung over one shoulder" (82). Inside, he and Sonia are given plates of *rossogollas* for which they have no appetite but which they have to eat. Next they have their feet traced onto pieces of paper, and a servant is sent to Bata to buy rubber slippers for them to wear indoors, as is customary in India.

Everything is radically different and in Gogol and Sonia's perceptions in a very negative way. They have to adjust to sleeping under mosquito nets, bathing by pouring tin cups of water over their heads, and watching cousins go to school while they sit around the house all day. Although they have rented their house on Pemberton Road to a couple of American students for the period in which they are gone, they do not rent an apartment in Calcutta, but spend the whole period living with various relatives, shuttling from home to home. All their relatives are fascinated by life in America. They ask about what they eat for breakfast, what they do in school, and are impressed by simple elements like the fact that they have carpets in the bathroom. Gogol and Sonia have little to do but witness how one of their aunts "presides in the kitchen all morning, harassing the servants as they squat by the drain scouring the dirty dishes with ash, or pound heaps of spices on slabs that resemble tombstones" (82). The interesting association between 'ashes' and 'tombstones' reminds one of Gogol's trip to the Rhode Island graveyard and his dilemma of being caught between cultures.

The use of space in this section of the book reflects Gogol's hybrid state and his cultural ambiguity. On the one hand, he knows the language and is accustomed with the foods and most of the Bengali traditions. On the other hand, he feels uncomfortable and alien in the midst of 'native' Bengalis, and desires nothing more than to be back in the familiar Boston area. Thus, in spite of his numerous visits, Gogol has no sense of direction in the huge Indian metropolis. Once he tries to run on the "cracked, congested, chock-a-block streets" (83), and his aunt promptly

sends a servant to follow him and make sure he does not get lost. So he chooses to stay in the house most of the time, sitting at his grandfather's drawing table, sketching what he can see through the iron window bars: "the crooked skyline, the courtyards, the cobblestone square where he watches maids filling brass urns at the tube well, people passing under the soiled canopies of rickshaws, hurrying home with parcels in the rain" (83). Sometimes Gogol goes to the roof to smoke a flavored bidi with one of the servants. From the rooftop there is a view of the imposing Howrah Bridge, but Gogol is not tempted and perhaps not even allowed to walk this bridge and thus symbolically close the gap between the two cultures. On the contrary, his self-imposed seclusion in the house marks his uneasiness in an unfamiliar, even hostile, environment.

In the summer, the four of them travel by train first to Delhi, and then to Agra to see the Taj Mahal. They have been warned that there are bandits lurking in Bihar, so Ashoke wears a special garment under his shirt, with hidden pockets for the cash, while Ashima and Sonia have to remove their gold jewels. Everything about this country seems inauspicious to Gogol, and even the landscape they see through "the tinted window of their air-conditioned car (...) is gloomy and gray" (84). Unlike Calcutta, where at least Ashima and Ashoke feel at home, Agra is foreign to all of them. They are tourists, staying at a fancy hotel with a swimming pool, drinking bottled water, eating in restaurants with forks and spoons, and paying by American credit card. Paradoxically, Gogol notices that in certain restaurants they are the only Indians apart from the serving staff. They admire the Taj Mahal, as well as Agra Fort (we are told nothing about Delhi), and Ashima ties red threads for good luck in Salim Chishti's tomb. To no avail, however, since on their trip back to Calcutta bad luck trails them. Sonia eats a slice of jackfruit which makes her lips itch unbearably and swell to three times their size. Predictably, somewhere in Bihar a businessman is stabbed and robbed of three hundred thousand rupees, and the train is stopped for hours while the police investigate the case.

When they finally arrive in Calcutta, both Gogol and Sonia get terribly ill. Doctors give them local remedies, and the relatives presume the 'American' children got sick because of the air, the rice, or the wind. It is obvious to the Indian family that "they were not made to survive in a poor country" (86). When they recover, it is already time to go back to the United States, and "the caravan of taxis and Ambassadors comes to whisk them one last time across the city. Their flight is at dawn, so they must leave in darkness, driving through streets so empty they are unrecognizable, a tram with its small single headlight the only other thing that moves" (86).

Probably this is the memory Gogol and Sonia will keep: a dark city they are relieved to escape from.

Back on Pemberton Road, jet-lagged and confused, they have to readjust. At first they are disconcerted by the space and 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). Yet, in their lives they are in fact in a perpetual transit between cultures, and the ever-present planes and trains stand for migration, mobility, and permanent fluctuations. The train metaphor often used by Lahiri in this text is perfect to capture the complexity of the above mentioned state(s). Michel Foucault has pointed out that “a train is an extraordinary bundle of relations because it is something through which one goes, it is also something by means of which one can go from one point to another, and then it is also something that goes by” (23-4).

After only one week the Gangulis have unpacked the eight suitcases, eaten the smuggled mango, and shopped in supermarkets. They already feel as if they have never been gone and they cozily retreat to their three rooms, sleep again in their three separate beds, with their thick mattresses, comfortable pillows, and fitted sheets. Refrigerator and cupboards are once again filled with familiar labels such as Skippy, Hood, Bumble Bee, Land O’Lakes. They settle back in the American matrix with ease, relieved to be back in a world with superior consumer goods. Ashima enters the kitchen for the first time in almost a year, while Ashoke drives the car, mows the lawn, and returns to the university. Their children watch television, eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, take hot showers and ride their bicycles around the neighborhood. Their American friends are happy to see them, but do not ask where they have been, unaware of how confusing it must be to occupy a space inbetween cultures. “And so the eight months are put behind them, quickly shed, quickly forgotten, like clothes worn for a special occasion, or for a season that has passed, suddenly cumbersome, irrelevant to their lives” (*Namesake* 88).

Time passes and Gogol takes an introductory course in architecture, combining his talent in drawing with his search for roots and identity. Sonia is in high school, having a “confident, frequent, American smile” (107), but dyeing almost all her clothes black, threatening to get additional holes pierced in her ear lobes, and to color a streak of her hair blond. This is shocking to Ashima who has never quite understood why her children need to go to what she considers such extremes. But Sonia’s experiments with looks parallel Gogol’s decision to change his name,

and reflect different ways of dealing with their ABCD status. In college Gogol attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English and hears for the first time an explanation of this acronym. One of the panelists, Amit, is a distant cousin from Bombay whom he has never met, but Ashima insists he should go and greet him. During the presentations he is bored by the repetitive mentions of “something called ‘marginality’, as if it were some medical condition” (118). Lahiri half-jokingly introduces the clichéd postcolonial trope of marginality. Although totally unaware of the fact that he inhabits this space, the phrase ABCD catches Gogol’s attention, and he gathers that it stands for ‘American-born confused deshi’. He learns that *C* could also stand for ‘conflicted’, and understands that he fits right in this category. He knows that *deshi* means ‘countryman’ or ‘Indian’ and that his parents and all their friends always refer to India simply as *desh*. But Gogol “thinks of it as Americans do, as India” (118).

However, there is a ‘little India’ recreated in their house, and Gogol constantly moves between this private sphere and the public American space. He and his sister are used to continuously translating between cultures, but this theoretical presentation makes him confront certain ambivalent realities he has lived with all his life:

For instance, although he can understand his mother tongue, and speak it fluently, he cannot read or write it with even modest proficiency. On trips to India his American-accented English is a source of endless amusement to his relatives, and when he and Sonia speak to each other, aunts and uncles and cousins always shake their heads in disbelief and say, ‘I didn’t understand a word!’ Living with a pet name and a good name, in a place where such distinctions do not exist – surely that was emblematic of the greatest confusion of all. (118)

Just like he hated and avoided learning the ancestral alphabet, so he avoids other ABCDs on campus and does not want to join the Indian association because its members remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people for the roots they happen to share and not for other things they might have in common. Still, when he renamed himself he could have chosen any name, but he went for Nikhil, thus affirming the Indian part of his hyphen. The new name is a mark of his ethnicity, whereas Gogol, the name he rejects, is Russian or universal, but not Bengali in any case. Moreover, even though he is disconcerted and distressed by his hybrid ‘condition’, it is something that does not go away.

But Gogol is only beginning to understand that he should consciously integrate the Indian side of the hyphen in his sense of self. Much more has to happen until he actually achieves this reconciliation.

Gogol's Women: Three Sequential Selves

Gogol's self-discovery is influenced by three long relationships which reflect different sides of his developing identity. In fact, critics (Gopinath, Bhalla) have noted that the female characters (including Gogol's three partners, but to some extent also his mother) are objectified foils to the male protagonist's development, or 'overcoats' he wears at some point in his life. Thus, his first girlfriend, Ruth, stands for Gogol's desperate wish for American roots. Maxine, on the other hand, represents his ambition to access a higher class status in American society. Moushumi, the one he actually marries, marks a return to his ethnic roots.

He meets Ruth on a crowded train back home from university. She is majoring in English, and they have seen each other on campus before but have not been introduced. She is the child of hippies, a natural beauty who wears no make-up or nail polish. She was raised on a commune in Vermont, and educated at home until the seventh grade. Her parents are divorced now. Her father lives with his new wife, raising llamas on a farm, while Ruth's mother, an anthropologist, is doing fieldwork on midwives in Thailand. Gogol cannot imagine coming from such a family of "utopian enthusiasts" (Song 357), who expose themselves to the wilderness in search of a perfect way of life, leaving behind the corrupted urban lifestyle. These characters hint at the Protestant settlers who came to New England centuries before and founded what Michel Foucault would call some "absolutely perfect other places" (27). Although Ruth expresses interest in his background, asking about visits to Calcutta, Gogol thinks that his own upbringing feels "bland" (*Namesake* 111) compared to hers. Natalie Friedman claims that Lahiri's choice of adjective indicates that Gogol does not see himself as an outsider, or as a person with a unique immigrant background. On the contrary, to him Ruth, the Yankee, is 'exotic', while he is a 'bland' American suburbanite (Friedman 120).

Her parents had been to an ashram in India before she was born, and Ruth is curious what the streets and the houses are like over there. So Gogol draws a floor plan of his maternal grandparents' flat on his school book, and navigates Ruth along the verandas and the terrazzo floors, "telling her about the chalky blue walls, the narrow stone kitchen, the sitting room with came furniture that looked as if it belonged to a porch" (*Namesake* 111). Then he draws the room where he and Sonia sleep when they visit, and describes the view of the tin-roofed businesses. Ruth says she would love to go to India, and he imagines her staying at the Grand, walking along Chowringhee, and shopping in New Market as other Western tourists do. He realizes that in

Calcutta Ruth would be the tourist and he the local. His grandparents were born and died there, their photographs are still hanging on the walls of their house in Amherst Street, so Gogol has firm roots in India and he is starting to relate to them. He continues to tell Ruth about meals they ate on Indian trains when they traveled to Delhi and Agra, about Indian tea with milk and sugar bought through the window from men on the platform, about how the crude clay cups were smashed afterward on the tracks. She appreciates these details and Gogol feels flattered, especially since he has never spoken of his experiences in India to any American friend. Indeed, Ruth in Hebrew means both ‘companion’ and ‘compassion’, another link with the Puritans, among whom Old Testament names are prominent.

They start dating, but he has no desire to tell his parents about Ruth, and he cannot picture her at their kitchen table on Pemberton Road, in her jeans and sweater, politely eating his mother’s food. What is more, he cannot imagine being with her in the house in which he is still Gogol. When they find out, Ashima and Ashoke are obviously displeased and claim he is too young to get involved in a serious relationship, particularly with an American girl. They give examples of Bengali men who have married Americans and then have gotten a divorce. It is interesting how Ashoke, otherwise so well-adapted to American ways, in certain matters betrays a very Indian attitude. Neither he, nor Ashima believe interethnic marriages have any chance of working. Gogol wishes his parents could accept Ruth, like her father and stepmother have accepted him, without any pressure at all.

Instead of bringing her home during Christmas break, they meet in Boston one day. They go to a movie at Brattle, have lunch at Café Pamplona, and exchange presents. They wander the streets of Boston hand in hand, discover a small shop selling architecture books, and Gogol buys Le Corbusier’s *Journey to the East*. They walk the very streets on which he was pushed in his stroller as a child, and he shows Ruth the Montgomerys’ house where he spent the first years of his life. He wishes they could go inside and suddenly feels strangely helpless because access to the house is denied. It now belongs to other people, and Gogol feels both happy to be there with Ruth and disappointed that until now this first house his parents have inhabited in America did not mean anything to him. This brief visit represents a first acknowledgement of his parents’ efforts to re-root themselves in a foreign land.

Ruth goes to Oxford for a semester and Gogol “longs for her as his parents have longed, all these years, for the people they love in India” (117). He starts to empathize with what they

must have gone through when they moved across continents. For Ruth it is easier to leave since she has no history of immigration in her family; traveling does not entail a drama for her and her parents. So she stays in England for a summer course after the semester is over and by the time she returns to Boston the distance between them is already too wide. Although they move together in a rented apartment for a short while, Ruth is determined to go back to Europe for graduate school. She mentions he could come too, but Gogol is still dealing with his roots and routes between India and the United States, and is obviously not ready for a transatlantic move. After a relationship of two years, they break up, and Ruth moves to England. Her trajectory resembles a reverse migration path, going back on the tracks of the Puritans. She is his only stable girlfriend during his years at Yale, and when she exits his life she “takes with her the self he was with her” (Caesar 2007: 111).

Gogol’s second significant relationship is with Maxine, another American woman, but one who is almost the opposite of Ruth. Gogol meets her at a posh party, and this affair marks a brutal distancing from his parents. While dating Ruth he would keep in touch with them, but after getting together with Maxine, he is absorbed by her sophisticated world and almost forgets about Ashima and Ashoke.

The year is 1994, and Gogol now lives and works as an architect in New York. His firm is in midtown, and although he apprentices with ‘big names’, it is not the job he had envisioned as a student. His dream was to design and renovate private residences; instead, he works with a team and designs for hotels, museums, and corporate headquarters in foreign cities he has never even visited, such as Brussels, Buenos Aires, Abu Dhabi, Hong Kong. His office faces the “tawny brick wall of a neighboring building across the air shaft”, and his work “is incidental, never fully his own: a stairwell, a skylight, a corridor, an air-conditioning duct” (125). Nevertheless, each component of a building is important, and he finds it gratifying that after all his years of schooling, his efforts have some practical end. He works hard even on weekends, but as he is still putting together parts of his identity, Gogol Ganguli is not ready to build houses, only parts.

He rents a studio in Morningside Heights, with two windows facing west, on Amsterdam Avenue. This is the first apartment he has to himself, after sharing rooms with a series of people all through college and graduate school, but it reflects the provisional stage he is in. There is a lot of street noise and the space is extremely small. It will remain an impersonal place, and he will

never attempt to decorate it or make it into a home. Although he still depends on his parents' money, New York to Gogol is the city of opportunities (on personal and professional level).

Maxine studied art history and works as an assistant editor for a publisher of art books. She is very assertive and calls him the day after the party, inviting him for dinner at her house in Chelsea where she lives with her parents. She had moved back with them after a failed relationship with a man with whom she had shared a house in Boston. Maxine is described almost exclusively in relation to her wealthy parents, their impressive house, and their class privilege. When he gets to the address she had indicated, Gogol is stunned by the beauty of their brownstone (a sign of their status as American citizens for many generations), and stops to admire it like a tourist before opening the gate.

Lydia, Maxine's mother, is in the kitchen. Yet she is nothing like Ashima: she is a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and only cooks exquisite foods. Her husband, Gerald, works as a lawyer, and the Ratliffs are in perfect antithesis to Gogol's parents. Thus, for dinner they have steak and dark beans, drink wine, followed by chocolate, seasoned with intellectual conversation about movies, exhibitions, and restaurants. They are New Yorkers and speak about their spectacular house and the history of the neighborhood. They also have a dog and epitomize the high class American family, belonging to this city by right of birth and heritage. This immediately fascinates Gogol, the son of immigrants. Although they are intrigued by his Indian background, his years at Yale and Columbia, and his promising career as an architect, he comes from a very different milieu. In fact, Lydia comments that he could be Italian, revealing stereotypes about darker skin and negating his Indianness by placing him in a more familiar European context. She wants to know whether Calcutta is beautiful, and Gogol is caught a little off guard since he is usually asked about the poverty, the beggars, and the heat. He says: "Parts of it are beautiful. (...) There's a lot of lovely Victorian architecture left over from the British. But most of it is decaying" (134). He refers to the colonial legacy, maybe because his hosts can relate better to that. The implication is, however, that Indians are not taking good care of their legacy. Gerald remarks it sounds like Venice (another comparison to Italy), and Gogol replies that there are canals in Calcutta only when the streets flood during the monsoons season. Maxine proclaims she wants to go to Calcutta, but quickly after gets up to make some tea, abruptly putting the whole discussion behind them.

Yet Gogol is “effortlessly incorporated into their lives” (136). Soon he accompanies Maxine when she goes shopping on Madison Avenue, where she buys “cashmere cardigans and outrageously expensive English colognes (...) without deliberation or guilt” (136). Together they eat in restaurants downtown, with tiny tables but huge bills, and afterwards the two always end up in the Ratliff residence. They sleep in the room she grew up in, making love just above her parents’ bedroom. So, “[q]uickly, simultaneously, he falls in love with Maxine, the house, and Gerald and Lydia’s manner of living, for to know her and love her is to know and love all these things” (137). Indeed, as Judith Caesar observes, part of Gogol’s unnecessary turmoil when it comes to his identity search arises from the fact that he tends to identify his self with what William James has called the ‘material self’ (one’s surroundings and possessions, including the houses), and the ‘social self’ (the relationships in one’s life), while leaving his ‘essential self’ (the organizing consciousness that helps one understand the meanings of events in one’s life) largely underdeveloped (Caesar 2007: 103-4). Throughout the novel he explores a series of sequential identities, and his troubles come from a lack of continuity and from a lack of a unitary sense of self. He seems unable to see the bigger picture: one can be many things at the same time, and plural identities are in fact preferable to either/or self-definitions.

Maxine and her ‘things’ thus constitute his next identity. She is superficial, surrounded by a mess, her hundreds of things always covering her floor. Still, Gogol is charmed by her unkempt ways and he loses his self in the material and emotional comfort of this relationship, to the point that her parents introduce him to their friends as “the architect Max brought up with her” (*Namesake* 157). He is an accessory to this young woman who always acts as if she has grown up but not matured. For example, she claims it has not occurred to her she could live on her own after returning from Boston, preferring the cocoon of her parental home. Gogol, on the other hand, could not even imagine going back and living with his parents. Instead, he learns to eat the refined foods the Ratliffs eat, polenta and risotto, bouillabaisse and osso buco among others, and adopts their ways, while they adopt him apparently without questions or obligations. Interestingly, Lahiri repeats the verb “learns” four times, stressing Gogol’s eagerness to absorb their lifestyle.

Maxine represents Western cosmopolitanism and upper-middle class status; she becomes a “cultural usher, teaching Gogol how to affect the highbrow tastes that would enable him to realize the cultural capital of his Ivy-League education and gain proximity to the advantage of

whiteness” (Bhalla 2012: 113). Her white, wealthy body holds the promise of power that tempts Gogol. She is objectified in order to represent everything that the male, ethnic subject is not but thinks he wants to become.

Consequently, he participates in the dinner parties they throw for their friends, all carefully selected, mainly painters, editors, academics, or gallery owners. He is impressed by the intelligent conversation and compares these classy events with his parents’ parties. Although their circle of Bengali friends is also an elite group, formed by educated people (Indian teachers, doctors, researchers), they would eat in shifts, out of the pans in which the food was cooked, sitting wherever they could, sometimes in different rooms of the house. Furthermore, their house is in the suburbs of Boston, whereas Gogol’s relationship with Maxine unfolds in a fancy house in Manhattan, during a period in which he is trying to make a name for himself in New York. Perhaps this is why, like Sanjeev from “This Blessed House”, Gogol is enticed by the standard of life these Americans display in their sumptuous residence.

At the same time, he is conscious that this immersion in Maxine’s life is a betrayal of his own. He cannot picture his parents sitting at Lydia and Gerald’s table, enjoying their excellent food and wines, contributing to one of their dinner party conversations. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Lahiri underlines that class is not just an ‘English’ obsession:

I think that class works differently in the United States, but it’s not that it’s not there, that people don’t think about it and have attitudes and live their lives according to certain notions. I’ve never felt a freedom from that. I mean, classes exist and you’re born into one and that’s it. Well, that’s not it, but there’s no escaping the fact that you were born into one specific circumstance or another. (Tayler, 2008, para 12)

Therefore, most of her characters, whether Indian, American, or Indian-American, are described in terms of social class and their houses and properties are accurate indications. But, apart from their affluence, there is another insurmountable difference between the Ratliffs and the Gangulis. Gerald and Lydia are secure in a way Gogol’s parents will never be, namely they are confident of their Americanness. Similarly, Maxine is comfortable with who she is, and, more importantly, “she has never wished she were anyone other than herself, raised in any other place, in any other way” (*Namesake* 138). This is the biggest difference between her and Gogol, a distinction correlated to the house she has grown up in compared to his. Maxine’s relationship with her parents is very open, again unlike his with Ashima and Ashoke. Hence, although Lydia and Gerald pressure her to do nothing, “she lives faithfully, happily at their side” (138).

Max is surprised to hear that Ashima and Ashoke have had an arranged marriage, that Ashima cooks Indian food every single day, and that she wears saris and a bindi. She exclaims in disbelief: “But you’re so different I would never have thought that” (138). Gogol does not feel insulted, but he realizes a line has been drawn between them because to Maxine, who is used to her father bringing flowers and expensive jewels to her mother and to the two of them kissing and going out, an arranged marriage is inconceivable. He knows his parents would want him to marry a girl of Indian descent, and this thought upsets him, maybe even makes him have relationships with American women as a late act of rebellion.

During his time with Maxine, Gogol seldom calls his own parents and does not go home to Massachusetts for the whole summer. Unable to reach him at the apartment, unaware that he has moved in with somebody else’s parents, Ashima calls his office one evening. She asks him to come home the following weekend because Ashoke is moving to Ohio for nine months on a grant. Gogol knows that his parents never regard the act of travel casually, and “that even the most ordinary of journeys is seen off and greeted at either end” (144). He and Maxine are supposed to go to New Hampshire for two weeks, but he reluctantly agrees to stop off at Pemberton Road for lunch. She is curious to meet his parents, amused that they do not drink wine and do not even own a corkscrew (Hinduism forbids alcohol, which seems funny to a liberal American). Gogol dreads the moment, especially since she is the first girlfriend he had ever brought home and she is not Indian. Additionally, he goes by Nikhil now, but in the shingled suburban house of which his parents are so proud, he is still Gogol. Hence, he feels uncomfortable throughout the rich Indian meal, and relieved to be back in her world as he pulls out of the driveway and heads North across the state border. During the ride he tells Maxine about his name change, and she exclaims it is the cutest thing she has ever heard, but never mentions it again, “this essential fact about his life slipping from her mind as so many others did” (156).

In New Hampshire he loves the fact that he is disconnected from the world, and is particularly glad that his parents cannot reach him. So he decides that here, “at Maxine’s side, in this cloistered wilderness, he is free” (158). During this holiday he turns twenty-seven, and it is the first birthday in his life he has ever spent away from his own family. Instead he spends it with Maxine, her family, and their friends. An unpleasant conversation, however, shadows his birthday party and reminds him of his status as ABCD. Pamela, a friend of the Ratliffs, says she

had a girlfriend who went to India and “came back thin as a rail” (157) and remarks that Gogol must not get sick when he goes to India, presuming that the climate does not affect him given his heritage. He replies he is from Boston, born and raised, and the climate conditions are tough for him too when he travels to India. Lydia intervenes, telling Pamela ‘Nick’ is American and he was born here. But she is not sure, after all this time, and asks: “Weren’t you?” (157). His hopes for national belonging and assimilation are shattered. He might have been effortlessly ‘adopted’ in their family, but it is only a partial, temporary, and surface integration.

He is not like them and ethnic differences prove unyielding a few months later, when his father passes away and Gogol finally understands he cannot and should not sever his roots. Maxine is unable to relate to what he is going through - first of all because she has not lost a parent, and secondly because she has no knowledge about Indian mourning rites. Their interracial relationship is eventually wrecked by cultural incompatibility, evoked in the movie by a powerful image in which she is the only one dressed in black during the ceremony held after Ashoke’s death. This comes in stark contrast with Indian tradition which asks for the color white to be worn at a funeral. Moreover, Gogol does not include her in his plans to go to Calcutta and scatter Ashoke’s ashes in the Ganges. She had opened her world to him, whereas he is shutting the gates to his. A few months after their break-up, he meets Lydia and Gerald in a gallery and finds out that Maxine is already engaged to another man. Once the object of his desire in his quest for national belonging and a higher social position, Maxine is now brutally relegated as an object of undesired alterity.

It is not surprising, then, that Gogol’s third significant relationship is with Moushumi Mazoomdar, a woman he has known from childhood and who stands for the ethnic identity he has now decided to adopt. She is a PhD candidate at NYU, writing a dissertation on francophone poets from Algeria. She is the first Bengali he has ever been involved with. In fact, it is the first time either of them has allowed their mothers to arrange a date. Moushumi’s parents have always tried to set her up with an Indian-American, but from early childhood she had been determined not to let them have a hand in her marriage. So she rebuffed all the Indian men, and as a teenager she was forbidden to date. She rebelled against her parents who made her major in Chemistry by secretly pursuing a double major in French: “Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge – she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries

that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever” (214). Moushumi seeks refuge in French culture, and after graduating from college she moves to Paris in an attempt to escape as far as possible from her family and the two cultures she had been caught in between her whole life.

She is a hybrid, just like Gogol, his mirror image. Her dislocation is more violent though: he changes his name but stays in the United States, close to where his parents live, whereas she remorselessly turns her back to the two countries that could ‘claim’ her and escapes to a third, totally unrelated, where she eventually asserts her individuality by denying any roots. In this third space everything is easy: “She was exactly the same person, looked and behaved the same way, and yet suddenly, in that new city, she was transformed into the kind of girl she once envied, had believed she would never become” (215). She starts dating, having numerous affairs (like Gogol when he ‘escaped’ to New Haven). Uninhibited, she sleeps with French, German, Persian, Italian, and Lebanese men. This is her second rebellion, this time away from her parents and the city she grew up in. Her sexual behavior is extreme (there are days in which she sleeps with several men on the same day), but self-conscious, a reckless attempt to annihilate her family’s influence and the constraints of their Indian mentalities. Somehow it also seems like she is taking revenge on herself, disintegrating violently only to reconstruct a transnational identity as far as possible from her previous influences. Born in England to Indian parents, having lived in the United States before fleeing to France, she has relationships with men of several nationalities in order to eschew questions regarding her own national belonging.

It is in Paris that she meets Graham, an investment banker living there for a year, and moves back to New York with him. Surprisingly, her parents are relieved she is seeing someone; by now she is ‘old’ by Bengali standards so it does not matter anymore that her boyfriend is American. Plus, Graham is Ivy educated and has an impressive salary, which makes them overlook the fact that his parents were divorced and his father had remarried twice already. Moreover, many of their friends’ children had married Americans and “had produced pale, dark-haired, half-American grandchildren, and none of it was as terrible as they had feared” (216). They are accepting Western mores in a way they never did when their daughter was growing up.

Graham and Moushumi get engaged after she proposes one night in a taxi. Although he agrees to a Hindu wedding and even flies with her to Calcutta to meet the extended family, he later makes fun of the trip during a meal with American friends. He reveals that he found the

culture provincial and repressed, and the only thing to do in India was to stay at home or to visit relatives without even being allowed to drink. A chasm opens between them because “it was one thing for her to reject her background, to be critical of her family’s heritage, another to hear it from him” (217). This is somewhat unexpected, but it proves that Moushumi does identify with her Indian/Bengali side quite strongly, to the point that she removes the engagement ring, his grandmother’s diamond, and tosses it away in the middle of the street. Graham then strikes her in the face publically in front of pedestrians, sealing their break-up. Like Gogol and Maxine, they too part because of cultural differences. Interracial relationships, however, are not impossible in principle. Sonia and Ben seem to be a solid couple, so maybe it is just that upper-class Americans look down on the people with immigrant background although they do grant them temporary access to their elite circles.

Gogol and Moushumi, both having gone through failed relationships with Americans and having finally embraced their Indian heritage, meet for the first time since childhood at a small bar in East Village. He notices she no longer has a British accent, but “sounds as American as he does” (193). She explains that she hated moving here and that is why she preserved the accent for as long as she could. Her parents feared America because of its vastness and because in their minds it had less of a link to India than England. Their cultural translation is toilsome; America is perceived as foreign and even dangerous (when Moushumi was growing up, children mysteriously disappeared from their yards). Moushumi and Gogol do not really have many shared memories, but she remembers the house on Pemberton Road, and “he is secretly pleased that she has seen those rooms, tasted his mother’s cooking, washed her hands in the bathroom, however long ago” (200). He, too, remembers going to a Christmas party at her parents’ home in Bedford. Moushumi played a short piece by Mozart on the piano, and then she played ‘Jingle Bells’ over and over again, as gifts were being distributed. They have never before met outside the context of their families, yet he decides “it is her very familiarity that makes him curious about her” (199). Their shared Bengaliness, constructed in America, is suddenly intriguing and makes him want to see her again.

During a lunch at an Italian place, the waiter asks if Moushumi is his sister and insists that they strongly resemble each other. Gogol laughs, yet realizes “they share the same coloring, the straight eyebrows, the long, slender bodies, the high cheekbones and dark hair” (203). He feels uncomfortable, his attraction to her made somehow illicit, incestuous by the implication

that they are siblings. However, he is “at once insulted and aroused” (203). Their parents went to great lengths to raise them as if they were all part of a surrogate extended Bengali family, and now, in a totally different context, a stranger actually believes that they are related. Gogol is pleased by this familiarity. At her place he recognizes versions of things he knows from home: Kashmiri carpets on the floor, Rajasthani silk pillows on the sofa, a cast-iron Natraj on one of the bookcases. And when they make love it feels as if they have known each other’s bodies for years.

Three months later, they already have things at each other’s apartments, and within a year they get married at a DoubleTree hotel in New Jersey, City where her parents now live. The Hindu ceremony is organized by them, so that the bride and groom are almost like witnesses at their own wedding. They would have preferred a sit-down dinner, with jazz played during a reception held at the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, the Metropolitan Club or the Boat House in Central Park. Instead, their families invite three hundred people, serve Indian food, and make them wear traditional outfits. Gogol is dressed in his father’s Punjabi top, a dhoti with drawstring waist, and a pair of slippers with curling toes. Nervous to be literally in his father’s shoes, he is afraid he cannot quite fill them and thinks the ensemble looks silly on him while it would have looked dignified on his father. Moushumi wears a sari and about twenty pounds of gold. For the reception he changes in a suit, and she in a self-designed red Banarasi gown. Both are aware that they are fulfilling a collective, longstanding cultural obligation: that of marrying a fellow Bengali and thus ensuring continuation of Bengali-American generations. In a way, they are giving in and doing what is expected of them, and “because they’re both Bengali, everyone can let their hair down a bit” (224). They are like two actors trying to play the parts distributed to them, but not feeling entirely comfortable with their roles.

As Min Hyoung Song observes, Gogol is making a choice that is not a choice, “reminiscent of being a six-month-old infant made to face his destiny in the form of symbol-laden objects” (359-60). It is symbolic, then, that he does not participate in the wedding preparations. Although it feels strange not to be involved in his own wedding, this reminds him of the numerous other rites of passage in his life, all the birthdays and graduation parties his parents have thrown in his honor, but which were attended by his parents’ friends, making him feel like an outsider. He is relegated to the status of a son once more, but this time he is finally

doing what his parents had expected him to do all along. The ‘American solutions’ had failed, so he is trying the ‘Bengali one’.

About half a year after their wedding, they travel to Paris together. Moushumi has to deliver a paper at a conference at the Sorbonne and Gogol accompanies her, eager to visit the French capital. They stay in an apartment in the Bastille, which belongs to a friend of Moushumi’s who is away at the time of their visit. The apartment is small, dark, and uncomfortable, and this is how Gogol feels throughout the vacation. Moushumi is fluent in French and seems to know every corner of Paris. He has never been to Paris and feels useless, with her taking all the decisions: where to go for meals, what to visit, how to spend time. When they meet her French friends he is “particularly mute” (*Namesake* 231), and does not even share their conversation topics about the Euro or the Y2K problem. Eventually he tells her he would like to explore the city like a tourist without the advantage of having a guide, to see the architecture he has read about for so many years, to look at a map, or just to get lost.

Roaming the streets on his own he understands why she lived here for many years, away from her family and the United States. He thinks of the way in which Moushumi had reinvented herself in Paris and admires her, “even resents her a little, for having moved to another country and made a separate life. He realizes that this is what their parents had done in America. What he, in all likelihood, will never do” (233). Moushumi, on the other hand, also thinks that the one thing about her parents’ lives that she truly admires is their ability to turn their back on their homes and their beloved ones and start anew in a totally different culture. Yet, she dreads becoming like her mother, a woman who has never worked, who was married off at twenty-two and has ever since been totally dependent on her husband. On their last day in France, she confesses to her husband she wishes she had never left Paris, and suggests they move here together one day. But Gogol does not feel a connection with French culture or with Paris; he is a tourist and does not empathize much deeper than that. In contrast, Moushumi feels at home and does not let him take her photo in a café, afraid that Parisians might mistake her for a tourist.

Back in New York, they attend a dinner party held by some of Moushumi’s closest friends, a crowd Gogol does not really like or has much in common with. Her friend Donald proves Gogol does not know his wife as well as he thought. Donald asks when they are going to move to Brooklyn, telling him Moushumi loves the area whereas Gogol is convinced she prefers Manhattan, like he does. Apart from the Bengaliness, it seems more and more obvious that they

do not share many other things. For Moushumi, “the familiarity that had once drawn her to him has begun to keep her at bay” (250). He represents an identity she thought she wanted at one point, but now realizes does not really suit her. In fact, she starts to associate Gogol with the very life she had resisted, showing that a quasi-arranged marriage does not work out for the second generation. She comes to understand that he was not who she saw herself ending up with, and he had never been that person. “Perhaps for those very reasons, in those early months, being with him, falling in love with him, doing precisely what had been expected of her for her entire life, had felt forbidden, wildly transgressive, a breach of her own instinctive will” (250). Particularly the last part of this phrase hints again at an almost incestuous relationship: the two are like family, and this brings them together but in the end tears them apart.

Hence, on their first anniversary dinner she does not like the place (although her yuppie friends had recommended it, the restaurant is hard to find and unimaginatively decorated) or the food (over-priced and served in tiny portions), and leaves still hungry (symbolizing he can no longer satisfy her). At one point she looks at his plate and even feels slightly repulsed by his dish, wishing he would finish sooner so she could light a cigarette. What is more, the shawl he had given her drops to the floor. The whole scene evokes the falseness and fragility of a marriage approaching its end.

Soon after, Moushumi starts an affair with a former crush of hers from high school. Dimitri Desjardins has a multicultural name: his first name is Russian and reminds us of the tormented brother in Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, while his surname sounds French. He is the opposite of her husband: unemployed, living off an inheritance from his grandmother, not considering getting married although he is thirty-nine. He spends his days cooking, reading, and listening to classical music. They always meet at his bohemian apartment and she loves the fact that on these days, during those hours, no one knows where she is. Moushumi transgresses all norms and, during this affair, she wonders if she is the first woman in her family to have betrayed her husband. Ironically, Gogol finds out about her infidelity on a train while they are traveling to spend Christmas with Ashima and Sonia.

A few months after their divorce he learns that she is moving back to Paris. Interestingly, Tamara Bhalla claims that Moushumi is defined by a choice between brown and white men, “the former representing oppression and the latter rescue from that oppression” (2012: 117). After her American fiancé, Graham, leaves her before the wedding, she seeks comfort in a relationship

with a fellow Indian-American, only to cheat on him with a white man. She is thus 'rescued' by a white man from the expectations of a brown man, echoing Gayatri Spivak's famous words. Hence, Bhalla concludes that Lahiri's novel subtly "reinscribes reductive and gendered Orientalist paradigms" (2012: 117). Yet this affair only represents one step in her liberation, and she eventually moves to Paris alone, rejecting once again any familial expectations to pass down her Indianness through generations. I think her body is her own, and she radically refuses to be a mere bearer of Indian culture, like her mother had been throughout her life in America. She is a global citizen in a 'world without borders', not tied down to a place by any man or any roots.

The shared Bengali-American identity which they needed to explore at one point proves too restrictive in the end; both Gogol and Moushumi need to assert their individuality and transcend ethnic obligations. But Gogol, who had rebelled against his family and heritage by changing his name, realizes that his ties are too strong and impossible to cut for good. So unlike his former wife, he travels to Europe but comes back to the United States. After having temporarily functioned as "cultural correctives for one another, remedying not only their heartbreak, but also feelings of ethnic alienation" (Bhalla 2012: 116), their relationship eventually falls apart because it was based on a false sense of authenticity. For second-generation Indian-Americans, shared experiences and ancestry are not enough anymore. Thus, Lahiri offers a rewriting of the trope of 'happy arranged marriage', and refuses to foreground intraracial romance as the perfect solution to ethnic dilemmas.

After trying to match different, separate sides of his identity with the women he is romantically involved with, Gogol is single at the end of the novel. Has he finally found his self? Is he eventually 'whole' on his own? The third path opening up for him, namely encompassing all dimensions of his identity without being in a sentimental relationship, seems to suggest that the answer to these questions is yes.

Gogol's Journey from Hybrid to Transnational Character

Two major moments in Gogol's life mark his dramatic transformation. The first is when he hears the story that has led to his naming. He is stunned by Ashoke's confession, looks at his father as if he were a complete stranger, a man whose past he does not really know. He tries to imagine life without his father, a world in which he does not exist, but is not able to until his father's

death actually does occur. This is the second huge shock Gogol suffers, one that ultimately makes him put together all the pieces of his identity and harmonize past, present, and future.

On a train to New York he inevitably links his father's life and death with his own life and name. Gogol thinks of that other train that had nearly killed his father, "of the disaster that has given him his name" (185), and of the significance this name had for Ashoke. He probably also grasps the consequences his name change must have had on his father, and all of these thoughts trigger a mitigation with his cultural hybridity. Gogol now remembers the cold Sunday afternoons when his family would drive to the sea. Once they went as far East as Cape Cod and "he and his father walked to the very tip, across the breakwater, a string of giant gray slanted stones, and then on the narrow, final inward crescent of sand" (185). His mother waited with Sonia, while he literally walked in his father's footsteps until they reached the lighthouse. Gogol's legs were aching and they were dangerously surrounded by water on three sides but incredibly satisfied to have made it. He recalls Ashoke telling him to keep this day in mind for ever: "Remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go" (187). With Ashima he had taken the journey of migration from India to the United States, with his son he walked to the easternmost point of the state of Massachusetts. Although he will probably never move to a new country, Gogol has learned from his father that one should be brave enough to explore new territories, to travel until there is nowhere left to go. Metaphorically, Ashoke was urging his son to test his limits, push any boundary, and explore the plurality of his identity.

Gogol is the one who flies to Cleveland to identify his father's body. Maxine offers to go with him, but he does not want to be accompanied by someone who barely knew his father. In the waiting room Gogol thinks that only twenty-four hours earlier he was having dinner with Maxine at a fancy, bustling restaurant in Chinatown, feasting on delicious and expensive foods, while his father was already dead in this hospital. He takes Ashoke's belongings, and arranges to have the ashes sent to Pemberton Road. The task of emptying the rented apartment leaves him exhausted, his father's presence still contained in all the objects he had used. Ashima had told him to bring nothing back, so he keeps only the wallet and a photograph of the family in front of the Indian landmark Fatehpur Sikri. He spends the long, painful night in the apartment, despite Maxine's advice to go to a hotel. Although he "is accustomed to obeying her, to taking her advice" (177) he does not want to check into an anonymous room, but stays in the space that his

father has inhabited for the last months of his life. He understands the guilt that his parents carried inside at being able to do nothing when their parents had died in India, and blames himself for not having kept in touch more often.

Not only does he understand, but he also feels the need to respect all the stages in the Indian mourning rituals. Thus, he shaves his hair, a Bengali son's duty when a parent dies, and identifies with his father who had done the same when his father passed away. Gogol stays with Sonia and Ashima during the entire mourning period, and when Maxine drives up from New York to bring some of his things, he does not care anymore how his modest parental house might look to her. Throughout the ceremony she feels useless and excluded in the house full of Bengalis, but Gogol does not bother to translate what they are saying or to introduce her to everyone. For the first time in his life, he does not want to get away from his roots and family, and feels no urge to return to New York. Instead, he parts with the American woman who is unable to relate to his culture.

A year after Ashoke's death, Gogol returns to the house on Pemberton Road almost every weekend. His father's photograph, hanging on a wall in the upstairs hallway, draws him back again and again. One day, as he glances at his father's smiling face in the picture he realizes that this is the closest thing Ashoke has to a grave. The house is both a symbol of Ashoke's stable life and identity in America, and the place where he lives on after death. It is intriguing that, although Ashoke's remains have not been buried but burned, Gogol associates the house with a sanctuary for his father. I think it shows how important the symbol of the house is in Lahiri's work, how life and death are inextricably bound together in the sacred space of the home. Sonia, too, has moved back to the room she occupied as a little girl. She now works as an attorney in Boston, but has returned to the parental house in New England which is the *axis mundi* of the Gangulis.

When Ashima sells the house and hosts one last Christmas party there, Gogol goes to his room to clean up. Most of his things are packed already, such as essays written in high school under the name Gogol, different records and clothes that he had left behind. Among his old books he discovers *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*, his father's present for his fourteenth birthday. He opens it and finally connects this gift with his name and identity. He notices an inscription written in his father's tranquil, optimistic hand: "For Gogol Ganguli (...) The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" (288). He remembers Ashoke standing in the doorway, an arm's reach from where he is sitting now, handing him the book

without mentioning the accident he had narrowly escaped. Gogol realizes he has obstinately concentrated his efforts on changing his name, “the very first thing his father has given him” (289), on becoming a different person, and on rejecting his filiation by correcting a presumed ‘error’ his father had made. He knows now that it is impossible to prepare for all the accidents and losses one suffers, and understands such incidents have shaped him and determined who he is.

The idea of the inevitable and the irrational surfaces again, this time in Gogol’s train of thought: “Things that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endured, in the end” (287). Indeed, while Ashima is the one who gave birth to him, his father is the one who gave him his name. But, he is also the one who passed down to his son a complex cultural heritage, combining his origins with his experiences and beliefs. Ashoke is what Genna Welsh Kasun calls “the bearer of cultural maternity” (14), enabling his son to carve out his own transcultural identity. Although he rejects it brutally in the beginning, Gogol ends up accepting it years later, albeit in his father’s absence. For as long as he lived, Ashoke continued to call him by his pet name. His name has always been an open invitation to explore his uniqueness, a cultural chance provided by his father to step out of restrictive matrices such as Bengali, Indian, American, Bengali-/Indian-American. And, at the same time, his name was a vivid warning of the “absurd tragedy of mistaking yourself for your overcoat” (Caesar 2007: 118).

As he browses Nikolai Gogol’s book and skims through the biography which had terrified him as a schoolboy, Gogol continues to meditate about existential matters. Ashima, who is now moving to a different world, will call and write emails from time to time, so for a while he will still hear ‘Gogol’ over the wires and see it typed on a screen. But once she passes away too, the name Gogol Ganguli “will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all” (*Namesake* 289).

In an article entitled “My Two Lives” (2006), Lahiri envisions her own situation when her parents are no longer alive. She lives three hours away from them, and sees them about once a month. Yet everything will change once they die because “[t]hey will take certain things with them - conversations in another tongue, and perceptions about the difficulties of being foreign. Without them, the back-and-forth life my family leads, both literally and figuratively, will at last

approach stillness. An anchor will drop, and a line of connection will be severed” (2). Similarly, the ultimate erasure of her character’s pet name is no comfort to Gogol Ganguli at all. Luckily, this revelation helps him recuperate the part of his identity corresponding to the name he had once officially deleted. For the first time, Gogol wonders if he is ever going to have a child of his own to name. When he becomes an associate at the new firm he works for, his name will be incorporated, and then “Nikhil will live on, publicly celebrated, unlike Gogol, purposely hidden, legally diminished, now all but lost” (*Namesake* 290). Nevertheless he preserves a connection with the Russian writer (Nikhil/Nikolai), and with his father (Ganguli).

Ashoke felt reborn in America, and so does Gogol. He has changed his name at eighteen and now, already in his thirties, he is finally ready to put the pieces together and generate a new, all-encompassing self. This phenomenon of polygenesis is defined by Aparajita De in her PhD thesis, *Mapping Subjectivities: The Cultural Poetics of Mobility and Identity in South Asian Diasporic Literature* (2009), as “a continual self-refashioning that characterizes diasporic identity” (37). In her work, De looks at the impact of the politics of location on Gogol’s identity, and she concludes that “space becomes the medium for articulating subjectivity based on theories of national origin, gender, geography, movement and/or displacement” (38). Thus, identity is a continual birthing process unfolding in a productive inbetween space.

Gogol starts to read, knowing that the book could have disappeared from his life, like his pet name. The ‘rescued’ book closes the distance between India and the United States, between past and present, between grandfather, father, and son. Gogol/Nikhil is now comfortable with his multiple affinities, achieving a seemingly more stable, yet heterogeneous identity. Like Moushumi and Ashima, but to a different extent, what he needs is a global citizenship and a sense of transnational belonging. It is not random, then, that Nikhil means “he who is entire, encompassing all” and “sky” in Bengali at the same time.

Spaces and Places

Throughout this thesis I have shown how Jhumpa Lahiri uses houses, cities, and other spaces and places as filters for the ways in which her characters negotiate their ethnic identities. A number of cities are featured in this novel, the most important of which are Boston, Calcutta, and New York. Interestingly, all three are presented alternatively from the point of view of Ashima and

Ashoke (at home in Calcutta and foreigners in American cities), and from the perspective of Sonia and Gogol (at home in America, but uncomfortable with the foreignness of India).

Other American sites of significance in the book are: New Jersey (where Gogol and Moushumi have their wedding), Cleveland (where Ashoke finds his death), and San Francisco (where Sonia lives for a few years). The place in New Hampshire that draws the Ratliff family every year in June is also important. They have a private graveyard here, epitomizing their roots and genealogical right to the land, and paralleling at a microcosmic level the cemetery in Rhode Island visited by Gogol as a student. The Indian cities in which various plot scenes unfold are Calcutta, Alipore, and Agra (where the famous Taj Mahal is located). Several landmark European cities are also dealt with: Paris is described in detail, and Oxford, London, and Venice are briefly visited.

In the first part of this chapter I have discussed at length the quiet ways in which Ashima asserts herself as a transnational character. She is born in Calcutta, but lives most of her adult life in Massachusetts. After a lifetime of homesickness, she realizes she feels at home in her house on Pemberton Road and is distressed that she has to sell it after her husband's death. Nevertheless, she deals with these emotions and decides to continue her life without a permanent residence, at home wherever her family members are. Ashoke originates from Alipore, but after immigrating to the United States he settles in the Boston area. He dies away from both these 'homes', having a heart attack in Cleveland, a city to which he has no connection except through a work contract valid for a few months. Their daughter, Sonia, is born in the United States and seems to be the most American member of the family. She goes to college in California, lives for a while in San Francisco, but after her father's death returns to Massachusetts to be close to her mother. In the end she moves to Boston with her American fiancé, with whom she is going to have a Hindu wedding in Calcutta. As a child Sonia had hated their journeys back East, but now she willingly returns to her Indian roots and actively explores her heritage.

As a child and then teenager Gogol, too, had been utterly uncomfortable with his Indianness, especially during his travels to India. Born in an apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he relocates with his parents first to an unnamed university town outside Boston, then to the house on Pemberton Road where he grows up. He goes to Boston to change his name, and then moves to a dorm in New Haven as a freshman at Yale. This is the first space he inhabits without his parents and under a different name. He is independent now and lives in this

temporary, impersonal space as if he were unrelated to Ashima and Ashoke. Foucault argues that the dormitory (or boarding school) is an example of 'crisis heterotopia', described as "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, the elderly etc." ("Of Other Spaces" 24). Thus, Gogol starts his sex life in this place, chooses a different major than his parents would have liked, and generally breaks loose from them.

Still in search of a fixed identity, he believes he has found it in the Gothic architecture of the campus: "He likes its oldness, its persistent grace. He likes that so many students have occupied it before him. He likes the solidity of its plaster walls, its dark wooden floorboards, however battered and stained. He likes the dormer window he sees first thing in the mornings when he opens his eyes looking at Battell Chapel" (*Namesake* 108). Resembling his father in this respect, Gogol is comfortable in the American university setting. He is convinced that the lasting beauty that surrounds him here also roots him to the environs. Strangely, he feels at home, in a way he has never felt while growing up on Pemberton Road. He is inspired to sketch these buildings for his drawing class, to learn the vocabulary that classifies them, and eventually to pursue a career in the field of architecture.

By 1994 he has graduated from the architecture program at Columbia, and has rented a small, noisy apartment in New York. It is the first place he has ever inhabited alone, without his family or a roommate. By no means a cozy place, it illustrates his yet uncertain social position in the metropolis. Hence, the entrance in the building is easy to miss, placed between a newsstand and a nail salon; the kitchen is built into an entryway, the space being so small that the refrigerator stands several feet away, over by the bathroom. Had he chosen MIT and moved back to Massachusetts, he would surely have had a better lodging. But Gogol has no intention of returning to "the one city in America his parents know" (126). He does not want to live his parents' life, to rent an apartment in Central Square and walk the same streets his parents reminisce about. His distancing is deliberate: he refuses to go home on the weekends, to join their Bengali friends at pujos, and to remain unquestionably in their world. He prefers New York precisely because it is a city his mother and father do not know, "whose beauty they are blind to, which they fear" (126) and which allows him to assert his independence and difference from them.

In Gogol and Sonia's childhood, the Gangulis once visited some Bengalis who lived in Queens. They went on a tour of Manhattan by car, past sites like Rockefeller Center, Central Park, and the Empire State Building. Extremely impressed, Gogol had ducked his head below the car's window to see how tall these edifices were. While his parents remarked that it was noisier and had heavier traffic than Calcutta, the boy was fascinated. He laughed at Sonia when she said she wanted to visit Sesame Street, and was upset they only got out of the car on Lexington Avenue, to have lunch at an Indian restaurant. He wished they had gone to the Museum of Natural History to see the dinosaurs, or simply walked through a park or ridden the subway. But they went shopping for Indian groceries instead, his parents showing no interest in exploring 'The Big Apple', feeling uneasy amidst all the cars and skyscrapers. Years later, when they drive here for Gogol's graduation from Columbia, the trunk of the car is broken into in the first five minutes and their suitcase is stolen. Thus, Ashoke has to attend the ceremony without a jacket and tie. This is another reference to Nikolai Gogol's story, where Akaky too is robbed of his overcoat in the street. Ashoke is confident and well-established in Massachusetts, but his social position seems threatened in the bigger and more cosmopolitan metropolis.

New York City is a symbolic point of arrival for Gogol, with the apartment on Amsterdam Avenue being a substitute for Ellis Island, the gate through which so many foreigners entered in America. The city remains an iconic locus for immigrants, providing a democratic space for them to negotiate their ethnic identities. Yet it is a socially layered town, where Gogol is a social 'subaltern' as proven during his relationship with Maxine Ratliff, a wealthy American woman. The Ratliffs' place is an impressive Greek Revival in Chelsea, an absolutely stunning house that the young architect admires like a tourist. He notices the "pedimented window lintels, the Doric pilasters, the bracketed entablature, the black cruciform paneled door" (130). Maxine takes him first to the kitchen, which is down a flight of stairs and seems to occupy an entire floor; it has a large farmhouse table, and French doors that lead into the garden. Ceramics are displayed on open shelves, along with hundreds of cookbooks, food encyclopedias, and other volumes about eating. Lydia Ratliff prepares meals in this kitchen, an exclusively American space, nothing like Ashima's cooking 'temple'.

Neither the modest house on Pemberton Road, nor Gogol's unappealing apartment can even come close to this splendid house, clearly evoking the class difference between them. In postcolonial narratives, houses have status symbol and they show the achievements of immigrant

subjects. Gogol's parents live on a street where American families live, so they have probably achieved the maximum a diasporic individual can achieve. Indeed, Gogol notes that the Ratliffs' house has two immense rooms per floor, each of which is larger than his own apartment. He adores the plaster cove moldings, the ceiling medallions, and the marble mantelpieces, things he has learned about but has never seen in any of the residences he and his family have inhabited. He is impressed by the walls which are painted in flamboyant colors and are crowded with clusters of paintings, drawings and photographs. He is dazzled by the shelves ascending to the ceiling, crammed with novels, monographs of numerous artists, and all the architecture books Gogol has ever coveted. The top floor is Maxine's space, filled with shoes and clothes scattered across the floor of her gray sitting room or piled on a couch. But to Gogol these elements of disorder make no difference: "it is a house too spectacular to suffer distraction, forgiving of oversight and mess" (132).

Maxine has grown up in this house and cannot really imagine living anywhere else, while Gogol cannot picture going back to live with his own parents. Maxine does not like his small apartment, so she seldom visits; when she does come over, she quickly fills up the small space with her perfume and her things. She eventually declares his place is awful and adds she will not let him live there any longer. He is thrilled to officially move in with her and her parents, but takes only a few bags of clothes and continues to pay rent for his apartment. He is equally captivated by his girlfriend, her parents, and the amazing house they own. When Lydia and Gerald are off to their lake house in New Hampshire, "an unquestioned ritual, a yearly migration to the town where Gerald's parents live year-round" (141), Gogol and Max have the house in Chelsea to themselves. Living alone with her for the first time, he feels dependence, not adulthood: "He feels free of expectation, of responsibility, in willing exile from his own life. He is responsible for nothing in the house; in spite of their absence, Gerald and Lydia continue to lord, however blindly, over their days" (142).

He reads their books and listens to their music, takes down their telephone messages, and sleeps in their daughter's bed. He is responsible for nothing in their house and feels grateful to them for the luxurious living conditions and the opportunities of assimilation they provide. Yet despite its beauty, the house has certain faults he only now notices: it lacks air-conditioning and the enormous windows do not have any screens, so it becomes unbearably hot during the summer months. They have to leave the windows open at night, so they are invaded by

mosquitos which always bother him and leave Maxine unbiten. These small, inauspicious elements from the otherwise breath-taking house foretell problems in their relationship as well.

Gogol is also in love with the Ratliffs' lake house in New Hampshire; he admires the landscape and adores the intimacy it provides. It is close to the border with Canada, the farthest North Gogol has ever been. The house is located in a clearing, in the middle of a forest, with the mountains rising up behind them, and the lake "a blue a thousand times deeper, more brilliant, than the sky and girded by pines" (151). Gerald says "Welcome to paradise" (152) and Gogol concludes that the Ratliffs "own the moon that floats over the lake, and the sun and the clouds" (155). These celestial symbols illustrate how rich this family is and how they can grant his boldest wishes. The house is not like their New York residence though: it is dark, musty, and full of mismatched furniture. On the walls they have framed butterflies, as well as photographs of the family taken here over the years. Gogol and Maxine sleep in a small, unheated cabin which was built for Max to play as a little girl and is scarcely furnished, making them feel as if being at camp. Gogol, however, has never been to camp, and although he is only three hours away from his parental house, this is an unknown world to him, a kind of holiday he has never experienced.

The Gangulis' vacations in Calcutta are nothing like the yearly 'migration' of the Ratliffs to this lake house. Although they come here to visit Gerald's parents, they travel for relaxation purposes more than out of duty, taking with them exquisite food and cases of wine, as well as books and games. Their preparations for departure remind Gogol of his parents packing for Calcutta every few years, when they would crowd the living room with suitcases, fitting in as many gifts as possible for their relatives. The main difference is that Ashoke "was always anxious about the job of transporting the four of them such a great distance. Gogol was aware of an obligation being fulfilled; that it was, above all else, a sense of duty that drew his parents back" (141-42). They take these trips so seriously because they never know how long it will be until the next visit, and loved ones might in the meantime die.

Gogol realizes in New Hampshire that his family's trips to India were never really true vacations at all, but "overwhelming, disorienting expeditions, either going to Calcutta, or sightseeing in places they did not belong to and intended never to see again" (155). Even when they went on road trips with other Bengali families to Toronto, Atlanta or Chicago, they rented vans and consulted maps like foreigners do. They stayed in low-priced motels, whole families

sleeping in a single room. Their relative economic success does not automatically entail full assimilation, nor does it grant them the advantages of owning a summer residence.

So Gogol thoroughly enjoys swimming naked in the lake with Maxine, walking barefoot about the Ratliffs' property, or running around the lake with Gerald, stopping to catch their breath near the private family graveyard where Maxine and her parents will undoubtedly be buried one day. Most of all, he enjoys being cut off from his parents' world, and loves the idea of returning year after year to the same place that is not Calcutta and does not involve the anxiety of traveling so far. He thinks his parents would feel lonely in this setting and would surely remark they are the only Indians, still obsessed with their ethnic difference, still longing for their homeland.

Gogol, on the other hand, does not miss India or his relatives over there at all. In fact, despite the numerous journeys to Calcutta, he never could get any sense of direction in the major Indian city. Unlike his mother, wandering freely the familiar streets of her home town, he prefers to stay inside lest he should get lost. When he tries to go jogging, he is deterred by the "cracked, congested, chock-a-block streets" (83). During a taxi ride he notices the crumbling buildings, and people riding on the stairs of trams and buses. He and Sonia are scared and uncomfortable throughout the eight months they have to spend there one year, feeling lost like their parents when they visit New York. Gogol hates how they shuttle from home to home, how they never really have a space of their own while in India.

When the family travels to New Delhi and Agra, they leave from Howrah, described as an "immense, soaring, echoing station, where barefoot coolies in red cotton shirts pile the Gangulis' Samsonite luggage on their heads, where entire families sleep, covered, in rows on the floor" (84). From the train, the scenery looks gloomy and gray, but once they get to Agra they wander around the marble mausoleum and are fascinated by its glowing tones of yellow, pink, and orange depending on the light. For two days they are all tourists, since even Ashoke and Ashima are unfamiliar with the famous site. They admire the perfect symmetry of the Taj Mahal and pose for photographs beneath the minarets from which they find out that tourists used to leap to their deaths. They learn that after the building was finished, each of the twenty-two thousand men who contributed had their thumbs cut off so that they could never replicate the structure. Gogol and Sonia are terrified by this cruel legend; the girl has repeated nightmares, and her elder

brother is haunted by this story and unable to sketch the dome and a portion of the façade. Despite his efforts, “the building’s grace eludes him and he throws the attempt away” (85).

Yet, no other building he has seen affected him so powerfully, so he starts studying the history of Mughal architecture and memorizing the names of the emperors. Like Raj from “Interpreter of Maladies”, Gogol immerses himself in a guidebook in English to find out about India’s history and culture. Both characters (Raj and Gogol) are born in the United States and need an ‘American’ filter to mediate their firsthand experience of India. In fact, the whole trip reminds readers of the aforementioned story, with Agra described as an unknown and inauspicious territory. The Gangulis then visit Agra Fort, an emperor’s tomb in Sikandra, with gilded frescoes that have been chipped, ransacked, burned, and the gems gouged out with penknives. At Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar’s abandoned sandstone city, they wander among courtyards and cloisters as parrots and hawks fly menacingly overhead. All of these ill omens eventually materialize in the sickness of the two American-born children.

Therefore, Gogol obviously prefers the lifestyle and the type of family relationship that the Ratliffs have. They adopt him without too many questions, without invading his private space. Maxine tells him the New Hampshire property is her favorite place in the world; it is where her roots are firmly planted and he understands that this landscape, this particular lake in which she first learned to swim, represent an essential part of her, even more important to her evolution than the house in Chelsea. Her past, present, and future are here. It is here that she has grown up, here that she comes every summer to relax, here that she will bring her own children, and eventually she will be buried in the small graveyard here, next to whole generations of her family. This is the second instance in the book when Lahiri uses the metaphor of the cemetery in order to show belonging or, on the contrary, lack of belonging to a place. Gogol can picture all these stages in Maxine’s life clearly, knowing that she and her family will never stray too far from this place.

On the other hand, as he discovered long ago while studying the stones in the cemetery from Rhode Island, he does not have any roots in the United States, nor will he be buried in any of these graveyards. He is a tourist in Maxine’s houses/world, a foreigner who feels good in New Hampshire and enjoys life in New York City, but neither represents his ‘home’. Luckily, for second generation characters like Gogol and Moushumi, a ‘third space’ opens up generously,

allowing them to go beyond their initial state of hybridity and explore different ‘soils’ where they might want to grow roots.

Immediately after his father’s death, Gogol gets over the fascination with the houses possessed by the affluent Ratliff family and sees the unrelenting differences between him and Maxine. They split and he marries fellow Indian-American Moushumi; together they buy a one-bedroom apartment in the Twenties, off Third Avenue. It is quite a small place, “but luxurious, with built-in mahogany bookcases rising to the ceiling and dark, oily, wide-planked floors. There is a living room with a skylight, a kitchen with expensive stainless-steel appliances, a bathroom with marble floor and walls” (*Namesake* 228). The bedroom has a Juliet balcony, and if one leans far enough outside the bathroom window it is possible to see the Empire State Building.

The couple shops at the farmers’ market in Union Square and sometimes goes to a restaurant in Queens to eat Indian food. Lahiri hints here at immigrants from the lower social classes who come to the U.S. and work in basements or kitchens, as opposed to the Indians who usually form her cast of characters and who belong to a diasporic middle class. Western consumerist society is based on working class migrants, whereas Lahiri’s immigrants have become consumers themselves, belonging to the academic group of immigrants. Gogol and Moushumi invite their families over for Thanksgiving, entertaining them on this American holiday in their posh American flat. The writer plays with the dichotomy of high and low class, distinguishing between native-born Americans (such as the Ratliffs) and immigrants (the Gangulis), but also between groups of immigrants themselves. Representatives of the diaspora all feel ‘unhomely’, but to different extents, echoing Bhabha’s statement in *The Location of Culture* that the ‘unhomely’ “has a resonance that can be heard distinctly in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites” (1994: 9).

While Moushumi is in Palm Springs for a conference, Gogol goes to his office in midtown to finish working on a project. Afterwards he stops at an Egyptian restaurant to get a falafel, and walks south as he eats, towards the Flatiron and lower Fifth Avenue. He strolls the streets like a New Yorker, noticing that the sidewalks are crammed with shoppers. He sees “the twin towers of the World Trade Center looming in the distance, sparkling at the island’s end” (*Namesake* 271). New York is a vertical city, famous for its tall buildings representing fantasies of opportunity and upward mobility. But the twin towers have crumbled, and this catastrophe can epitomize Gogol’s thwarted dreams of a successful career and a happy marriage.

He is not looking forward to Christmas; he and his wife are going to Pemberton Road this year. He does not know what to get Moushumi, so he wanders absently from store to store, but nothing catches his eye in the maze of stalls in Union Square that sell candles, shawls, and handmade jewelry. This description reminds readers of the crowded streets in Calcutta, populated by vendors fretting to sell their merchandise. Gogol next goes into the Barnes and Noble at the northern edge of the square and buys a travel guide for Italy, a country whose architecture he had studied so thoroughly as a student, but has never visited. It strikes him that a trip together, to a place neither of them has been to, might be what he and Moushumi need. Unlike the trip to Paris, he could plan this one himself, deciding what cities to visit and what hotels to book.

Excited by the thought and anxious to see her, he crosses the park toward their apartment and stops off at a gourmet grocery on Irving Place to buy some things she likes, anticipating she will return hungry from Palm Springs. His trajectory on a map goes south/down, but when he looks up, the sky is dark, “the clouds a deep, beautiful gold”, and he is

momentarily stopped by a flock of pigeons flying dangerously close. Suddenly terrified, he ducks his head, feeling foolish afterward. None of the other pedestrians had reacted. He stops and watches as the birds shoot up, then land simultaneously on two neighboring bare-branched trees. He is unsettled by the sight. He has seen these graceless birds on windowsills and sidewalks, but never in trees. It looks almost unnatural. And yet what could be more ordinary? (272)

He thinks of the pigeons in San Marco Square he is soon going to visit with Moushumi, but as the birds seem to have predicted he will end up taking the journey to Venice alone. On the train to Massachusetts for Christmas, Moushumi slips about her infidelity. So he goes to Venice on his own for a week, “saturating himself in its ancient, melancholy beauty” (283). He loses himself in the dark, narrow streets, crosses countless bridges, sits in squares and draws palaces and churches, “unable ever to retrace his steps” (283). Wandering aimlessly as a tourist in an unknown city enables him to come to terms with events in his life before going back to the United States.

After the divorce Moushumi moves to Paris, showing that in today’s world America is not the endpoint of an immigrant’s journey anymore. She was born in London, then taken across the Atlantic by her parents who lived first in Massachusetts, and later moved to New Jersey. She relocated to Paris after college, returned to the United States for two failed relationships (one with an American, one with a fellow Indian-American), before finally settling in France. She

breaks off with Gogol completely, radically, not wanting anything from their life together. So, like he had done with his father's things, he has to remove her possessions from the apartment, putting her books into boxes on the sidewalk for people to take and throwing out the rest. The apartment is now all his, the first property he actually owns, but there are nights when he falls asleep on the sofa like a mere visitor. Their marriage has failed as if it were a building he had been responsible for designing and which collapsed for all to see. Yet it was a mistake they both made, namely that of seeking comfort in "their shared world, perhaps for the sake of novelty, or out of the fear that that world was slowly dying" (284).

The most pivotal house for Gogol's development remains the property on 67 Pemberton Road. His earliest memories are of playing in the dirt-covered yard of their newly-acquired household. He recalls the warm day when the topsoil was poured, and a few weeks later, coming out of the house one morning and seeing the first blades of grass emerge from their lawn. This represents concomitantly a rooting for Gogol and a re-rooting for his mother and father. In this house he has the first room of his own, filled with Tinkertoys, Lincoln Logs, and other games bought from yard sales. Gogol grows up in this space, living his teens to the beats of The Beatles, refusing to read Nikolai Gogol's book which he receives from his father in this very room. When they return from trips to Calcutta, the modest house seems gigantic to him and he finds pleasure in retreating to the privacy of his room.

Years later, after his father's death and Ashima's decision to sell the house, he has the task of emptying his childhood's room and of tossing away every last scrap. It saddens him that the house will be occupied by strangers who will gradually redecorate it and erase any trace that they were ever there. Gogol contemplates that there will be nothing "left to signify the years his family has lived here, no evidence of the effort, the achievement it had been" (281). Like the narrator from "The Third and Final Continent", Gogol acknowledges the merits of the immigrant generation his parents belong to, praising the bravery it takes to succeed in a different country. For months he will be separated from his mother, without having the possibility of catching a train and coming to see her. He understands the trauma his parents have gone through when they left their own parents thousands of miles behind, seeing them so seldom and living in a perpetual state of longing. While he has spent years maintaining distance from his origins, his parents were struggling to bridge that distance as best they could. "And yet, for all his aloofness toward his family in the past, his years in college and then in New York, he has always hovered to this

quiet, ordinary town that had remained, for his mother and father, stubbornly exotic” (281). Without this house, he has absolutely no roots in America, no home to return to. With his father dead, Ashima gone, and Sonia married in Boston, he is free of permanent roots, no longer a four-hour train ride away from ‘home’.

Ironically, he thinks of these things while stepping off a train that brings him to his parental house one last time. Keenly aware that no more journeys like this will follow, is Gogol also freed of the constant cultural negotiations? His parents’ generation achieved an extraordinary success by transplanting themselves in a new soil. Gogol’s generation is admirable because it gives up on the need for firm roots and travels globally, uncovering unlimited opportunities. Lahiri’s short stories and novel celebrate these contemporary journeys, showing that concepts like national belonging tend to be less fixed in our times. Consequently, ethnicity appears less relevant in this transnational world in which everyone is liable to be displaced. Therefore, the negative prefix ‘dis-’ no longer bears the negative and violent connotation it used to.

At peace with these changes and new realities, Gogol reunites with his family to spend one last Christmas on Pemberton Road. Together with Sonia he assembles the artificial tree they have had for decades, and adorns it with ornaments they made in elementary school. Gogol knows now that for his and Sonia’s sake their parents had gone to the trouble of appropriating Western customs. Interestingly, despite their efforts, Christmas “has always felt adopted to him, an accident of circumstance, a celebration not really meant to be” (286). Had they stayed on the other side of the world, they would not have celebrated the 25th of December. When they are finished decorating, Ashima reminds her children of some awful colored lights they used to put on the fir tree. Then she comments half-jokingly that she did not know a thing back then, showing that what was at first her son’s whim now is a tradition she actually relates to, illustrating Ashima’s Americanness and her evolution towards achieving it.

Picking up the rare edition of Nikolai Gogol’s short stories, Gogol shuts the door to his room and starts to read, disregarding the farewell party that is going on downstairs. He imagines Ashima coming to his room, summoning him to put the book aside and join the party, unaware, like he has been, that Ashoke “dwells discreetly, silently, patiently” (290) within the book’s pages. Gogol’s journey towards self-definition, gone through different stages including that of self-naming, ends up in his childhood room, in the first house he has memories of. He is now

ready to embrace his plural affiliations and to act towards changing his life. Although living alone, he keeps tighter relations with what is left of his family. He is not a passive character anymore but one who has consciously rounded up his development. At thirty-two he is already married and divorced, and his time with Moushumi is already put behind him. Having closed this chapter of his life, Gogol changes his job as well and moves to a smaller firm where he has the opportunity to be more creative and innovative. By implication the protagonist is now ready to build his identity outside the constraints of ethnicity (name) and relationship status.

In addition to the houses in which he has lived with his parents, Gogol has had three lodgings in New York. From the first room of his own on Pemberton Road, through the houses owned by the Ratliffs, to the apartment off Third Avenue in New York, Gogol Ganguli has evolved in many ways. His identity quest is illustrated by the spaces he inhabits, but also by his profession. In fact, as an architect, he is now doing what he has always wanted: producing his own designs, combining his talent for drawing with his passion for buildings and his search for roots and fixity. Eventually he understands identity is perpetually in transition and under construction, and he becomes the architect of his own fate.

The Film: An Indian-American Tale of Two Cities

With the same task in mind, namely showing that spaces and places are crucial for identity formation processes, I will now look at Mira Nair's filmic adaptation of *The Namesake* (2007). While trying to avoid falling in the traps of merely comparing the two texts or of implying that one is richer or 'better' than the other, I will concentrate my analysis on the visual, aural, and verbal signifiers that point to the importance of two cities in Nair's work. During this analysis I will keep in mind Thomas Leitch's warning that fidelity of the film to its source text is "unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense" (161), and focus on its originality as a valuable intertext, generating additional meanings.

Mira Nair, the Indian-born director of *The Namesake* (2007), was educated at Delhi University before attending Harvard. Several documentaries paved the way for her remarkable debut film *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), nominated for an Academy Award and a Golden Globe. Her filmography includes *Mississippi Massala* (1991), starring Denzel Washington, *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1996), *Monsoon Wedding* (2000), and *Vanity Fair* (2004) with Reese Witherspoon. More recently she directed *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012), a film based on the bestseller

with the same title, written by Mohsin Hamid. Although she makes a short cameo in *The Namesake* as Jhumpa ‘Mashi’, Lahiri has declared that she enjoyed relinquishing all control to the film’s director: “I had seen her other work and I knew that she was smart and interesting. There was a sense of, ‘This person has a vision, this person knows what she wants to say’. It was an alternative universe and I conceived of it as something that was her thing. It was her *Namesake*” (Chotiner 4).

Nair’s *Namesake* opens with a shot of Ashoke’s trunk being carried by a coolie in a crowded Indian train station. The first scene is set in India, and the spectator is given a prequel on Ashoke’s train accident before being introduced to Ashima (the shot in which she ‘approximates’ her favorite Indian dish in her American kitchen is included much later). We get the dialogue with Ghosh who urges Ashoke (played by Indian actor Irrfan Khan who also featured in *Salaam Bombay!*) to leave his homeland and “conquer the world” (which he reduces to England and America). The film, therefore, follows a chronological line, starting with Ashoke’s accident in India and not with Ashima’s pregnancy in Massachusetts. The first scene ends with a shocking image of Ashoke’s body flying through the air and, after the opening credits, we see him recovering in bed. I think it is telling that Nair plunges the spectator straight into an Indian space: the train station is an indication that her focus will be more on the first generation of immigrants (Ashoke and Ashima) and on their diasporic journey. Indeed, this dramatic train ride has triggered the young Indian man’s choice to get away from a potentially lethal homeland and be reborn in a new country where he will constantly have to translate between cultures.

Both Lahiri and Nair are bilingual and translated individuals themselves, so the titles run first in Bengali calligraphy, before melting into Latin characters. Throughout the film, explanations and clarifications are provided through various translation and transliteration strategies for international audiences. For example, cold and alone in an American house soon after her arrival in the United States, Ashima writes a letter to her family in Bengali, while the voice-over reads in English.

Ashima (played by the highly-celebrated Bollywood actress Tabu) first appears in the film during a singing lesson, although in the novel there is no reference to an interest in music on her behalf. She is presented in the movie as a professional singer of Indian classical music (perhaps to emphasize her links with Indianness), and in the end she returns to the homeland to

resume her sitar-playing and singing. When Ashima comes home from her lesson she passes through a crowd demonstrating in the streets of Calcutta in 1977, probably in support of the Left Front because the billboards carried by the protesters have slogans like “Down with Fascism”, written both in Hindi and in English. The scene has little bearing on the plot; however, it indicates from the onset that Nair has subtly advanced the timeline by almost ten years, to a troubled political period in India’s history after Indira Ghandi’s arrest in March 1977. This is another clue that her focus is more on India and on the first generation. By displacing the timeframe of the narrative (the plot of the novel unfolds between 1967 and 2000, whereas that of the film covers the time span from 1977 to 2004), she also disrupts the “primacy of the nation in the representation of the film’s cultural and social milieu” (Brennan 3). Nair looks at a historical period which overlaps for a while with that of the novel but which is twelve years away from the 1965 immigration wave.

What is more, a spatial shift accompanies the temporal one. The novel places the Ganguli couple in the suburbs of Boston, enjoying a peaceful middle-class existence in a university environment, whereas Nair relocates them in metropolitan New York City. Queens itself, the new locus where the life of the Ganguli family unfolds in the film, hosts a large part of the South Asian diaspora and is considered the center of Indian-American cultural and social life, so the director’s choice is deliberate. According to Sue Brennan, Nair aims by this relocation from the suburbs of Boston to the borough of Queens to anchor the story of the Gangulis “in a larger community narrative around migration, home, and the development of one of the most extensive immigrant networks in the nation” (12-3). Interestingly, this is the first film the famous director has shot in New York, the city where she actually lives. While Jhumpa Lahiri focuses on the Gangulis’ assimilation into the nation and on the gendered nature of the ‘model minority myth’, Nair sets their tale in the iconic ‘city of immigrants’ and emphasizes the ‘silent’ part immigrant groups play in sustaining the vitality of the city and nation. By featuring Queensboro Bridge and its traffic to and from Queens, she hints at the ways in which immigrant groups traditionally based in the boroughs come to Manhattan and bring their contribution to its vibrancy.

Written and consumed in the aftermath of September 11, Lahiri’s novel “makes claims on South Asian American identity at the height of the nation’s xenophobic, racist backlash against visible minorities from South Asian and the Middle East [and] works from familiar models of national belonging and assimilation as a way to challenge the nation’s discourses of exclusion”

(Brennan 3). Nair's film, on the other hand, offers "a point of view suspicious of the sense of security and upward mobility promised by integration into the nation" (Brennan 4), by playing with multiple temporalities and spatial representations and by concentrating on the story of Ashima and Ashoke, representing the first generation of Indian immigrants.

In the novel, Lahiri often juxtaposes images of places from India with images of places from the United States, aiming to show the distance that separates the two countries and the homesickness of her immigrant characters. In *Mount Auburn Hospital*, about to give birth, Ashima visualizes the familiar space of her home on Amherst Street in Calcutta, before taking notice of the physical space visible from the window (namely the Charles River and Memorial Drive). In the film, Mira Nair superimposes images of the Triboro and Queensboro Bridges in New York to those of Howrah Bridge in Calcutta, but her aim is different. She is creating a visual and spatial continuity and thus proving that American and Indian cities are comparable in terms of infrastructure, urban planning, and even skyline. As Carmen Concilio has noticed, the two bridges "look similar as products of the modernist technical and urban dreams" (110). For instance, in one scene we see Ashima looking at Triboro Bridge from the window of her house. Next, we see a close-up of her looking at Queensboro Bridge out the window of the hospital, followed by images of the massive steel of the Howrah Bridge and of a Hindu deity (which appears in several scenes) being carried in a cart. Howrah Bridge, one of the busiest bridges in the world, linking Calcutta to Howrah, is paired with the bridges leading in and out of Manhattan. These frequent juxtapositions accurately reflect the fact that the diasporic individual is living between worlds, but at the same time they also bring Calcutta 'closer'. Nair has confirmed and clarified this idea by stating that, as an Indian immigrant, "[y]ou look outside your window and one day, instead of the Hudson River, you see the Ganges. I wanted the film to have this see-saw between cultures, a seamless see-saw" (qtd. in Cabaret 341). Having literally walked both the streets of Calcutta and New York countless times, the director manages to merge these two mirroring geographical spaces and cultures, and the bridge becomes an extremely powerful symbol of the ties between the two cities.

Queensboro Bridge is particularly significant since it links midtown Manhattan to Queens and it serves to "dismantle the temporal logic of racial othering that excluded South Asian subjects from the nation after 9/11" (Brennan 13). As I have mentioned above, in the film the recurrent screenshot of the bridge replaces the iconic image of the lower Manhattan skyline

(made famous by the grandiose presence of the Twin Towers), and it constitutes itself as a reminder of the role immigrant communities living in Queens have played in the development of New York City. The Twin Towers, “phallogocentric symbol of Western economic and cultural power” (Suarez qtd. in Brennan 13), are not recreated digitally in the movie. Instead, Nair insists on the iconic image of Queensboro Bridge in an alternative skyline in order to make viewers imagine the city as a site of transition and flow between various spaces and groups of people. Furthermore, in 2002, Mira Nair took part in a collective cinematographic project about the events of September 11th. Her 11-minute video is about the disorientation of a Muslim Indian-American family living in New York at the time of the attacks, whose son does not come home on that day. He is tragically found in the debris of the World Trade Center and declared a national American hero for having rescued other people trapped in the crumbling buildings. But the family has to undergo repeated interrogations and neighbor suspicion before their son is actually found, pointing to American hostility towards ‘aliens’ in the post-9/11 world. Although in *The Namesake* there is no direct reference to these events, Nair’s *11 September* film might be considered an intertext for her own filmic version of Lahiri’s novel. Indeed, by relocating the whole Ganguli family to New York, she brings them into the same space where the terrible attacks took place. And by inserting repeated shots of bridges she hints at connections and cultural exchanges that should be preserved, not cut off.

The movie’s poster features Gogol (portrayed by Kal Penn, actor born in America to Indian parents) walking alone. His parents are in the background, with Ashima submissively leaning her head against her husband’s shoulder. The title is recorded in both English and Hindi, and there is a caption writing “Two worlds. One journey”. I have already analyzed the way in which bridges fuse the two worlds. But trains, metros, cars, and airports are other recurrent images in the movie, and they also aim to render ideas of journeying, migration, and transition. Mira Nair herself attests in the companion book to the film that trains and metros constitute another link between the two apparently antithetic cities: “Below and above ground, both cities are stitched by rails; the tram tracks of Calcutta, the elevated trains of New York, the subways of both. (...) I would shoot these two cities as if they were one” (2006: 19). Ashoke tells Gogol the story of his accident and utters the words “Every day since then has been a gift” in the car, in the scene right before his actual death. Thus, in the American car there is a flashback to the train

wreck in 1974 India, and we see images of dead bodies in an apocalyptic landscape, a white bird, and the book that saved his life.

Sue Brennan asserts that the filmic representation of the train derailment “stages the iconography of 9/11 in the chaos and destruction produced by the clash” (1). The first scene, with Ashoke’s body flying through the air, alludes to the bodies falling from the Twin Towers, whereas the flashback showing charred bodies and a smoky atmosphere evokes the images of Ground Zero. Therefore, by “[p]lacing Ashoke at the center of this mimetic gesture, Nair identifies 9/11 as a formative event in the history of South Asian American citizenship” (Brennan 2). It has often been said that the events that day ‘changed everything’ in American and world history, marking a clear dividing line between “a ‘before’ and an ‘after’” (Dudziak 3). Similarly, Mira Nair opens her film with the catastrophic derailment of a train in India as an ‘originary moment’: everything changes in Ashoke’s life *after* this moment, and his personal trauma is linked to a global tragedy, despite the profoundly different spatiotemporal contexts (another country, period, and even means of transport – train accident instead of planes crashing into the World Trade Center).

Besides being possible references to 9/11, planes and airports are used by Nair to convey the perpetual comings and goings of immigrants, always worrying about packing and carrying their suitcases across continents. Airports, then, are “the threads of the film, uniting its tapestry, covering thirty years in the Ganguli family’s life between New York and Calcutta” (Nair 2006: 20). The first one is shown when Ashima and Ashoke leave for the United States (together in the film), with relatives waving as they board. The next day in their cold Cambridge apartment Ashoke tells Ashima it will take her several days to recover from having flown ‘half-way across the world’. Years later we see Ashima, Ashoke and Gogol in another airport, reluctant to return to India for the funeral of Ashima’s father. The daughter’s unwillingness to go back for such a painful event is shown by her slow movement towards the gates. Little Gogol focuses on the holographic photos from all over the world lining the hallway, and then stops at a board listing the arrivals (where ‘Delhi’ is misspelled ‘Dehli’, probably unintentionally). Another plane flies the four of them this time straight to Calcutta, when the Gangulis move there during Ashoke’s sabbatical. In a fourth airport we see Ashoke in a queue as he embarks for Cleveland. His wife is there, silently waving a symbolic good bye since it is the last time she sees him alive.

As Nair explains in the book *A Portrait of the Film* (2006), every movie she makes is fueled by photographs, and *The Namesake* is also shot in an austere photographic style. The scene in Kennedy airport was inspired by Garry Winogrand's photo book called *Arrivals and Departures* (2003), which enabled the director "to find secrets in the reflecting floors of airports, where human beings stand in endless queues linked in anonymity, like journeying lemmings" (Nair 2006: 20). In this scene then, the camera lingers on the two silent protagonists, before Ashoke advances in the queue and is gone forever.

Finally, we have Ashima and Sonia waiting in LaGuardia airport for Gogol to come home after identifying his father's body in Cleveland. They mourn his passing in the same space as the events and victims of 9/11, evoking a collective experience of loss. In conclusion, airports (neutral spaces of transition) accurately capture the constant shuttling of immigrants between 'host' and 'home' countries, but also reflect the second generation's travels within/across America.

The film's focus is definitely on Calcutta and New York, with a brief interlude in Agra and one in Oyster Bay (to where the Ratliffs' lake house is 'moved'), but without any journey to Europe. The director gives balanced representations of the two countries, with a slight preference for India in my opinion. Ashoke and Ashima take long walks in the Botanical Gardens from Calcutta, and exchange "I love yous" like the Americans. At the Taj Mahal, the two utter more romantic declarations. After the famous, clichéd postcard picture of the family in front of the monument, the camera insists on details of its architecture. These inside close-up shots manage to transpose Gogol's fascination with the masterpiece. At the same time, the spectator (unlike the reader of the novel) senses that an unprecedented emotional connection is created with his parents' homeland. As Florence Cabaret asserts, "Mira Nair's vision of a palimpsest India is much less derogatory and more harmoniously construed" (341), and viewers take in a more direct and 'lived' representation of India.

Neither country is idealized, though. Tellingly, I think, many of the 'New York' interiors, such as Moushumi's apartment and the honeymoon suite, are filmed in India to save costs. In one of the first scenes, Ashima is shown dragging a trolley bag on the empty, desolate American streets to a public launderette. There she is appalled to witness a vagrant washing his underwear and waiting almost naked for the washing machine to finish. Concomitantly, the camera catches images of poverty in India, with children sleeping on car roofs or on the streets, "demonstrating

that both societies have the same flaws and social problems, and neither is necessarily better than the other” (Concilio 113). Mira Nair also adds a scene in which Gogol refuses to get on a rickshaw in Calcutta because he is against using another human being as a slave, while his mother (proud of her upper class position) and Sonia (probably too young to realize the implications) go on the carriage pulled by the ‘rickshawalla’. When Gogol tries to go jogging, a servant is sent after him to make sure the ‘sahib’ does not get lost in the foreign city, and they return by tramway. The opposition is evident: Americans running for fun/pleasure, Indians of the lower casts to earn their living. On the other hand, Ashima’s house on Amherst Street is big and beautiful, showing their affluent social status in India, and perhaps mirroring the Ratliffs’ residence in New York.

As I have suggested already, in terms of artistic richness and possibilities the two countries also have comparable things to offer: Ashima takes singing lessons, her father is a painter, and the Taj Mahal’s perfection inspires Gogol to become an architect. In Calcutta and the whole of West Bengal culture is worshipped, which is why Nair features Saraswati, the goddess of music and arts, in several scenes, “appearing inexplicably every now and then to bless our tale” (Nair 2006: 16). Meanwhile, New York is (in both book and film) a deeply cosmopolitan place, where Gogol and Maxine (and later on, Moushumi) go to different cultural events, parties, museums, and art galleries. In fact, Nair acknowledges the fact that she wanted “to 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” (2006: 15). However, she has been critiqued by Bakirathi Mani (*Novel/Cinema/Photo* 2012) for her upwardly-mobile version of New York City. Thus, Mani argues that this class-bound New York marginalizes most South Asians living here because they are working-class. Bringing into discussion documentaries like Vivek Bald’s *Taxi- valah/Auto-biography* (1994), and *Bangla East Side* (2004), by Fariba Alam and Sarita Khurana, Mani demonstrates that Nair’s *Namesake* romanticizes possibilities of upward class mobility and generalizes them as a common experience for all South Asian/Indian immigrants to America.

Earlier in this chapter I have shown how Lahiri uses the trope of medical and educational institutions to prove that mobility, access to public spaces, and the process of assimilation in general are gendered in the American city. Nair also implies that certain urban spaces are inaccessible to the immigrant woman. In their first months as a married couple in an American

suburb, Ashoke leaves for work one morning while Ashima stays at the window and waves, showing how entry in the city is reserved to the Indian male. Ashima is left behind, looking at the row of houses, the parallel-parked cars, and the rail tracks covered in snow. Before climbing some stairs and getting on a subway (physical symbols of his social ascension), Ashoke turns around and waves back to his wife. Years later they buy their first (and only) property in the Long Island suburbs. Ashima now has a job at the library and has learned to drive, but does so too slowly and is criticized by her husband. This is symbolic for her access to American society which is cumbersome. Later on, Ashoke is delighted to welcome his friends to 'Suburbia' and to showcase the house, proof of their gradual progress to middle-class prosperity and assimilation. Nevertheless, Ashima still wears vividly-colored saris, and remains responsible mainly for cooking and performing other household chores.

For Gogol, born and bred in New York, Manhattan apparently has few spaces he cannot enter. He buys a necklace for Maxine from Tiffany's, goes to cosmopolitan bars and galleries, and lives in a gentrified townhouse with affluent Americans. In fact, his girlfriend's parents call him 'Nick' and introduce him to their friends as "the young Indian architect who has so captured Maxine's heart". His first girlfriend, Ruth, does not appear in the movie, the focus being much more on the parents than on the son's struggle to make sense of his ABCD status. Tellingly, the film even skips the conference panel Gogol attends. On his first date with fellow Bengali-American Moushumi, she is wearing net stockings and smoking in a provocative way. Gogol asks "How did you get so sexy" and she replies simply: "Paris". Both of them embody a radically different type of attitude from their parents' generation. Raised and educated in New York, they are at ease with the metropolitan space and with the economic and cultural networks formed by the generation before them. Although they agree to an Indian wedding ceremony and to wear traditional costumes, immediately afterwards they mock a Bollywood dance in their luxury hotel room. Dressed in white hotel bathrobes, the two mimic Indian musicals by elaborate movements of their arms and bodies, causing viewers to smile.

Florence Cabaret explains this pastiche: "The fictitious nature of the second-generation's submission to Indian traditions is also hinted at thanks to the quick succession of the two scenes (ceremony and wedding night), recalling countless films staging Indian marriages as mere shows hiding other 'realities'" (338). Indeed, in the next scene, Moushumi and Gogol make love and count the money they received at the wedding, revealing the reality that American customs

prevail. But after they get home from a party thrown by her friends, Moushumi announces she has turned down an offer to teach at the Sorbonne and is going to be “a good Bengali housewife and make *samosas* every Thursday”. Nevertheless, while she is cooking alongside Ashima, she talks in French on the phone to her lover (called Pierre in the movie), so her betrayal is both personal and cultural. When she slips that she is having an affair, she tells Gogol: “Maybe it’s not enough that we’re both Bengali”, concluding that shared background does not guarantee a successful relationship for their generation.

The numerous references to death and Indian mourning/burial traditions in the novel are also included in the film. After his father’s death, Gogol cuts his hair in sign of mourning; a hip-hop song plays in the background, ensuring an interesting mixture between ancestral Indian rituals and contemporary American sounds. Ashima tells her son in Bengali he did not have to observe this tradition, but he replies, also in Bengali: “I wanted to”. After the Hindu ceremony in their American house, the next scene shows Ashima, Gogol and Sonia scattering Ashoke’s ashes in the sacred water of the Ganges. The camera insists on the boat (symbolizing transition to another world, both literally and metaphorically), the floating leaves and flowers and the burning flame that accompany the ashes. The ritual is accompanied by traditional music sung by a man in the boat. Behind them, some children are splashing and plunging into the same water, showing how life and death are part of the same cycle. Indians do not fear death, and water is both a source of life and a means to death (Concilio 115). In the background there is the huge, crowded bridge, also symbolizing crossings.

In the final scenes, Gogol finds the book and Ashima says “There are no accidents, Gogol. Baba made you find it. He’s with us”, contradicting ideas from the novel that everything is irrational in the world. The movie ends (as it began) in India, a symbolic homecoming for Ashima. Although we know she is going to return to the United States for the second half of the year, she seems happy and free in the last scene, singing and touching the sitar. So, by moving both the initial and the final scene to India, Mira Nair might be calling for a reconsideration of idealized notions of the American society. The dedication “For our parents who gave us everything” suggests, once more, her gratitude and respect for the immigrant generation. In fact, as the titles are running in Roman letters this time, we hear a Bengali song and then an English one, reinforcing the idea displayed in both novel and film, namely that of a “fruitful crosspollination of various cultures” (Cabaret 342).

Final Remarks

The filmic adaptation of *The Namesake* provides an interesting, complementary picture of the novel. Lahiri, writing not long after 9/11, focuses on the second generation and on its efforts to articulate their Indian/Bengali-American identity. Nair, on the other hand, chooses to detail the experience of the first generation. Although she does not alter Lahiri's plot, she includes more footage meant to build up a desired return to the homeland.

In this chapter I have demonstrated how several characters, in particular Ashima, Moushumi, and Gogol, evolve in different ways and, eventually, embody some very 'American' traits like striving for personal achievement, flexibility, and adaptability to change. These features shape their identities and ease their transition as transnational characters. Interestingly, the two female personages make very bold moves across borders (both physical and cultural), working towards the dissolution of these already permeable boundaries. Ashima's transition is extremely relevant since she is first translated from postcolonial to immigrant, then to American and finally to transnational citizen, perfectly mixing old and new. In fact, she becomes a transmigrant, an individual who moves freely across national frontiers. Her transnationality is constructed in "borderlands", to quote Anzaldúa's phrase, showing how identity can become "a matter of choice, not geography or inheritance" (Alfonso-Forero 2011: 128) even for a first-generation Indian woman immigrant.

Although the process of negotiating a third space is not easy for Moushumi either, this second-generation representative chooses to join a 'community of taste' (Kennedy and Roudometof). A global citizen who does not long for a homeland, she moves to a country to which she feels a strong cultural attachment. Her former husband, Gogol, develops in the course of the novel from hybrid to transnational traveler. Unlike Moushumi, however, he is drawn back to New York (his *terra firma*, the closest he has to roots and a home). Interestingly, for him this place so close to the region where he was born proves to be the place from where there is nowhere left to go. His journey is not so much a physical one, but more a metaphorical inner search for his self.

Chapter 3

Transplanted Identities in *Unaccustomed Earth*

Unaccustomed Earth (2008) is Jhumpa Lahiri's second collection of short stories. It focuses on the children of Indian immigrants and on the ways in which they shuttle between at least two cultural milieus, developing capabilities to negotiate several worlds. In this chapter I aim to show how some representatives of the second generation put down strong roots in foreign, unaccustomed earth. At the same time, I will point out how some of the characters born in the United States to Indian parents, therefore inhabiting the interstices between cultures, actually have difficulties in reconciling elements from both lifestyles. Their parents migrated in pursuit of the American dream, choosing to assimilate in order to achieve 'happiness', but for their children things are more complicated and they sometimes find themselves in the impossibility of reconciling their in-betweenness. The stories in this volume are longer, allowing Lahiri to explore more in depth the evolution of second and even third-generation personages, as well as their ways of dealing with the tensions arising from their hybrid status.

Representatives of the first generation have had a traditional arranged marriage, usually before coming to the United States, and they insist on their children marrying fellow Indian-Americans as a way of safeguarding and passing down their ethnic heritage. Although many second-generation characters give in to the insistence of their parents and get together with co-ethnics, this does not guarantee a good matrimony. Characters from *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) like Mina and Raj Das, Shoba and Shukumar, Twinkle and Sanjeev, or Moushumi and Gogol from *The Namesake* (2003), have unexpected struggles in their unions. This happens because they have been raised in a Western society and their parents' successful companionship is hard to replicate in a land where personal freedom and thriving careers are valued more. Written almost a decade after her debut volume, *Unaccustomed Earth* focuses on the children of immigrants, now in their adulthood, and surveys more mixed marriages than previous volumes. But Ruma and Adam, Pranab and Deborah, Amit and Megan, Sudha and Roger, Sudha's brother Rahul and Elena, also have their difficulties, while Hema and Navin's intraracial relationship seems dead from the very beginning. Therefore, it cannot be argued that Lahiri prescribes one or the other as the key to a happy marriage.

Although Lahiri's fiction is still populated by a large diversity of characters, allowing her to capture the Indian/Bengali-American experience from several viewpoints and to put forth fresh patterns of national and transnational identities, it has been noted that Lahiri's 'Others' are "not too spicy" (Dhingra Shankar) and "not all that different" (Srikanth) from mainstream Americans. Readers are thus presented with a tinge of difference, but it is a comfortable, "palatable" otherness displayed in Lahiri's depoliticized fiction. Indeed, her narratives focus on the domestic space and on familial relations. Her characters are recognizably ethnic, but there is a "taming and domesticating of South Asianness" (Rajan 128). To the outside world these characters constitute a safe and desirable difference, one that conforms to the model of successful citizenship and that invites a human, universal connection. Srikanth calls them "ornamental Indians" (59), a harmless presence in the American ethnic landscape. Those who deviate from this inoffensive norm are excluded from both Indian and American communities (an example is Rahul's case which I will discuss later).

One feels Lahiri's prose is more pessimistic, as she deals more extensively with estrangement, loss, and loneliness. The collection abounds in references to death, some subtle, and some overt, violent even. Hence, in the first story Ruma's dead mother is very present throughout the narrative. In the second story, Aparna is about to commit suicide by setting herself on fire when she is saved by an American neighbor, unaware of the Indian woman's intention. In "A Choice of Accommodations", Amit realizes the fragility of life when he thinks something bad might happen to his daughters at any given moment. In the next story, "Only Goodness", Sudha's baby is almost killed by the negligence of her alcoholic brother. This triggers the realization that life is loss, and she chooses to lose her brother instead of endangering her child and her marriage.

Death also looms over the three stories that form the second part of the collection. There it is closely linked to displacement and exile. Kaushik, the male protagonist, is unable to move on after his mother's death, even though he travels the world attempting to cut off all roots and be freed of emotional suffering. He is eventually killed in the Boxing Day tsunami, which seems to reinforce the idea Lahiri dealt with in *The Namesake*, too, that life and death are inevitable accidents. Nevertheless, I still think that the overall message in her work is positive; migration is a sort of 'deathlike' state that has to be embraced fully and thus challenged and overcome. This

provides her characters with an amazing freedom to explore ‘unaccustomed’ spaces and flourish despite adversities.

Apparently each of the five stories in the first section of *Unaccustomed Earth* is autonomous and self-contained, whereas the final three stories are grouped together as “Hema and Kaushik” and can be read as a novella. However, spaces and places are tropes that connect all the pieces and are used by Lahiri to suggest the emotions of her characters as they undergo various transnational engagements and processes of transplantation, whether from native India to the United States, from one American city to another, or from the North American continent to other corners of the world. Another red thread runs through all the narratives: Lahiri provides an elaborate radiography of the family. In this volume she places the spotlight more on the second generation, revealing ways in which they negotiate both a generational *and* a cultural clash. She also explores these characters’ attempts to build their own family. The house is, still, the place around which parents and children gravitate. The architecture of old American houses becomes, in the words of Judith Caesar, “an emblem of the emotional spaces between the people who live in those houses, of the interior walls within the mind, of the stairs that connect the levels of experience, of the doors that shut others in or out, of the exterior walls that would normally delineate public from private space but which, again and again, do not” (2005: 52).

Sometimes the spaces echo the emotional emptiness of the characters, as they do in “Unaccustomed Earth”. The title story unfolds in an old house in Seattle, built in 1959 by an architect who also inhabited it for a while. The age and sturdiness of this house suggest the continuity and stability that its new residents probably seek. Ruma, the main character, her husband Adam and then her father, rearrange and redecorate interiors and plant a garden in order to achieve familiarity, intimacy and a feeling of ‘home’, while trying to preserve the original atmosphere. In other stories Lahiri uses space as an indication of her characters’ transnationalism. For example, women like Sudha and Hema travel the world freely, while Kaushik stands out as a nomadic, rootless human being. Their struggle to establish a coherent sense of self is made more difficult by the fact that they must reconcile their Bengali upbringing with mainstream American culture *and* increasing transnational realities. They are not foreigners in the United States, but they experience ‘foreignness’ within. As Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt notes, “[t]ese subjects are always in transit, always becoming, and always suspended in a state of irresolution” (170).

Ambreen Hai also highlights the idea that at the heart of all the narratives from *Unaccustomed Earth* lies the difficulty of second-generation Indian-Americans to balance their often conflicting allegiances. She sees a perpetual tension between the expectations of the natal family (first-generation immigrants who have successfully established themselves in the United States) and those of what she calls the ‘alternatal’ family, namely the family that children of immigrants form on their own. Ideally, these two families should merge (after all there is only one word for ‘family’ in English), but unfortunately some characters fail to reconcile the sometimes competing claims. Thus, the book is unified around this central theme, and the stories produce a prismatic effect, reflecting and contrasting with each other. Hai concludes that *Unaccustomed Earth* is a composite work, and the issue of mediating between families across generations and cultures is “a central dynamic that impels each story, and elaborates on the peculiar difficulties of transnational migrant families negotiating belonging in multiple cultures” (188).

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In the first story, which also gives the title to the entire collection, Ruma moves with her husband Adam from New York to Seattle, having to negotiate life in a new environment, across the United States. At 38, she undergoes a different ‘migrating’ experience from that of her parents. Her mother and father had only one available option: to assimilate while translating between home (Indian) and host (American) cultures. And her father in particular has been very successful at assimilating, similar to Ashoke from *The Namesake*.

Born in the United States, Ruma is acculturated but she feels at a loss after her mother passes away. She is expecting a second child and gives up her job in order to follow her husband to an unfamiliar city. She has lived in a ‘third space’ all her life, but now the move and the process of settling in a different location, coupled with her mother’s death, seem confusing and unmanageable. Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt explains this split in subjectivity: “the death of a parental figure disrupts for the second-generation subjects a sense of roots and routes, resulting in a loss of a home(land)” (160). The relationship to both India (ancestral homeland) and America (land of birth) is disturbed for Ruma and other Lahirian characters (notably Gogol and Kaushik) upon the loss of a parent.

Ruma's father (an unnamed protagonist) visits her in Seattle for seven days, during which Ruma leaves the house only twice – once to take her three-year old son Akash to his weekly swimming lesson and the second time to show her father some famous sites in Seattle. Thus, the new house can be compared to a womb, and when Ruma finally steps outside, she is born again. The walls of the house are the walls of her self; her father acts as a catalyst and helps her make an imaginative connection with Seattle, an American space of loneliness and self-reliance, empty of memories or familiar links. Initially confined to the 'feminine' space of the house, Ruma eventually manages to reconnect with her father and afterwards can step outside and explore the city. In the beginning, the two are distant; the father is almost an intruder in his daughter's house. But by the end of the week they have grown close, and the father's agency enables Ruma to start growing roots in new soil.

When Ruma's father arrives in Seattle, he is dressed in a polo shirt and is wearing a cap which has POMPEII written on it; he looks well rested and does not show his age (70). He takes his shoes off upon entering the house, which betrays an Indian habit meant to show respect for the host. Despite this gesture, Ruma is struck by the degree to which her father resembles an American in his old age. It occurs to her that "he could have been practically from anywhere" (*UE* 11), thus embodying transnationality. A first-generation immigrant, Ruma's father came in pursuit of the American dream, which has transformative power it seems. Hence, he adapted quite easily, received a PhD in biochemistry, and had a successful career with a pharmaceutical company. After his wife's death, he started to travel to other continents in order to relax and come in contact with different cultures. He seems to visit Seattle as an American willing to discover new sites, and since he has never been to the Pacific Northwest he is mesmerized by the breadth and beauty of his adoptive land. He had flown across America only once before, when his wife booked tickets to Calcutta via Los Angeles, instead of traveling East as they normally did. That journey seemed endless, whereas this time the endpoint is an American city he is free to explore. He is no longer interested in traveling to India, and recalls with surprise that his wife had lived for those epic journeys back home.

Ruma's mother is a very important character, and numerous flashbacks relating to her are inserted throughout the story. In fact, the short story even debuts with the news of her death during a routine surgery and the most important changes that take place after she passes away, namely her husband retires and starts to travel extensively, and Ruma relocates to a different

American city. Her mother had opposed the marriage to Adam claiming “that he would divorce her, that in the end he would want an American girl” (26). She stands for the ties with Indian tradition such as arranged marriages, or the duty to keep the family together. Her main aim is to ensure that Indian traditions are preserved in the midst of an alien culture. Not surprisingly, she is shocked to find out her daughter got engaged to an American. Ruma had kept her other involvements with American men a secret from her parents, just like her father is now hiding an affair with Mrs. Bagchi. In time her mother “grew to love Adam as a son, a replacement for Romi, who had crushed them by moving abroad and maintaining only distant ties” (26). Ahmed (qtd. in Aubeeluck 167) calls “the hallmark of American culture (...) the process of separation from parents and family towards achieving a sense of individuality”. Her son Romi, a second generation Indian-American moves from the United States to New Zealand and can be said to fit this description. He, too, is trying to grow roots in distant lands, or maybe he needs a ‘third space’ to negotiate his identity, away from both India and America. In this way he is similar to Moushumi from *The Namesake*.

Eventually Ruma’s mother becomes used to chatting to Adam on the phone; she even emails him, or they play Scrabble over the Internet. She brings him Indian food which Ruma had never learned to make and Adam loves. Therefore, food preparation helps her to express her ethnic identity but also to forge a connection with her American-born son-in-law. The American Adam (in the sense of R.W.B. Lewis) came in contact with the Oriental Other (Said) by consuming Indian cuisine. As I have shown in the other chapters, “food as metaphor frequently constructs and reflects relationships to racialized subjectivity and also addresses issues of authenticity, assimilation, and desire” (Williams 70). In Lahiri’s prose, food is often the means for female immigrant characters to assert agency and subjectivity as an alternative to the dominant culture. This suitably describes Ruma’s mother, whereas for her daughter Indian food is more like an extravagance, something in which she indulges from time to time, a reminder of her difference. However, after being exposed to different languages, cuisines, and cultures while growing up, Ruma is an enriched individual.

I believe that the experience which restores the connection between father and daughter is that of the garden, the oldest example of a contradictory site according to Michel Foucault (“Of Other Spaces” 25). The French theorist stresses the fact that in the Orient the garden had deep and superimposed meanings, being a sacred space for the Persians, who believed the four parts

of the world come together in its rectangle. A sort of microcosm, “[t]he garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world” (Foucault 26). On his very first day in Seattle, Ruma’s father takes to watering the neglected plants in her garden. The next day, he goes out and buys some shrubs, gardening tools, and an inflatable pool for children. When he returns he tells Ruma: “You get a fair amount of sun in the back, and the soil looks rich” (*UE* 42). She immediately embraces the idea of having a blossoming garden, so Ruma’s father and his grandson, Akash, spend the next few days outdoors, the former planting seeds and the latter splashing in the pool or searching for worms in the soil. Akash himself plants “a pink rubber ball, a few pieces of lego stuck together, a wooden block etched with a star and a miniature plastic dinosaur” (44). Since these objects could be ‘planted’ anywhere, one can presume that the child has no need to grow roots in a particular soil. Nevertheless, he is delighted by his new activities and even learns a few basic Bengali words, such as “lal” for “red”.

Interestingly, Ruma refers to family relations in Bengali. She tells her son “Dadu is here” (10) although “her own Bengali was slipping from her” (12). Her mother had been so strict that Ruma never spoke to her in English. But now she uses Bengali only rarely, when relatives call from Calcutta to wish her a Happy Bijoya or Akash a Happy birthday. Over these phone calls “she tripped over words, mangled tenses” (12). The use of Bengali words in the same sentence with English words is evidence of her dual identity, as well as of allegiance to both cultures (Indian and American). Culture and identity are like language, ever developing, unfixed, and heterogeneous. Like Stuart Hall has observed in his essay “Ethnicity: Identity and Difference” (1991), identity is neither simple nor stable, but it is a dynamic construction that always has ambivalence within it.

The fact that the grandfather teaches his grandson, a third-generation Indian-American, a few elementary words in his native tongue ensures continuity and transnational transmission of ancestral heritage. Indeed, Ruma’s father reflects at one point 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. (*UE* 54)

Thus, even if he is helping his offspring get settled in a foreign land, blood ties are impossible to cut off. On the contrary, his grandson, conceived with an American, represents continuation of

Bengali genealogy in a completely new territory. The room he occupies downstairs is going to belong to Akash when he gets bigger. He pictures the boy in that very room, shutting the door to his parents as Ruma and Romi had. This triggers the conclusion that he, too, had turned his back on his parents by settling in America. He senses his life reconstituted in his grandson, and he remembers that his children had always wanted to leave the house. At the same time, Ruma's father looks and behaves like an American himself and is eager to travel to other countries. He is "an old man who was now behaving like a child" (54). Therefore his meditation might not be about ethnic roots anymore, but a celebration of universal life and growth. Overall, his experience with migration is a positive, generative one.

Ruma's father is very active in the kitchen (upstairs) and the yard (outside). In fact, shortly after having taken a short tour of the house, he sees the garden from the kitchen window and remarks the delphiniums need watering. He immediately takes the tea kettle and goes outside to water the flowers, while Ruma stays inside and watches him through the window. We find out that gardening is his passion, that he used to work outdoors in the summers as soon as he came from the office, and that he did not include any other member of his family in this activity, but did it alone. He used to plant tomatoes, eggplant, zucchini, bitter melon, chili peppers and spinach, all Indian ingredients his wife liked to cook: "Oblivious to her mother's needs in other ways, he had toiled in unfriendly soil, coaxing such things from the ground" (16). He was forcing a connection with India in American soil and connecting to his wife at the same time. By working the garden and planting seeds in Seattle, as he had done in Pennsylvania, he leaves his mark on his daughter's space, establishes a bond with her, and ensures continuity in this 'virgin' land.

According to Judith Caesar, in many of Lahiri's stories, "[t]he plot is almost incidental to the story's meaning, which resides in the images, metaphors, interconnecting patterns, and emblematic moments. It is a meditation upon inner space and intimacy" (2005: 65). Indeed, in "Unaccustomed Earth" the plot is not very complex: Ruma's father visits her in Seattle for seven days. Nevertheless, the story manages to put across a world of emotions by describing Proustian moments like the one in which father and daughter are serving Darjeeling tea together on the porch. In an interior monologue, Ruma's father admits that he associated taking tea with milk, sugar and "Nice" biscuits deeply with his wife; their kitchen cupboard always contained a box of them. Adopting characteristics and traditions of the new culture (such as celebrating Christmas

or Thanksgiving, or certain foodways), while preserving some Indian ones indicates “transnational exchange and reciprocity, where simultaneous embeddedness is strong” (Faist qtd. in Aubeeluck 147). Mixing Indian tea with American biscuits stands for their hybrid identity and transculturality. Cooking represents a way of maintaining their Indianness, but American ingredients and dishes fill their well-stocked cupboards and fridges. Therefore, the kitchen of Indian immigrants is hybridized, but the merging of cultures gives them and their children the chance to develop dual cultural lenses.

While father and daughter are having tea together on the porch, he says he would like to build a porch like this for himself but the condo where he lives now does not allow it. He remarks it would have been nice at their old house, and this is the first time he is nostalgic about the place he had sold after his wife’s death. Places and spaces connect people and when the people are gone their memory lingers on in those places and spaces. Ruma asks her father where he would have put the garden and they plunge together in a space of imagination, joined by the memory of a house which they had shared happily. She imagines her parents’ house transformed, walls broken down, and her parents sitting on the newly-built porch, in wicker chairs, having tea. When she pictures that building in her mind, her mother is always alive in it. She realizes in a way it is easier for her to deal with her mother’s absence in a house she had not lived to visit. The fact that no memories tie her to Seattle somehow soothes the pain caused by her mother’s death. Thus, Ruma’s self-imposed seclusion in the house can also be read as a form of mourning. Even across the country she still has not fully absorbed this event – physical distance does not heal wounds of the psyche. She is, simultaneously, struggling to get established in the new surroundings and deal with her mother’s sudden death.

She realizes that space contains a part of people’s spirit and promises to visit her father’s new home after the second baby is born. He replies that there is no need for her to travel all that way just to see an ordinary apartment, empty of memories or meaning. He continues: “You’re a mother now, no need to drag your children. Your life, your roots, are now here” (*UE* 47). Ruma protests, pointing out that is exactly what he and his wife did when they took their children to India numerous times. But to no avail; her father is categorical and concludes that he will come to see her. Although he is easing her transplantation, Ruma must re-root on her own. The neglected, dying garden symbolizes Ruma’s lack of belonging and dislocation. She draws from her parents’ experience of ‘planting their seeds’ elsewhere, but different generations cope in

different ways with dislocation. The father knows his work meant to revitalize the garden is a futile exercise and in weeks the garden would be overgrown with weeds, unless Ruma nurtures it and keeps the plants alive. The immigrant knows that transplantation is never an easy process and that not all transplants are successful. He plants “some slow-growing myrtle and phlox under the trees, two azalea bushes, a row of hostas, a clematis to climb one of the posts of the porch” (49). He also throws some seeds of marigolds, impatiens and some gladiola bulbs, as well as a hydrangea in honor of his wife, so her memory too could live on in Ruma’s new garden: “They were always your mother’s favorites. In this country, that is” (52).

It can be argued that this metaphor of planting a garden is Lahiri’s literal interpretation of Spivak’s words on the post-1965 immigrants to the US: “this new transnationality, ‘the new diaspora’, is the new scattering of seeds of ‘developing’ nations so that they can take root on developed ground” (1999: 357). Symbolically, Ruma’s father cultivates his wife’s favorite flowers and other plants alongside his grandson’s toys, proving how different cultural influences can coexist in the same space and ‘soil’. His grandson asks if the plants would come out the next day and he is told that: “These things take time” (49). Just like wounds take time to heal, so new forms of life take time to develop, and people need time to adapt to new environments.

Himadri Lahiri makes the accurate observation that “[i]t takes time to enroot oneself in a new soil through generations” (8). However, Jhumpa Lahiri’s story “Unaccustomed Earth” indicates the numerous possibilities of her Indian-American characters doing just that. What is more, she has chosen an eloquent epigraph for the whole collection of eight short stories, to gather them around the previously stated idea. The motto belongs to Nathaniel Hawthorne, who, in Lahiri’s opinion “represents the great tradition of great American writing” (Leyda 14). The book bears a title that is the last phrase of the following paragraph taken from “The Custom House”, the introductory sketch to *The Scarlet Letter* (1850): “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 roots into unaccustomed earth” (Hawthorne 10).

Lahiri added, in the same interview with Leyda, that she was re-reading Hawthorne as she was working on this volume and she recognized how his words reflected her own life and upbringing “in such a visceral way” (Leyda 14). The American people are a group of transplanted populations who have the opportunity to flourish in American soil once they have

passed through the 'custom house'. By using Hawthorne's phrase to title her book and by placing his quotation as the epigraph to her collection, Lahiri boldly claims her place within an established gallery of American authors.

Nathaniel Hawthorne came from a family deeply rooted in New England. The founder of the family, William Hathorne, arrived in 1630 among the first colonists, and was "the bearded, sable-cloaked, and steeple-crowned progenitor," who possessed "all the Puritanic traits, both good and evil" as Hawthorne described him in the preamble to *The Scarlet Letter* (8). He won fame as a soldier and judge, while his son, John, who was also a judge, added to the family fame by "his zealous part in the witch trials" (Brooks, Lewis, and Warren 433). The bravery of David Hathorne, a captain in the continental navy and the grandfather of Nathaniel, was celebrated in a ballad. But Nathaniel Hawthorne added the 'w' to his name to make the orthography conform to the pronunciation or maybe to distance himself from their deeds. He was "divided between a past of Puritan guilt and a present of transcendental hope" (Ruland and Bradbury 147-48).

In "The Custom House" he talks about his affection for his native town of Salem and concludes that "The sentiment is probably assignable to the deep and aged roots which my family struck into the soil" (8) since they were born and died here, thus mingling "their earthly substance" (8) with the New England soil. On the other hand, he insists that "frequent transplantation is perhaps better for the stock" (8) and that the long connection of a family with one spot, as its place of birth and burial has become an unhealthy one, which "should at last be severed" (10). He makes reference here to his Puritan forebears, but does not mention his father who was an East India captain who died in Surinam in 1808 and who "had sailed to the East half a dozen times, and left behind logbooks and journals, including that of a trip to Bengal in 1796, and to Madras, on the Coromandel Coast, in 1800" (Newman 73). Nor does he mention his maternal branch of his family tree, the Mannings, who were involved in the mercantile trade of Salem during its golden years, between the 1780s and 1830s.

At this point it is perhaps interesting to note that another celebrated Indian-American writer, Bharati Mukherjee, has offered a rewriting of *The Scarlet Letter*, "that most canonical of American novels" (Newman 69). Mukherjee spotted the gap Hawthorne had deliberately left between the Puritan beginnings and the mid-nineteenth century, and set out to fill it. Her novel, *The Holder of the World* (1993), tells the story of Hannah Easton, who moves from New England to the Coromandel Coast, has an affair with an Indian lover, Rajah, and returns to

America with his child, Pearl Singh. Mukherjee was inspired to write this novel “by a pre-auction viewing at Sotheby’s in New York of a seventeenth-century Indian miniature of a woman in elaborate Mughal court dress, a woman who was Caucasian and blonde” (Newman 69). She reports in her article “A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman” that she had immediately thought: “Who is this very confident-looking seventeenth-century woman, who sailed in some clumsy wooden boat across dangerous seas and then stayed there? She had transplanted herself in what must have been a traumatically different culture. How did she survive?” (Mukherjee qtd. in Newman 69) Transactions between the two cultures are at the heart of her novel, which reveals in the end that Hannah Easton, the white woman from Salem who travels from America to India and back again, was the original for Hester Prynne, Hawthorne’s heroine. Hence, Mukherjee connects to her prominent American predecessor through the figure of Hester, whereas Lahiri references Hawthorne himself. Lahiri’s gesture 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” (Srikanth 55).

In the same August 2010 interview, Lahiri further relates to the passage from “The Custom House”, by saying that: “The greatness of America is based on layers upon layers of foreign transplants, stepping away from the old world and being willing to set foot in the new” (Leyda 14). Ruma’s father did that when he immigrated to the United States, and Lahiri extends Hawthorne’s metaphor to most of her characters, representing two and sometimes three generations of Bengali descendants (the newcomers and their hyphenated children and grandchildren) attempting to get settled in new environments.

On Saturday morning, the day before Ruma’s father has to leave, the garden is finished. After breakfast he shows it to Ruma and instructs her how to take care of the plants. She hints that maybe he should stay and take care of the garden himself but his reply is, once again, firm: “It’s a good place, Ruma. But this is your home, not mine” (*UE* 52). He has fulfilled his ‘duty’ – that of ensuring conditions for his child and grandchild to strike roots into unaccustomed earth. By referencing Hawthorne’s fictionalized preface, Lahiri deploys intertextuality in an attempt to destabilize ethnic identity. As Cardozo observes, “intertextuality generates a ‘third space’ in which the resonance between texts A and B generate a new text, C, in the spacetime of reading” (7), thus representing the ways in which new identities are formed.

Ruma starts crying and insists that although it would be a big move, it would be good for him and for the entire family. She wonders how his life is in the condominium, whether he has any neighbors who care about him. For a second she fears he might die of a “broken heart”, but then realizes “her parents never loved each other in that way” (*UE* 33). They had a commitment, an arranged marriage, and she notices that her father seems happier now, “the opposite of what it had done to her” (33). In fact, he does not want to be part of another family, “to live again in an enormous house that would only fill up with things over the years (...) Life grew and grew until a certain point. The point he had reached now” (53). Normally children leave their parents’ house, but the reader senses that this is a situation in which the daughter is attempting to pin down her father, desperate for familiarity, support, and fixity in an unknown space.

Ruma looks for ways out of the rooms that enclose her loneliness. The walls of the house are a metaphor for confinement within her own ego, or confinement within a set of gendered conventions that deny individuality. Ruma’s self-imposed isolation is reflected by the very architecture of the house she inhabits in Seattle. She often trips, hardly ever steps outside, and doors seem to block her in. She has an impersonal connection with this space because it does not yet feel like her home. She had moved from Park Slope, Brooklyn, New York (where Lahiri lives in real life!), to the Eastside of Seattle for Adam’s job. The second child was conceived in New York just before the move and Ruma “hadn’t been prepared for how much work it was, how isolating it could be. There were mornings she wished she could simply get dressed and walk out the door, like Adam” (10). Men are on the move in this story (Adam, Romi, Ruma’s father), and the outside is clearly a masculine space, while (married) women are stuck in the house. The only notable exception is Mrs. Bagchi, who is mobile and to whom I will refer later on in this chapter.

Ruma has half-heartedly followed her husband to a new and faraway place, across the United States, just like her mother had done years ago (but from India to the United States). In New York she had worked part-time for a law firm, but after her mother died “all she wanted was to stay home with Akash not just Thursday and Friday but every day. (...) It was the house that was her work now” (5-6). She identifies with her mother more strongly than ever before, but being a housewife does not make her happy. She rejects the independence and professional success she had enjoyed as a lawyer, but is not fulfilled by her role as mother and wife either. She is uncomfortable with her in-betweenness.

Like in Gogol Ganguli's story, a parent's death triggers identification with Indian roots for representatives of the second generation. When a parent disappears (the father in Gogol's case, the mother in Ruma's), Indian-American children, otherwise well-adjusted in American society, undergo an identity crisis and turn to their heritage for a solution. First-generation Indians immigrated in order to further their economic strength and, in a sense, they embody ideals of social mobility and equal opportunity. Yet Ruma seems to be regressing, falling back into traditional women's roles and reliving her mother's experience: "She didn't understand how her mother had done it. Growing up, her mother's example – moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household – had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma's life now" (*UE* 10-11). She has no intention of looking for work in Seattle, but plans to be at home for the next few years. Her father disapproves and encourages her to get a job, but Ruma's response is that her work is now to rear two children. She adopts a traditionally Indian stance, and her father asks her the very American question if this lifestyle will make her happy. Ruma remembers that she used to work fifty-hour weeks for years, while her brother "was still living hand to mouth" (36). Again she feels unjustly treated in contrast to Romi: "She'd always felt unfairly cast, by both her parents, into roles that weren't accurate: as her father's oldest son, her mother's secondary spouse" (36). Hence, Ruma is still struggling to deal with the burden of having grown up as the first child of immigrant parents, the one who is usually impacted more by the move to a different country.

In antithesis with her father, who looks and feels great, Ruma is tired and has been putting on weight. She has to apply concealer below her eyes, even though she does not work or even go out at all. She is aware that she is trapped inside the house and that she is becoming her mother. Her father also notices this transformation: "Something about his daughter's appearance had changed; she now resembled his wife so strongly that he could not bear to look at her directly" (27). She has identical features, "haunting now that his wife was gone" (28). Towards the end of the story, we come across this comparison once again, also from the father's perspective: "Like his wife, Ruma was now alone in this new place, overwhelmed, without friends, caring for a young child, all of it reminding him, too much, of the early years of his marriage, the years for which his wife had never forgiven him. He had always assumed Ruma's life would be different. She'd worked for it for as long as he could remember (...)" (40). His wife could not forgive him because he had brought her to this new country, isolated from her

family, enclosed in a small American house where she had the responsibility of raising two children without being backed up by the extended Indian family. Had she lived to travel to Seattle to see her daughter, she “would have stuck out in this wet Northern landscape, in her brightly colored saris, her dime-sized maroon bindi, her jewels” (11). After her death, Ruma only kept three of her over 200 saris and she placed them in a bag at the back of her closet. This gesture is probably an effort to postpone dealing with the loss, or to keep alive a symbolic connection to Indian traditions.

By constantly drawing a parallel between mother and daughter, Lahiri shows how both first- and second-generation Indian-American women grapple with the formation of new roots, or with what critics refer to as “border crossings”, namely “the rebuilding of an Indian home where American values filter in, and the reassertion and reaffirmation of ancestral values” (Aubeeluck 10). Ruma identifies with her mother from all points of view – physical (despite not wearing a sari, she starts to look like her) and emotional (Ruma realizes what her mother had gone through, as an immigrant and as a parent). Eventually this leads to a sort of differentiation once Ruma comes to terms with the major changes she has undergone and starts afresh.

Ruma is not part of any community in Seattle, and she realizes this is what her parents must have gone through when they came to America, a space of loneliness, as opposed to the imagined Indian spaces filled with relatives and community members. She has no circle of friends, work colleagues or family to validate her experiences in the new environment since she now lives on a separate coast thousands of miles from where she grew up, “a place where her parents knew no one, where neither of her parents, until today, had set foot” (UE 11). The Bengali friends that surrounded them in Pennsylvania and New Jersey and that Ruma grew up with, do not exist here.

What is more, she seems to have problems in her matrimony, too. Although Adam is empathic and tries to accommodate his wife’s wishes (for example, he agrees to have Ruma’s father move permanently in Seattle with them if that is what Ruma desires), he cannot fully understand what she is going through. He has not lost a parent and, more importantly perhaps, he has not had to deal with uprooting and immigration:

For the first time since they’d met, at a dinner party in Boston when she was a law student and he was getting his MBA, she felt a wall between them, simply because he had not experienced what she had, because both his parents were still living in the house in Lincoln, Massachusetts, where Adam had been raised. (...) Though his absences contributed to her isolation, sometimes it was worse, not better when Adam was home. (25-6)

When father and daughter take Akash to his weekly swimming lesson, Ruma drives an SUV; she had not driven in New York, so this is something else she has to get used to in Seattle. Although she is growing familiar with the roads, the light, and the landscapes, she still feels disconnected. The new neighbors here are complete strangers, while the neighbors in New York had helped her when she went into labor. They lived in the same building or a five or ten-minute walk from her apartment, so they could meet her at a moment's notice, pushing their strollers through Prospect Park. In addition, the former neighbors also knew her mother and some even drove to Pennsylvania for the funeral. But in what follows we are told that "for all the time she'd spent with these women the roots did not go deep, and these days, after reading their emails, Ruma was seldom inspired to write back" (35). Connections are cut even to this imagined community.

Later that evening after dinner, Ruma's father shows her and Akash the video recordings of the swimming lesson and of his trips to Europe. At one point Ruma spots a woman who looks Indian and inquires about her. Her father chooses to hide the truth about his relationship to Mrs. Bagchi behind an evasive remark: "This is one thing I've observed on my travels. Indians are everywhere these days" (39). However, his statement echoes the term "ethnoscape" which Arjun Appadurai coined to define the cultural flows we are witnessing nowadays. Thus, "ethnoscape" refers to

[t]he landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups or individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree. This is not to say that there are no relatively stable communities and networks of kinship, friendship, work, and leisure, as well as birth, residence, and other filial forms. But it is to say that the warp of these stabilities is everywhere shot through the woof of human motion as more persons deal with the realities of having to move or the fantasies of wanting to move. (33-4)

Other new types of communities he identifies are called "ideoscape", "mediascape", or "technoscape". All of them bring together people from different countries, who share the same activities and interests but are continuously on the move and reshape the various "scapes" as they travel. Consequently, the importance of actual places and fixed geographical locations seems to be diminishing in the globalized world.

Lahiri's oeuvre contains resonances of her own family experience. The fact that all her women characters cook extensively points to her mother. Lahiri's father has said in an interview (Flynn 2000) that "The Third and Final Continent" is the story of his life. "Unaccustomed Earth" is also a father's story; this father also comes from India, settles in the United States and starts

traveling to Europe, “a continent he’d never seen” (*UE* 3), his third continent. He starts going on organized tours to countries like France, Holland, or Italy after his wife dies. Actually, she was the one supposed to go with Ruma to Paris for her 64th birthday. In the year before she died, after flying over Europe dozens of times on her way back to Calcutta, she wishes to see the canals of Venice, the Eiffel Tower, or the windmills and tulips that are landmarks of Holland. She is finally comfortable in her adoptive country and has learned to let go of the idealized homeland.

But she never gets to take this European trip, and Ruma’s father travels in her stead. Apparently he no longer wants to be attached to a place or a community, and seems inclined to let go of all his roots, remarking: “How freeing it was, these days, to travel alone, with only a single suitcase to check” (7). He does not want to go through the hardships of re-rooting again, this time from the East Coast of the United States to the West Coast. He put down roots once, when he migrated from India, and now chooses a nomadic existence, one that involves traveling but not settling down. Similar to other transnational characters sketched by Lahiri, Ruma’s father moves quite easily between American and European spaces.

Despite the tendency towards isolation, some elements do connect characters, such as phone calls (between Ruma and Adam) and postcards (between Ruma’s father and Mrs. Bagchi, or Ruma and her father). For instance, Adam calls from his travels, but they talk briefly and communication seems superficial. He calls her “Rum”, which reminds her that the first time he wrote her a letter he had misspelled her name, beginning with “Dear Room” (24). The analogy to the house is evident, but it can also represent a less obvious effort of Adam to Americanize her. As I have discussed in the previous chapters, names are important and highly symbolic in Lahiri’s work. Adam etymologically is the masculine form of the word *adamah* meaning “ground” or “earth”. Genesis ii. 7 explains that the man was called *Adam* because he was formed from the ground (*adamah*). Adam is mostly absent in the story, always away from their new home: “He never went anywhere interesting – usually towns in the Northwest or Canada where there was nothing for her and Akash to do” (5). However, Adam is firmly rooted wherever he moves, considering the fact that he is born and raised on American ‘ground’ and has no recent history of immigration in his family. We learn that Adam is 39 but “still boyishly handsome”, with brown-blond hair that Akash has inherited. Although Akash physically resembles his father, his name means “sky” or “aetherus” in Hindi. Too young to grasp much of what was

happening, the move is difficult for him as well: “It was a combination, she knew, of the new surroundings, and her lack of energy, and Adam being away so much” (10).

Ruma’s father sends her postcards from his travels to Europe, yet they are written in telegraphic, impersonal style except for the end which is, invariably, “Be happy, love Baba”. He combines an “American” ending formula with his signature which remains the Indian word for “father”. Being ‘happy’ is an essential component of the Dream that has brought him to the United States. And as he grows older, he seems to be getting happier. His postcard to Mrs. Bagchi, on the other hand, is written in Bengali and is left unsigned. He has chosen a view of ferries on Elliott Bay, a sight he had not seen while in Seattle. He tells her about his work in the garden, but, ironically, Akash steals the postcard he had so carefully hidden between the pages of the Seattle guidebook in the drawer. The boy “plants” the postcard in the garden, hence temporarily breaking the connection/communication between lovers. On the very last page of the story, after her father has already left, Ruma steps out into the garden he had revived, finds the buried postcard and mails it. This represents her symbolic coming out of mourning, accepting her father’s new relationship, and moving on with her own life.

Many times and places overlap in the protagonists’ consciousness (Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Seattle, Martha’s Vineyard in Massachusetts – the place where Ruma and Adam had their outdoor wedding, Europe, India). From his bed in Ruma’s house in Seattle, Ruma’s father studies the “spacious, sparsely furnished room” (28) and remembers the first house he had inhabited in America. In this short story, three houses merge into one; they seem contained like a set of matryoshka dolls. The first is a small apartment in Garden City, a neighborhood in New Jersey, where:

He had worried for his family’s safety in that apartment complex, the surveillance cameras in the lobby making him nervous rather than putting him at ease (...) He remembered his wife making meals on the electric stove in the tiny kitchen, the rooms smelling afterward of whatever she’d prepared. They lived on the 14th floor and she would dry her saris one by one over the narrow balcony railing. (28)

The bedroom in which Romi and Ruma had been conceived was dreary, “[y]et he considered it, still, the most sacred of spaces” (29). Connections to India are still very strong in this first American apartment; saris and Indian food fill up the intimate family space, which is deemed blessed. American public space, quite on the contrary, is perceived as foreign and threatening, with surveillance systems reminding us of Mike Davis’ *City of Quartz* (1992). Children are born

and spend their first few years in this small apartment, yet they can only remember the “large house he’s bought in the suburbs with willow trees in the backyard, with rooms for each of them and a basement filled with toys. And compared to where Ruma now lived even that house was nothing, a flimsy structure that he always feared could burn down from the flame of a match” (UE 29). Hence, their second American house contains the first – it is bigger, situated in the suburbs, has willow trees and a backyard. They start to look and act like an American family.

Finally, Ruma’s big house in Seattle contains all of them, a sign of evolution and Americanness. Ruma shows him the house with “rooms that were larger and more gracious than the ones that had sheltered her when she was a child” (14). The view from the living room is breathtaking: the famous Seattle Skyline, Lake Washington and its two bridges, the Olympic Mountains. But she is unhappy and feels imprisoned in this perfect house, whereas in the smaller apartments she had felt joyous and free. Reflected through her father’s subjective lens, the first two houses appear as flimsy structures, symbolizing their lack of stability and roots in the United States, and his initial silent struggle to assert himself as an Indian-American.

After his wife’s death, Ruma’s father sells the house he had shared with her, “wiping out her mother’s presence just as the surgeon had” (6) and moves to a one-room apartment. This new apartment is still in Pennsylvania, but is unfamiliar to Ruma who “could not picture his surroundings when they spoke on the phone” (6). Space is fluid, heterogeneous; this new residence could be anywhere, and is not contained or rooted this time. In India he would have moved in with Ruma after his wife passed away; in Seattle this was not an option, although “there were rooms to spare, rooms that stood empty and without purpose” (7). In the beginning Ruma feels remorse for not offering him a place in her spacious, sophisticated house. At the end of the story she finally proposes, only to be refused. Her father declines the invitation to move in with his daughter and her family and relocate to Seattle because he now enjoys solitude. It is a relief for him not to have to maintain the old house and “to be living in another part of the state, close enough so things were still familiar, but far enough to feel different. In the old house he was still stuck in his former life” (30). He has thus moved on, and the new, impersonal apartment he now inhabits obviously stands for a fresh start. He is a retired widower, who does volunteer work for the Democratic Party and travels for long weeks, but who refuses to become attached to a particular place.

His lover, Mrs. Bagchi, also prefers to live alone in Long Island, “an anomaly, an Indian woman alone” (8). Nevertheless, she honors the memory of her (dead) husband in an Indian way: “She was adamant about not marrying, about never sharing her home with another man” (9). Yet, she is willing to share a hotel room with Ruma’s father during their planned trip to Prague because hotels represent impersonal private spaces. They offer a certain level of intimacy, but hotel rooms are places without permanence, spaces people share temporarily before going back to their cities, houses, and everyday lives. The two have an open ‘Western’ relationship when they are away. Ruma’s father, who had been married for nearly forty years, still longs for the habit of companionship. Mrs. Bagchi is comfortable with a distance relationship; she had loved her husband of only two years so deeply that she does not want another big commitment.

As already hinted above, Mrs. Bagchi has an atypical trajectory for a first-generation Indian woman immigrant. She moves to the United States at 26, already a widow, trying to escape another marriage which would have surely been arranged by her parents. She obtains a PhD in Statistics and teaches at Stony Brook University. In perfect antagonism to her lover’s wife, Mrs. Bagchi only returns to Calcutta for her parents’ funerals, and loves traveling to other countries and continents. She meets Ruma’s father in Italy and they agree to see each other only abroad. During their trips they “wandered off together, picking up something small, commenting with amazement that there had once been a time when they, too were capable of eating elaborate lunches, as was the custom in India” (21). This is yet another fundamental difference from his wife who “used to run the household as if to satisfy a mother-in-law’s fastidious eye” (22) and who took cooking particularly seriously.

Even Ruma spent two days cooking Indian dishes before he came to visit her and we learn that she prepared Indian food for Adam too sometimes, but less meticulously. During her father’s visit she eats with her fingers, for the first time in the new house in Seattle. She has not taught her boy this Indian practice. Actually, he refuses to eat anything but macaroni and cheese for four months: “In spite of her efforts he was turning into the sort of American child she was always careful not to be, the sort that horrified and intimidated her mother: imperious, afraid of eating things” (23). After they finish dinner, her father does the dishes, as he had always done after the whole family had eaten, proving that rituals associated to food still unite them. Eating out is an impersonal habit, whereas eating at home bonds family members, and epitomizes familiarity and intimate connection.

Interestingly, although Ruma and Adam are married and they share a house, Adam is often away so there is an inevitable physical and emotional distance between them. Ruma's father and Mrs. Bagchi, on the other hand, do not live together; therefore they are not physically intimate in a permanent space, but paradoxically seem to have a closer emotional tie. As Judith Caesar states:

Lahiri's rooms and houses are filled with people who must find the imaginary space that will enable them to live with one another, and whether or not they succeed in doing so depends on their abilities to create their own imaginary societies with their own rules. Even though her characters are not usually Americans, they embody the American impulse to reinvent oneself, to escape, to ignore conventions and rules, to create one's own morality, the American spirit of place that D. H. Lawrence identified. (2005: 67)

In 'Unaccustomed earth', male characters move freely outside, while Ruma is yet to break this barrier and still feels nostalgic about New York. She mentions to her father the famous places they could visit in Seattle, as she has conceived a touristic plan: "There's the Space Needle of course. And Pike Place Market. There's an aquarium along the waterfront I've been meaning to take Akash to. They have ferry rides across Puget Sound that are supposed to be nice. We could go to Victoria for the day. And then there's the Boeing factory" (*UE* 32-3).

We are not given the details of their sightseeing tour. All we are told is that they follow the itinerary Ruma has proposed and that it is Saturday, the day before his departure. The landmarks are finally 'checked', as the father had imagined them the night he arrived. He could not sleep that night so he browsed a guidebook to Seattle that he had found on the bedside table. He read about the coffee shops, salmon and rain amounts, and saw photos of the new library and other famous sights. It is surprising that Ruma's father, who has never been to this part of the United States, somehow seems familiar with the environment, proving that America is no longer *terra incognita* for him:

Studying a map, he was surprised by how far he was from the Pacific Ocean, not realizing until now that the mountains stood in the way. Though he had traveled such a distance, his surroundings did not feel foreign to him as they had when he went to Europe. There he was reminded of his early days in America, understanding only a word or two of what people said, handling different coins. Here, as on a summer night in Pennsylvania, moths fluttered against the window screen. (28)

As the father leaves, Adam returns from his business trip. Hopefully the space of the revitalized garden will also bring about the cherished metamorphosis in their marriage. Ruma's father offers to visit again when the second baby is born and asks them to take care of the garden. Akash

misses him already (“I want Dadu”) so he and Ruma go out into the garden. The boy pretends to water the ‘plants’ in his little plot and Ruma, who sets foot in the garden for the first time, finds the postcard for Mrs. Bagchi. She understands everything and by mailing the postcard she symbolically ends her bereavement, accepts her father’s choices, and begins the re-rooting process in Seattle.

In the first part of this chapter I have shown how Jhumpa Lahiri uses different tropes to reflect her characters’ struggle as they undergo processes of acculturation and transplantation. The ways in which they negotiate spaces as they relocate from India to the United States, or from one American city to another, mirror their efforts of dealing with new cultural and social environments. Ruma and her father acknowledge their “inner emotional truths”, and this helps them push forward in American and transnational spaces. They are able to re-imagine their place in the world, and, in a sense they are born again. But, while Ruma is successfully transplanted in unaccustomed earth, her father is freed of permanent roots.

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In what follows I will provide a reading of the story called “Nobody’s Business”, placed fifth in the book. Space is extremely significant for the meaning of this story also, and houses in particular function as filters for the characters’ subjectivity like they do in “Unaccustomed Earth”. In fact, except for the final scene which takes place outdoors, all the action in this story unfolds in one of three houses.

The first house is shared by three lodgers, Paul, Sangeeta, and Heather. We learn that its owners live downstairs, but they play no part in the development of the plot. In fact, they remain anonymous throughout. The house has a “spectacular central staircase” which “turned six times at right angles after every six steps and was constructed of dark gleaming wood with the luster of cognac” (*UE* 177). However, this is a false promise of luxury and the rooms on the rented floor do not live up to its grandeur, just like the intricate relationships between the characters promise something beautiful but end up brutally dismantling. Eloquently, the staircase “was the only thing of enduring beauty in the house, a false promise of what was above: ugly brown cabinets in the kitchen, moldy bathrooms with missing tiles, omnipresent oatmeal carpeting to protect the ears of the landlords who lived below” (177).

Although she is only going to inhabit this house temporarily, Indian-American Sangeeta Biswas repaints the walls of her room sage green and the trim pale lavender (a shade called “mole”). While repainting, she also leaves her mole-colored fingerprints on the phone they all shared, claiming her part of the common space, even though her intention is to move out as soon as possible and in with her Egyptian lover, Farouk. He teaches Middle Eastern history at Harvard and works at home as well, writing papers for conferences. He is not willing to move in with Sang, although they have been together for three years and she believes they are going to get married, assumption he does not deny. Yet he maintains a suspicious distance from her and behaves mysteriously.

Sangeeta (who prefers to be called Sang) is 30, has studied philosophy, and graduated from NYU. She started a PhD at Harvard but dropped out, causing her mother to lock herself up in a bedroom for a week and her father to stop talking to her. She now works part time at a bookstore and has recently moved in with two strangers, Paul and Heather, thus failing to fulfill her parents’ expectations to have a brilliant career. They want their daughter to at least get married to someone of Indian descent, which is why they give her phone number to suitors who call for her quite often, sometimes from as far away as Los Angeles. They are all Indian-Americans and want to marry her, but she is not in the least bit interested. Paul vaguely envies these men “despite the fact that he shared a house with Sang, and a kitchen, and a subscription to the *Globe*” (175). He compares her to Penelope, trying to ward off all these suitors. Even Heather envies her because “[d]ozens of men, successful men, possibly even handsome, want to marry [Sang] sight unseen” (175). The woman of Indian descent runs away from a prospective arranged marriage, whereas the Western one finds it fascinating that her flat mate is pursued by several suitors.

Paul is tall, has straw-colored hair, and wears round glasses which he does not like but had been talked into buying by the sale girl. He is studying for his PhD orals in English literature. He failed this exam the year before, not because he was not well prepared, but because he was unable to control his nerves and reply to the examiners’ questions. He had not left the house for a week afterwards, shutting out the world and retreating to the safe space of this (rented) house. After Sang moves in he starts to study in the kitchen (shared space) to be in her presence for longer. He tries to impress her with his knowledge of literature, but she shows little curiosity, making it clear that she is not looking for commitment or a deeper connection. There is

only one phone jack in the house and Paul, who hardly ever goes out, like Ruma from “Unaccustomed earth”, is the one answering it most of the times and writing down the names of Sang’s suitors. He is lonely and insecure; therefore he easily becomes infatuated with exotic Sang. One of the suitors asks if he is Sang’s boyfriend but he replies “No, (...) I’m just her housemate” (183). However, the fact that they share a house apparently gives him the right to get involved in her ‘business’.

When Sang’s boyfriend calls for the first time, Paul is caught off guard. Initially, the two are portrayed as being very different. For example, when they actually meet, Paul is returning by bike from the library, “shabbily dressed”, while Farouk is wearing “perfectly fitted faded jeans, a white shirt, a navy-blue blazer, and brown leather shoes. His sharp features commanded admiration without being imposing” (184). He looks several years older than Sang, but at the same time resembles her in certain ways, “for they shared the same height, the same gilded complexion, the same sprinkle of moles above and below their lips” (184). Farouk introduces himself to Paul as “Freddy” and Sang starts to laugh when she hears this Americanized nickname. He points out that she expects people to call her “Sang”, but she retorts: “That’s different. That’s actually part of my name” (185). It seems the two are in a competition who is more ‘Western’ and better integrated.

During the summer Farouk goes to Cairo to visit his parents, but after his return from Egypt, Sang is never at home anymore. Paul is displeased because even when she is at home, she prefers to stay in her room, with the door shut, often speaking on the phone. The food on her shelf in the refrigerator develops mould. It becomes evident that she is always with Farouk and when she is not with him, she does things for him, such as choose items to redecorate his apartment or buy expensive groceries. Nevertheless, she does not sleep over, but returns home late every night. Farouk, on the other hand, rarely comes over to Sang’s place, and then they always retreat to her room. He never says hello or goodbye to the other tenants, but behaves as if she “were the sole occupant of the house” (186). Monday is Sang’s day off from the bookstore, so Farouk usually comes for lunch. They eat in her room, but Paul sometimes overhears them talk and once he even sees through the partly-open door Farouk zipping his jeans. Despite the fact that they are silent lovers, unlike other couples he had overheard in the house over the years, Paul develops the habit of going to the library on Mondays, trying to stay out of their lives.

Paul's parents had died and he had only had one girlfriend, Theresa, who broke up with him because she did not like the way he kissed her. Since he has no social life and is quite curious, he starts to spy on Sang. He overhears some arguments between her and Farouk which start around Thanksgiving, and end with Sang crying into the phone. In December he hears them fight in Sang's room, with her accusing Farouk of not wanting to meet her friends, not wanting her to sleep over, and not even driving her home in the middle of the night. His answers are rude: "I pay for the cabs. What difference does it make?" and "You know I don't sleep well when you're there" (189). Sang starts to cry and asks how they are supposed to get married in these conditions and whether they are going to live in separate houses for ever. Farouk calls her hysterical, she swears at him and throws a plate or a glass against a wall. And "[t]hen the room went quiet" (189). Doors and walls do not protect one's privacy in this house; the others can always find a 'crack' and catch glimpses of someone else's life.

Heather, the third lodger, is a law student at Boston College. She is mostly absent from the house (and the story), especially after she gets together with a man named Kevin. For the winter break Sang goes to London to see her sister who lives there and has recently given birth to a baby boy. She announces that she is going to be called "Sang Mashi", one of the few references to her Indian origins, along with the long list of suitors who linger in the background of the story. While Heather and Sang are both away for the holidays, Paul continues to study and takes over the house: "In the mornings he reviewed poetry at the kitchen table. After lunch, criticism in the living room. A Shakespeare play before bed. He began to leave his things, his binders and his shoe boxes and his books, on the kitchen table, on certain steps of the staircase, on the coffee table in the living room" (192). Perhaps by occupying more space in the house he feels less lonely.

One afternoon, while Sang is still in London, she receives a package. Paul takes it upstairs and leans it against the half-open door of her room. He then closes the door, but cannot resist the temptation to enter the private space of Sang's room. He first unties the silk scarf which is gathering the curtain and smells Sang's perfume, then sits on her bed and takes his shoes and socks off. He even undoes his belt buckle, "but suddenly the desire left him, absent from his body just as she was absent from the room" (193). Even though he has entered her intimate space, he knows it is a violation and there can be no intimacy between them, not even on an imaginary level. He falls asleep in her bed and is awoken by the phone; no one replies but he can

hear a dog barking before the person at the end of the line finally hangs up. However, the person calls again the same evening. It is a woman who introduces herself as Deirdre Frain and asks if Sang is at home. She calls again the next day, this time asking if Sang is in Cairo and Paul has to tell her she is in London. The fourth call arrives in the middle of the night, and the woman inquires if Sang and “Freddy”, as she calls him, are cousins. Then she starts crying and confesses to the stranger on the phone that she and Freddy are in a relationship. Paul hangs up but that night, “for the first time since the winter break had begun he felt lonely in the house” (195). He thinks that the weird phone calls must be a fluke, a scheme on behalf of one of Sang’s Indian suitors, because he knows Farouk has driven her to the airport and they are going through a calm period in their relationship. However, in this way Sang’s complicated life directly enters his, right after he had entered her room.

Apparently he still does not want to interfere, so the next morning when the phone keeps on ringing Paul does not answer and eventually unplugs it. Curiosity gets the better of him, so in the evening it is he who calls Deirdre and engages in conversation. Paul finds out she originates from Canada and had met Farouk a year and a half earlier when she was walking out of a café. He had followed her halfway down the block, and “tapped her on the shoulder, looking her up and down with unconcealed desire” (197). Their first date was at Walden Pond and afterwards they went to her house where they ate corn, tomatoes and grilled salmon in her backyard. She claims that Farouk loves her home, an old farmhouse covering five acres and that he had asked her to draw the plans for redecorating his kitchen. It becomes evident that Farouk/Freddy has a double identity: he goes by two names, has two girlfriends whom he asks to do similar things for him, and leads two perfectly parallel lives. Yet, he does not allow anyone to get too close to him and seems particularly afraid of moving in with someone and permanently sharing a space. The Oriental Farouk is fascinated with the white woman’s house and body, but he cheats on her with an Indian-American with whom he does not seem particularly in love either.

After an hour of conversation Deirdre asks again if Sang and Farouk are cousins and Paul tells her that they have been a serious couple for three years. He feels a “strange, inward power as he spoke, aware that the information could devastate her” (198). But her reply is shocking: “Well, we’re a serious couple too. I picked him up from the airport yesterday when he came back from Cairo. I saw him tonight. He was here for dinner, here in my house. He made love to me on my staircase, Paul” (198). The staircase mirrors the one in the house Paul shared with Sang; so

perfect is the symmetry that Paul mentally pictures Farouk and Deirdre having sex on their stairs every time he walks up the staircase to his room. Therefore, Deirdre's place is the second house significant for the meaning of the story.

When Sang returns from London she sees Deirdre's name on the notepad Paul used to write down messages for her and asks if she should call back, but Paul dismisses the whole thing by saying she is probably just a telemarketer. After this lie he begins to avoid Sang, goes more often to the library and retreats to eat in his room, waiting for Deirdre to call again, but two months go by and she does not. One spring day before Paul's exam, he is fixing his bike in order to ride to Concord to see Emerson's house, when Deirdre does call and it is Sang who answers this time. Deirdre says she is a friend of Farouk's, visiting from out of town. Paul is relieved she does not say more but Sang starts to worry. Farouk has never introduced her to anyone and Sang believed he did not have any friends.

Paul, too, is uncomfortable with the situation. When he and Sang have dinner together, alone for the first time, he dreads the fact that the truth might surface: "He used to yearn for such an occasion. He used to feel clumsy and tongue-tied when Sang was in the room. Now he felt dread" (203). He feels guilty for knowing more than a mere housemate should about Sang's life, but either because he is trying to protect her or because he is afraid of ruining the fragile relationship between them, Paul does not tell her what he has learnt about Farouk's double life. When Sang starts asking more questions, he lies again saying he did not talk to Deirdre, but then admits that she acted strange and cried over the phone. Sang obviously asks why he had withheld this detail from her and he starts to regret having offered the cassoulet for dinner. In fact, he regrets having picked up the phone that day, and "that Sang and not another person had moved into the room, into his house, into his life" (204).

After this discussion Sang avoids him, while Heather had moved in with Kevin and left the house for good. A week later, Sang goes to Paul's room for the first time, and apologizes for shouting at him that night. She clears up the confusion by saying that Deirdre really is an old college friend of Farouk's living in Canada who had called to announce Farouk that she was getting married. She believes this story which had been made up by her boyfriend and accuses Paul of inventing the fact that Deirdre cried on the phone. She continues her attack: "Did you really think it would make me leave him? (...) I mean, it's one thing for you to like me, Paul. It's one thing for you to have a crush. But to make up a story like that - it's pathetic, really.

Pathetic!” (206). Paul feels wronged and outraged since for her sake he had told her about the crying. That night in the kitchen “he’d felt the walls collapsing around her. He’d wanted to warn her somehow. Now he wanted to push her from the door frame where she stood” (206). As Judith Caesar points out:

The architectural metaphors are deliberately chosen here. A house is not a place of safety but a place where walls can collapse, a place where the self collapses, as Sang’s does. The door frame of his room is not a barrier, is no protection from false accusations, misinterpretations, unfairness, anger. The house keeps out nothing, keeps in nothing, provides no refuge. It is another false promise, like the staircase that promises connection and leads to loneliness. (2005: 13)

Usually passive and insecure, this time Paul decides to act and take revenge for the fact that he was judged so harshly. So he starts calling Deirdre repeatedly, leaving messages on her machine and telling her to call him back. One day she finally picks up and says she would call him later. Paul buys an adapter with two jacks and tells Sang to listen to the conversation as he confronts Deirdre. The latter admits that she had helped Freddy to make Paul into a liar because she is a 35-year old woman, already divorced, who is in love with the Egyptian. However, she claims she had ended their affair when she found out about Sang:

You know, there was a point when I actually believed he couldn’t live without me. That’s what he does to women. He depends on them. He asks them to do a hundred things, makes them believe his life won’t function without them. (...) He doesn’t have any friends, you see. Only lovers. I think he needs them, the way other people need a family or friends. (*UE* 210)

In the end, she advises Paul to tell Sang the whole truth, unaware that Farouk’s other lover has been listening all along. After this dramatic scene, Paul knows he should feel relief or vindication, yet he realizes he only feels sorry for everything. Sang says nothing about the whole scene, but asks Paul to give her a ride to Farouk’s place.

They go upstairs, to the tenth floor of a posh building, and Sang has to tap ten times and shout through the door that she knows the truth before he undoes the chain and opens up. When he sees Paul he says: “I did not invite you here. Please, for once, try to respect our privacy” (212), and pushes him away. A short struggle follows in the hallway and ends with Paul easily pinning his opponent to the floor. Farouk can only spit at Paul’s face and push him off. Then he goes into his apartment and slams the door, with Sang already being inside. Behind another closed door Paul can again overhear crying, shouting, and objects falling until the superintendent of the building comes and asks Paul who he is. He answers ambiguously: “I live with the woman inside” (212) and they both go in.

Farouk's apartment is the third house that is crucial to interpreting the story. It is an exclusive, impersonal and somehow distant space, just like its owner:

Paul glimpsed a bright white kitchen without windows, a stack of cookbooks on the counter. To the right was a dining room, painted the same sage-green as Sang's room. Paul followed the super into the living room. There was an off-white sofa, a coffee table, a sliding glass door that led to a balcony. (...) There was a bookcase along one wall which had fallen to the floor, its books in a heap. The receiver of a telephone on a side table hung from a cord, beeping faintly, repeatedly. In spite of these things, the room had a barren quality, as if someone were in the process of moving out of it. (214)

Sang is kneeling on an Oriental carpet, picking up the pieces of what appeared to have been a clear glass vase; there is water everywhere and the ruins of a flower bouquet which had been bought by her. She has petals all over her face, hair and body. A policeman arrives and asks Sang if she lived there. All she can retort is: "I painted the walls" (214), as neutral a statement as Paul makes when asked about his relation to Sang: "I'm her housemate. I just gave her a ride" (214). Then Sang adds: "I did this to myself" (215), admitting at last that she had been living an illusory life. The scratches on her face as well as the wrecked apartment she leaves behind illustrate how devastated she is by the break up.

Farouk's apartment is ruined, and so are the fragile and shallow relationships between the three characters. The scene contains many violations. Sang is evicted once more from Farouk's space, for good this time. The fact that she chose the color, painted the walls, and helped with other decorations, turns out to be irrelevant, since Farouk's space remains off-limits for her. Farouk, on the other hand, is exposed, his house is invaded and then severely damaged, and his relationship with Sang is over. Although Paul wins the physical fight with his opponent, he is spat at, which cancels his victory. Moreover, he leaves holding hands with Sang, escorts her to the house they share but is forced to admit (publicly and to himself) that he is no one to Sang. It can be said that this scene evokes Gayatri Spivak's phrase referring to white men who symbolically save brown women from brown men. Nevertheless, Paul was right to intervene in this scene of domestic violence. It is unclear whether he did it for ethical reasons, or hoping that his love for Sang would be reciprocated after the Arab man's deceit is exposed.

Rajini Srikanth argues that Farouk, the only character in the book of Arabic descent, is used by Lahiri to strengthen the already tight links between Indian-Americans and white Americans. He is a totally unattractive character, one who cheats, lies, and psychologically abuses two women. This has led Srikanth to the 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” (68). Even if she has not done it deliberately, the fact remains that her Indian-American characters are pleasant and perfectly acculturated, only slightly different from mainstream white Americans, whereas the Egyptian émigré emerges as totally untrustworthy and despicable. A foreigner that should be avoided and eventually excluded.

The next morning Sang flies to London but leaves money for a month’s rent and a note thanking Paul for his ‘help’ the other night. She is fired from the bookshop and after three weeks Farouk begins to call, falling back into his old pattern, expecting her to forgive him as she had done many times before. But this time things are different and the events that had occurred created a gap which cannot be bridged anymore. Thus, Sang does not come back for one month and when Paul calls her sister’s place a man announces she would be living in London through the summer. So Charles, Sang’s friend who had helped her move in, comes by to pick up her stuff. She does not have many things in the rented room, symbolizing it is not hard for her to relocate to a different country since she does not have very strong roots in the United States to begin with.

The story ends with Paul passing his exam and going out with two of his professors for a drink at the Four Season’s bar. He gets a little drunk, studies the impressive lobby and wishes he could afford to “march up to the desk and request a room, a big white bed, silence” (218). Even though he is now living alone in a big, empty, and presumably silent house, he dreams of a hotel room. Like Farouk, he is probably afraid of commitment and of sharing a house with people who might get to know him. He needs a space which he can totally control. Longing for a silent, impersonal space can also mean that he still hears Sang’s ‘music’ in the house they used to share and it might be his attempt of getting away from that memory.

After he leaves the hotel he goes for a walk and notices a couple on a bench – it is Farouk and a woman. Paul sits on a bench across from them, looking straight at his rival, believing he is with a new woman and thinking with contempt: “For this man, Deirdre had called a perfect stranger, made a fool of herself. For this man, Sang would rush from the house, had refused all her suitors” (218). Surprisingly, Farouk walks over and tells Paul he should be grateful he did not sue since his shoulder was damaged in the fight and he may need surgery. The story has one more twist, and as the couple walks away, Paul sees a small dog between them and realizes the woman is Deirdre. She, too, had thus lied to Paul over the phone saying that Farouk had a fear of

dogs and she had to hide Balthazar every time he visited her. More importantly, she had also lied about having broken up with Farouk, and the whole ‘phone’ game was a scheme on her behalf meant to separate her lover from Sang.

“Nobody’s Business” is a story of deceptions, a story in which three houses promise intimacy and connection between characters but all the triangles formed inside them are unstable and illusory. At the same time, nobody actually manages to grow roots or be transplanted anywhere; they all seem free of permanent roots (maybe that is also the reason why the city is not named). Sang is Indian-American but does not feel any special link to India or America and ends up moving to England virtually overnight. Farouk is from Egypt but does not personalize the space he inhabits in America so he could have migrated anywhere. He is involved with two women, but shares a house with neither of them. He takes Deirdre, a Canadian, on a date to Walden Pond, but neither of them relates to the place or connects it with iconic New England writer Henry David Thoreau. Paul studies English literature, so the literature of a foreign place, and visits Emerson’s house like a tourist. He lives with two women but is not involved sexually with either. In the end Paul is left alone in his rented space and Farouk continues his relationship with Deirdre, but theirs is a connection based on betrayal and on a foundation which could crumble at any point. In fact, as the title announces, everything seems to be “nobody’s business” and characters in this story are unable to go beyond superficial levels of acquaintance. When they do, everyone comes out harmed.

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“Hell-Heaven” is the second story of the book, and also the shortest. It is narrated by Usha, now an Indian-American adult who is telling her mother’s story in an effort to make sense of her own cultural hybridity by meditating on her complicated childhood. We learn that the family of the narrator is from Calcutta but has moved in the early seventies to America, via Berlin, where the father finished his training in microbiology and where Usha was born. At 37, her father accepted a job as researcher at Mass General which brought them to American soil. His wife, Aparna, who is nine years younger, followed him abroad but is initially unhappy in their rented apartment which is small and has “dull, mismatched furniture” (*UE* 62), although it is situated in Central Square.

The narrative debuts with Aparna roaming the streets of Cambridge, Massachusetts with her little daughter. Pranab Chakraborty, who is 25 years-old and has just arrived in the United States to study engineering at MIT, follows them for a while until he finally asks if they are Bengali, despite the fact that Aparna is wearing a conspicuous sari, red and white bangles and the vermilion powder in the center parting of her hair. Pranab is very intelligent, “a star at Jadavpur” (63), still life as a graduate student in Boston proves to be a cruel shock to him, and in his first month he loses nearly 20 pounds. He landed in New England in the middle of a snowstorm, and after a week he had already repacked his bags and went to the airport in order to return to India. But he changed his mind at the last moment and stayed.

Aparna invites Pranab to the house where she serves him tea and Indian food to soothe his homesickness. He is soon adopted into the family as a younger brother of the father, which is why he is addressed with Pranab Kaku (meaning “uncle”) and he in turn respectfully calls Aparna “Boudi” and her husband “Da”. In Aparna’s opinion, Pranab already looks like an American hippie: he is tall, “with a high forehead and a thick moustache, and overgrown, untamed hair” (62). He often visits his new Bengali friends and they open up their apartment to him at any time. He always leaves behind some vestige of himself: “a nearly finished pack of cigarettes, a newspaper, a piece of mail he had not bothered to open, a sweater he had taken off and forgotten in the course of his stay” (62). Pranab fills the house with his exuberant laughter and sprawls his lanky body all over the furniture; before long, Aparna begins to set aside a teacup for him to use as an ashtray. More importantly, he also fills the emptiness in Aparna’s life caused by the experience of being uprooted. Thus, Usha recalls:

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

Aparna cooks for Pranab, planning days in advance snacks to serve him, changes into new saris and combs her hair for him, and practically lives for the moments they spend together. In his first months in the United States, Pranab is always hungry and “would eat ravenously, reaching behind my mother to steal cutlets as she was frying them, before she had a chance to set them properly on a plate with red onion salad” (63). He consumes Aparna’s food to connect with the lost homeland, but soon, like a child who is at first totally dependent on his parents to feed him/her, he asserts his independence.

Pranab's hobby is photography, a recurrent trope in Lahiri's second collection of short stories. In fact, this particular story unfolds chronologically, as if one were browsing through a family album. The pictures Pranab takes of Usha as a child are still her favorites, "for they convey that confidence of youth I no longer possess, especially in front of a camera" (64). He captures her childhood in these photographs, but photography also entails a feeling of nostalgia since the moments one immortalizes are gone forever.

Interestingly, Lahiri also draws attention to what lies beyond the frame. She often describes photographs and refers to that which is not seen in the actual picture. For example, in the only photo in which Aparna appears, she is holding Usha in her lap, her head tilted toward the little girl, and her hands pressed to her ears as if to prevent her from hearing something. "In that picture", the narrator continues, "Pranab Kaku's shadow, his two arms raised at angles to hold the camera to his face, hovers in the corner of the frame, his darkened, featureless shape superimposed on one side of my mother's body. It was always the three of us. I was always there when he visited" (64). Pranab's shadow is juxtaposed on Aparna's figure, the way their bodies never are in reality. Yet, he is part of this picture, as he is of their daily life. He is both the photographer, the one who captures this memory on film, and the photographed, even if it is only "his darkened, featureless shape".

Pranab and Aparna are homesick, isolated, and alone in the United States, but they find 'home' in each other. The two have many things in common: they both come from wealthy families in North Calcutta, they actually lived within walking distance from each other, and "[t]hey knew the same shops, the same bus and tram routes, the same holes-in-the-wall for the best jelahis and moghlai parathas" (64). Even though they were neighbors in India, they only met in the United States; their relationship develops here but it is rooted back home. Besides the homeland nostalgia, they are also connected by a love of music, film, leftist politics, and poetry:

Within a few weeks, Pranab Kaku had brought his reel-to-reel over to our apartment, and he played for my mother medley after medley of songs from the Hindi films of their youth. They were cheerful songs of courtship, which transformed the quiet life in our apartment and transported my mother back to the world she'd left behind in order to marry my father. She and Pranab Kaku would try to recall which scene in which movie the songs were from, who the actors were and what they were wearing. My mother would describe Raj Kapoor and Nargis singing under umbrellas in the rain, or Dev Anand strumming a guitar on the beach in Goa. She and Pranab Kaku would argue passionately about these matters, raising their voices in playful combat, confronting each other in a way she and my father never did. (65)

The two legendary Indian actors mentioned in this paragraph worked together in sixteen films and apparently also had an affair off-screen. The scene where they sing under umbrellas in the rain is from the movie *Shree 420* (1955). Pranab and Aparna share these memories and connect to India through references to music and film. They need these imaginary connections in order to ease their transition to the new land they now inhabit. But, as Rushdie puts it, what the two actually share are in fact memories of an imaginary homeland, of “Indias of the mind” (*Imaginary Homelands* 10).

In contrast, Usha’s father comes from a suburb twenty miles away from Calcutta, an area that Aparna considers to belong to the wilderness, and “[e]ven in the bleakest hours of her homesickness she was grateful that my father had at least spared her a life in the stern house of her in-laws, where she would have had to keep her head covered with the end of her sari at all times and use an outhouse that was nothing but a raised platform with a hole, and where, in the rooms, there was not a single painting hanging on the walls” (*UE* 64-5). Hence, isolation in America is preferred to life in a poor Indian suburb, and immigration is seen as an evolution by Aparna despite its hardships.

Aparna’s husband is the perfect opposite of Pranab. He loves silence and solitude, and does not eat “with the reckless appetite of Pranab Kaku” (65). He does not crave for more than cereal and tea in the morning, and two different vegetable dishes every night with dinner. He got married in order to placate his parents who were willing to accept his departure from home as long as he had a wife. But the only thing he is really passionate about is his research. Instead of being jealous of the younger man’s regular visits to his house and for the effect he has on his wife, Usha’s father is actually “grateful to Pranab Kaku for the companionship he provided, freed from the sense of responsibility he must have felt for forcing her to leave India, and relieved, perhaps, to see her happy for a change” (66). One can detect the same sense of burdening responsibility like in the case of Ruma’s father, from “Unaccustomed Earth”. This patriarch is also indifferent to his wife’s emotional turmoil, but works hard in order to support the family and ensure its prosperity in the United States.

In the summer of his first year in America, Pranab buys a Volkswagen Beetle and starts to take Usha and her mother for long drives through Boston and Cambridge, and soon outside the city, flying down the highway to ‘India Tea and Spices’ in Watertown, to New Hampshire to look at the mountains, or once or twice a week, to Walden Pond. The transcendentalist writer and

philosopher Henry David Thoreau lived near the pond for two years starting in the summer of 1845. Boston's Frederic Tudor, owner of the "Tudor Ice Company", harvested ice on Walden Pond in order to ship it to the Caribbean, Europe, and even India. In his journal, Thoreau records this: "The sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well (...) The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges" (233).

Probably unaware of this historical connection to India, the three make their own imaginary links with their homeland by having picnics at Walden Pond. The food is, of course, prepared by Aparna, who always reminisces about the picnics of her youth, when she and fifty of her relatives would go by train into the West Bengal countryside. Pranab Kaku listens to these stories with interest, sharing with Aparna the nostalgia for the 'good old days' when they both had the companionship of their extended families. Except for their constant recollections, the past is fading in the troublesome process of re-rooting themselves. As Salman Rushdie has observed:

The effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves – because they are so defined by others – by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. The migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. (*Imaginary Homelands* 124)

Mile by mile, Pranab discovers New England, land of the first colonies, and gets used to America, with its large roads and sites to visit. Yet, he remains "an odd sight, with his pole-thin legs, and a small flaccid belly, like an otherwise svelte woman who has had a baby and not bothered to tone her abdomen. 'You're making me fat, Boudi,' he would complain after gorging himself on my mother's cooking" (*UE* 66). He still devours her food, totally dependent on her during these first months, more than her husband had ever been during their whole marriage. To him she is the link to India, someone who eases his abrupt cross-cultural experience, his transplantation. To Aparna, he is a link to India and more. She is in love, but Pranab will never return her affection. What he feels is respect for her and her husband, "always seeking his advice about making a life in the West, about setting up a bank account and getting a job, and deferring to his opinions about Kissinger and Watergate" (67). While his connection with Aparna is meant to preserve his Bengality, the bond he has with Aparna's husband is oriented towards his

assimilation in America. He eats the food she prepares, talks to her about Indian films, and listens with her to Indian music. With her husband, Pranab pragmatically discusses American business and politics.

In the fall of 1974, Pranab meets a student in philosophy at Radcliffe, an American girl called Deborah, who starts to accompany him to dinners prepared by Aparna. He teaches his girlfriend to address Usha's parents with Indian terms, and to eat with her fingers. Moreover, they sometimes feed each other, their fingers lingering in each other's mouth, causing Usha's parents to look down with embarrassment. They also hold hands and kiss in front of everyone at these Bengali gatherings. Deborah is an American and looks like one, too: she is tall, has brass-colored hair, which she wears in a ponytail, and does not use any make-up. Her parents are both professors at Boston College and both have doctoral degrees.

Usha considers this American girl "utterly beautiful" (68), regardless of her mother's negative comments, concerning the spots on her face and the fact that her hips are too small. She falls in love with Deborah, "the way young girls often fall in love with women who are not their mothers" (69). At the same, Usha is fascinated by this American girl precisely because she is American. She identifies more with Deborah than with her Indian mother, and this illustrates her ambivalent nature as a second-generation immigrant. She feels more comfortable communicating in English, and with Pranab's girlfriend she can do just that: "Deborah and I spoke freely in English, a language in which, by that age I expressed myself more freely than in Bengali, which I was required to speak at home" (69).

Deborah also brings Usha presents, like the Grimm's *Fairy Tales*, and different toys. This is a biographical reference, because in an article published in June 2011 in *The New Yorker*, Lahiri mentions how much she cherished her first book in English. The author received it from her mother, as opposed to her character who got it from an American woman to whom she was not related, and she still keeps it in her childhood room. Yet, reading in English provides them both with an opportunity to trespass, to discover a culture that is foreign to their parents. Lahiri writes in the same article: "I began to defy them in this way, and to understand, from books, certain things that they didn't know. Whatever books came into the house on my account were part of my private domain. And so I felt not only that I was trespassing but also that I was, in some sense, betraying the people that were raising me" (*Trading Stories* 79).

In “Hell-Heaven”, Trips in the Volkswagen continue, but they now involve Pranab and Deborah in the front, and Usha and Aparna in the back. Soon Aparna begins to find excuses to stop accompanying them, so Usha becomes part of a new triangle. She goes with the two lovers to the Museum of Fine Arts, the Public Garden and the Aquarium. Of course, numerous photographs are now being taken of Usha and Deborah, with Usha sitting in Deborah’s lap. The American woman has taken the place of Usha’s mother not only in Pranab’s life, but also in photographs. Meanwhile, Aparna is pregnant for the fifth time since Usha’s birth and since their relocation to the United States. She has another miscarriage, a symbol of her failed relationship with her husband or of her failure to adapt in the United States. She is eventually advised by the doctor to stop trying.

A few months later, Pranab gives Deborah a diamond ring and asks her to marry him. Usha’s mother is jealous and she tells her Bengali women friends that his American girlfriend has changed Pranab dramatically: “He used to be so different. I don’t understand how a person can change so suddenly. It’s just hell-heaven, the difference, she would say, always using the English words for her self-concocted, backward metaphor” (*UE* 68-9). This is an upside-down version of the Bengali expression ‘*akaash-paathal*’ (heaven-hell), which signifies a vast difference.² In a very short period of time, Pranab has indeed reinvented himself and assimilated into American society. He seems to have abruptly severed connections to India, and Aparna judges this separation as negative. She is hurt both as a woman, and as an Indian.

Pranab has also distanced himself dramatically from his biological parents, to the point to which he comes to ask Aparna and her husband to bless his marriage to Deborah. He was nervous about telling his family back in Calcutta that he intends to marry an American girl, so he asks Aparna and her husband to write a letter to his parents, telling them that they thought highly of his fiancée. Usha’s father agrees and mails the letter, but Aparna, who secretly hopes the two will eventually break up and Pranab will return to their ‘family’, has a fit and breaks the teacup he had turned into an ashtray and cuts her hand. As expected, Pranab’s parents are horrified by the thought of their only son marrying an American woman, and they call in the middle of the night, threatening to disown him if he goes through with the marriage. They have already chosen a wife for him in Calcutta and they have even bought the neighboring flat for Pranab and his betrothed. Finally, they accuse Usha’s parents for betraying their trust in their role as ‘adoptive

²<http://www.asianwindow.com/books/roots-migration-and-exile/>

parents' for Pranab, and launch the pejorative, rhetorical question: "Is this what happens to people in America?" (71) Their implication is that ancestral customs and values must be replicated in the adoptive land; otherwise Indian immigrants are guilty of betrayal.

Pranab's sentimental trajectory is atypical – usually Lahiri's first-generation Indian men come to the United States already married, with their spouses and children by their side and only their children marry Americans. Pranab at first needs Aparna and her family to help him settle into and adjust to American society and then marries an American woman. However, as Rüdiger Heinze points out, it would be a mistake to judge the whole Indian diaspora as "monolithic" (193).

Soon, Pranab and Deborah move to an apartment in Boston, and Usha's family, too, changes house and buys a bigger place in Natick. From the initial rented apartment they occupied when they arrived in the United States, they now own a house in which they still behave like tenants, taking great care of walls and furniture. They are growing roots in America but at the same time they are probably still unsure of their status. A few weeks before the wedding, Pranab is invited to the new house alone and Aparna prepares a special meal to mark the end of his bachelorhood. This dinner "would be the only Bengali aspect of the wedding; the rest of it would be strictly American, with a cake and a minister and Deborah in a long white dress and veil" (*UE* 72). Obviously, there is a photograph to document this event. But this time Usha's father is behind the camera. Ironically, it is the only picture in which Aparna and Pranab ever appear together:

The picture is slightly blurry; I remember Pranab Kaku explaining to my father how to work the camera, and so he is captured looking up from the kitchen table and the elaborate array of food my mother had prepared in his honor, his mouth open, his long arm outstretched and his finger pointing, instructing my father how to read the light meter or some such thing. My mother stands beside him, one hand placed on top of his head in a gesture of blessing, the first and last time she was to touch him in her life. (73)

Again, what happens outside the frame interferes with/influences the people being photographed. Pranab is more interested in explaining the technical aspects of taking a picture than in the person he is photographed with. As for Aparna, she is convinced he is making a mistake, despite her gesture of blessing. Even though they appear together and even touch, the picture seems to seal their separation, with Pranab cutting ties with the narrator's family almost completely. Aparna's husband does not feature in the picture physically, yet he is the one she will spend the

rest of her life with. In fact, by taking Pranab's place behind the camera he also symbolically takes his place in Aparna's life.

The wedding *per se* takes place at a church in Ipswich, and is followed by a reception at a country club. Usha and her parents are the only Bengalis invited among the thirty guests, but they are not included in the group photographs taken with Deborah's parents, grandparents, and many siblings. Being left out of the group pictures is, of course, very dramatic to them, especially since wedding pictures are highly cherished in a family album. Pranab has broken off completely with his Indian past and has left both his Indian families – his biological parents and his 'adoptive' parents in America – 'out of the picture'. Aparna complains about the formality of the lunch, and Pranab barely notices them, being too busy socializing with his new American in-laws. In stark contrast to his wife who is going through an ordeal, Usha's father clears first his plate and then his wife's, displaying an unusual appetite. Later, everyone dances except for the two of them, and after a few songs they decide to leave, feeling totally out-of-place.

After a year they receive a birth announcement from the Chakrabortys, together with "a picture of twin girls, which my mother did not paste into an album or display on the refrigerator door. The girls were named Srabani and Sabitri but were called Bonny and Sara" (74). This is the first communication in twelve months and, although Pranab now has a good job at Stone & Webster and has moved with the family to a new house in Marblehead, Usha's family is never invited and the distance between them seems unyielding. They go under his Indian family name, but they never come to Bengali house gatherings anymore, and their absences are attributed again, by Usha's parents and their circle, to Deborah. It "was universally agreed that she had stripped Pranab Kaku not only of his origins but of his independence. She was the enemy, he was her prey, and their example was invoked as a warning, and as vindication, that mixed marriages were a doomed enterprise" (75). Even worse, their two identical little girls who barely look Bengali and speak only English are raised totally differently from Usha and most of the other children of Indian-Americans. In fact, Usha envies the twins because: "They were not taken to Calcutta every summer, they did not have parents who were clinging to another way of life and exhorting their children to do the same" (75). The story is fraught with symbols of duality: two countries, two cultures, two families, twin girls, heaven and hell. And two identities the narrator has to wrestle with.

Usha, who is by now in her teens, starts to have crushes on American boys but her mother warns she will not “get away with marrying an American, like Pranab Kaku did” (75). Family relations and attitudes towards sex are understood in radical opposition by Indians and Americans. For example, when Usha has her first period, her mother tells not to let any boy touch her; the girl disobeys but keeps this a secret from her mother. Aparna is troubled by the uninhibited lifestyle of Americans and she complains to her husband about how much she hates life in the American suburbs and how lonely she feels. He urges her to go back to Calcutta, displaying a blunt rigidity and lack of affection. Usha also screams at her mother, isolating her doubly. She is an American teenager who has “stopped needing her, definitively and abruptly, just as Pranab Kaku had” (77). The conflict between generations is more acute due to the cultural factor: Aparna wants her daughter to grow up like an Indian girl, but Usha obviously rejects this prospect and develops like an American.

Soon, however, Usha starts to understand her mother and feel pity for her: “The older I got, the more I saw what a desolate life she led. She had never worked, and during the day she watched soap operas to pass the time. Her only job, every day, was to clean and cook for my father and me” (76). She understands how lonely and uprooted her mother must have felt for decades. Without her husband’s support, constantly fighting with her daughter, Aparna’s experience with immigration was terrible.

The year before Usha starts college, they are invited to the Chakrabortys’ home for Thanksgiving, together with other friends from the old Cambridge crowd. Normally, Usha’s parents do not celebrate American holidays such as Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, or Veteran’s Day. But they accept the invitation and go to Marblehead where Pranab and his family now live. The house is stone-faced and impressive, situated only a short walk away from the ocean. Toys and dolls are scattered everywhere, and numerous photos of Bonny, Sara and Deborah are decorating the walls or are pasted on the refrigerator door. Deborah’s sisters are wearing jeans and fisherman sweaters and Usha is furious with her mother for making her wear a *shalwar kameez*: “I knew they assumed, from my clothing, that I had more in common with the other Bengalis than with them” (78). Yet she is included in the preparation of an all-American meal: two stuffed turkeys, which are going to be served with different wines. Deborah’s father, Gene, gets up to say grace and asks everyone at the table to join hands, which, to Usha’s astonishment, even her parents do. Afterwards, Gene raises his glass and says: ““Forgive me, but I never

thought I'd have the opportunity to say this: Here's to Thanksgiving with the Indians.' Only a few people laughed at the joke" (78). Ethnic stereotypes are explored and deconstructed by Lahiri from both sides – Indian and American. Aparna frowns upon American cuisine and the fact that food is not ready when they get there, while the American patriarch makes a rather offensive ethnic joke.

Then Pranab gets up and actually gives thanks to "the Indians". He talks sentimentally about his early days in Cambridge, and tells everyone how he had followed Aparna and Usha that afternoon:

He walked around the room to where my mother was sitting and draped a lanky arm around her shoulder, forcing her, for a brief moment, to stand up. 'This woman', he declared, pulling her close to his side, 'this woman hosted my first real Thanksgiving in America. It might have been an afternoon in May, but that first meal at Boudi's table was Thanksgiving to me. If it weren't for that meal, I would have gone back to Calcutta. (79)

After dinner and dessert, Pranab and the Americans take the dogs for a walk on the beach. The Bengalis prefer to stay in and have tea together, talking to each other freely "after the forced chitchat with the Americans during the meal" (79). They are depicted as being in two different 'camps', with Usha deserting to the American side when she borrows a pair of jeans, a thick sweater, and sneakers from Deborah, so that she looks "like her and her sisters" and finally feels "like herself" (80).

Fourteen years after that Thanksgiving and twenty-three years after their wedding, Deborah and Pranab divorce because he has "strayed, falling in love with a Bengali woman, destroying two families in the process" (81). Ironically, the other woman was among the guests at the Thanksgiving dinner. Deborah calls Aparna and cries; they are connected by the fact that the same man broke their hearts. Aparna has moved on and she is getting along much better with her husband as they are approaching old age. Moreover, it turns out that, contrary to everyone's belief, Pranab was the one who had turned his back on his family in India and on his Bengali acquaintances in Massachusetts, although Deborah had insisted he should not. However, like his Thanksgiving speech seemed to announce, the fact that he cheats on his American wife with a woman of Indian origins might represent his return to the roots and his reconnecting with his Indianness.

The end of the story reveals one last picture, one that is not included in the chronological flow of events, and will not be pasted in any family album. A few weeks after Deborah and

Pranab's wedding, Aparna gathers all the safety pins in the house and pins them to her sari one by one, "attaching the front piece to the layer of material underneath, so that no one would be able to pull the garment off her body" (82). Then she goes out into their backyard, pours a can of lighter fluid on her clothes, and stands there for nearly an hour looking at the house, trying to find the courage to strike a match. Usha reports: "It was not I who saved her, or my father, but our next-door neighbor, Mrs. Holcomb, with whom my mother had never been particularly friendly" (83). The American woman comes out to rake the leaves in her garden and remarks what a beautiful sunset it is; Aparna agrees and goes back into the house, giving up on her suicidal plan. By the time Usha and her father return home, she is in the kitchen preparing rice for dinner, as if it were an ordinary day.

Aparna's attempt at self-cremation reminded me of the Hindu practice of *sati* (or *suttee*) in which a recently-widowed woman sets herself on fire on her husband's funeral pyre. Singh (1999) wrote that *sati* (which means 'good wife') "was based on the karma principle (implying fatalism and predestination) of Hindu marriage, which as a sacrament demands that a widow kill herself so that her soul may join that of her deceased husband" (645). Although exceedingly rare nowadays, the practice of *sati* basically required women to commit suicide out of a sense of duty. Spivak also discusses this practice at length in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) She points out that *sati* was prevalent in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Bengal because widows could inherit property here, unlike in other regions, and relatives wanted to prevent that.

This is not the case in Lahiri's story; first of all because Pranab is not Aparna's husband, even though they sometimes do appear as a family and she probably considers him 'dead' for her after he marries another woman. Secondly, Aparna does not go through with her symbolic *sati*, but leaves this love behind and works on building a life in America. She mends her relationship with her lawful husband and even gets a degree in library science, at fifty. After feeling alienated in the first years abroad, Aparna eventually assimilates. The title, "Hell-Heaven", can be interpreted as a metaphor for her whole experience as an immigrant, going from 'hell' in her first years in the United States, to 'heaven' in her senior years, after getting accustomed and transplanted into its earth.

When Usha becomes an adult, Aparna tells her the story of her attempted suicide. They now get along well, and Aparna has accepted the fact that Usha "was not only her daughter but a child of America as well" (*UE* 81-2). She knows that Usha dates American men, and supports

her when she goes through break-ups. In her turn, the daughter now understands what a struggle it has been for her mother to re-root in this foreign land.

Usha tells her mother's life story in order to reconcile her own hybridity as an Indian-American. This echoes another fragment from *Trading Stories: Notes on an Apprenticeship* (2011), in which Lahiri explains why and how she started to write literature and how her work reflects the migrant's in-betweenness. As a young girl, she wrote in order to connect with her peers. But in her twenties she took up writing again, this time as a means of reaching out to her parents. Lahiri confesses:

In 1992, just before starting the writing program at B.U., I went to Calcutta with my family. I remember coming back at the end of summer, getting into bed, and almost immediately writing the first of the stories I submitted that year in workshop. It was set in the building where my mother had grown up, and where I spent much of my time when I was in India. I see now that my impulse to write this story, and several like-minded stories that followed, was to prove something to my parents: that I understood, on my own terms, in my own words, in a limited but precise way, the world they came from. For though they had created me, and reared me, and lived with me day after day, I knew that I was a stranger to them, an American child. In spite of our closeness, I feared that I was alien. This was the predominant anxiety I had felt while growing up. (81)

Both the writer and her character (who narrates her parents' experiences) understand where their parents come from and the hardships caused by being stranded between two worlds. Through storytelling they are able to recover the past and make sense of their own hyphenated identities.

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"A Choice of Accommodations" is a story in which space is used, once more, in order to show how migrants negotiate their identities. The main characters, Amit and Megan Sarkar take a long drive from New York to attend a wedding at Langford Academy, "in the middle of nowhere" (UE 85) according to Megan. They have two girls, Maya and Monika, whom they drop off at Megan's parents in Long Island; this is their first trip without the girls in three years, and they intend it to be a romantic getaway. That is why they choose to stay in a hotel instead of sleeping at one of the Langford dorms. But Chadwick Inn proves to be "a place without character" (84), and the room is dark, in spite of the cathedral ceiling with exposed beams. The two do not like the room, but decide it is not worth changing it for a couple of nights.

Amit grew up in Winchester, Massachusetts; when he was in the ninth grade, his parents announced they were moving back to India, and he was going to Langford for prep school. Amit remembers the discussion vividly. They were having lunch at a seafood restaurant on the Cape, in Cotuit, and the table was: “heaped with the bright red claws and shells from which his father had effortlessly extracted the meat for all of them” (95). His father began by saying he was growing restless on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and continued that there was a hospital in New Delhi where he was needed. The decision to go back to India comes as a shock to Amit since his parents were not nostalgic about their homeland. In fact, they are quite Westernized and comfortably translated in the United States:

His parents, unlike most other Bengalis in Massachusetts, had always been dismissive, even critical of India, never homesick or sentimental. His mother had short hair and wore trousers, putting on saris only for special occasions. His father kept a liquor cabinet and liked a gin and tonic before his meals. They both came from wealthy families, had both summered in hill stations and attended boarding schools in India themselves. The relative affluence of America never impressed them; in many ways they had lived more privileged lives in India, but they left the country and had not looked back. (96)

Thus, the Sarkars are not among the Indians who immigrate in order to improve their economic condition, but itinerant characters, feeling at home on every continent, and not wanting to be pinned down anywhere. They are constantly on the move and embody the global transnational tendencies we witness today. After four years Amit’s parents return to America, but settle in Houston. Another five years go by and they move yet again, this time to Lausanne, Switzerland. They live in Saudi Arabia at the time of the narration because Amit’s father perfected a laser technique to correct astigmatism and he received a good offer. He is an ophthalmologist with a high reputation, but an authoritarian father who does not communicate with his son in order to find out his needs. Amit’s mother, on the other hand, follows her husband wherever he goes, and although she is only briefly sketched it is obvious that she is also distant to her son, very different from nurturing Indian mothers typically featured by Lahiri.

At Langford, Amit has a difficult time adapting. He is the only Indian student, he misses his parents to tears, cannot forgive them for abandoning him, and feels “crippled with homesickness” (97). The only emotional refuge he finds is in the family of the school’s headmaster, Mr. Borden. The Bordens invite all the students who do not go home for Thanksgiving to their place and they are always “friendly hosts for the students who washed up at their holiday table” (98). They have four sons and one daughter, Pam, the woman whose

wedding Amit and his wife are now attending. Amit has a crush on her, like every other boy in the boarding school. After graduating, Amit and Pam go to Columbia together; they are good friends, and Amit loves many things about her, including the fact that “the last two letters of her name were the first two in his, a silly thing he never mentioned to her but caused him to believe that they were bound together” (99). However, they never get together, even though they kiss once: “She had indulged him, just as her family had indulged him once a year in their home, offering a small piece of herself and then shutting the door” (100). For now, assimilation is refused to the Indian boy, and intercultural contact is brief and superficial.

At 21 Amit’s hair is already completely gray, and he thinks this is due to the fact that his parents had so abruptly parted with him when he was sent to Langford. He remembers his parents did not even come for his graduation, and some Bengali acquaintances of his parents’ attended in their stead. During Christmas and summer breaks Amit travels to Delhi to be with his mother and father, but does not feel comfortable or at home “in their flat full of servants in Chittaranjan Park” (96). His parents now live in a different part of India to that where they were originally from and everything feels foreign to young Amit. The house reflects his loneliness, his entrapment, and the sense that he does not belong there. The streets, on the other hand, are plain hostile:

He never enjoyed his visits to Delhi, his broken Bengali of no use in that city. It made him miss Calcutta, where all his relatives lived, where he was used to going. His parents had moved to Delhi the year of Indira Gandhi’s assassination, and the riots that subsequently raged there, the curfews and the constant vigilance with which his parents had to live, meant that Amit remained cooped up inside, without friends, without anything to do. (96)

The year is 1984 and Indira Gandhi is shot in October. Coincidentally, India is 37 and Amit’s age at the time the plot unfolds is also 37. Maybe this is a connection to his parents’ homeland, but Amit has a hard time accommodating there. In fact, he does not feel at home anywhere.

A parallel can be drawn between Amit and Rajiv Gandhi. As Salman Rushdie points out in his essay “Dynasty” (1985), included in the volume *Imaginary Homelands* (2010), Rajiv stepped in as prime minister after his mother’s murder because it was expected of him to take the dynastic rule further. Amit too is expected to become a famous doctor, like his father. He dreams about becoming a journalist, but his parents insist he should pursue a medical career. Yet he drops out of Columbia medical school after two years, literally walking away from his parents’ expectations. He takes the decision one night when he stops studying and goes out from his dorm

in Washington Heights, down Broadway to Lincoln Center and then finally stops in Chinatown, after having walked all night. His trajectory is descending and when he reaches the lowermost point he emerges as a different person. Amit is determined to apply for journalism, but is not accepted. Megan, whom he has met in medical school, encourages him to write anyway and he chooses a job as editor of a medical journal because it is “easier, more predictable work” (*UE* 109).

In contrast, Megan works really hard as a cardiologist at Mount Sinai; she is 42, five years older than her husband. She comes from a poor family, and is sometimes judgmental of richer people – Amit is from a wealthy family who disapproves of their relationship. Their wedding was a secret, they had eloped to the City Hall and Amit’s parents had not even met Megan, which was an insult to them: “For all their liberal Western ways he knew they wanted him to marry a Bengali girl, raised and educated as he had been” (112). Perhaps in this way Amit takes another revenge for the fact that they had abandoned him at Langford. First, he drops out of medical school, hence refusing to follow in his father’s footsteps. Secondly, he marries an American woman, older and more accomplished than him (she became a doctor and he did not).

Amit has the ‘easier’ job, so most of the time he is the one who takes care of the girls. He is an overly cautious dad, one who always frets about accidents and bad things happening to his daughters. He cannot imagine letting go of his daughters as his parents had let go of him. Amit’s parents are absent from their granddaughters’ physical features, as they are from their lives. Even their names are ‘vaguely Indian’ since they are third-generation Indian-Americans and they are totally disconnected from their Indian side:

His daughters looked nothing like him, nothing like his family, and in spite of the distance Amit felt from his parents, this fact bothered him, that his mother and father had passed down nothing, physically, to his children. Both Maya and Monika had inherited Megan’s coloring, without a trace of Amit’s deeply tan skin and black eyes, so that apart from their vaguely Indian names they appeared fully American. (94)

As they are preparing to go to Pam Borden’s wedding, Megan notices her skirt has a burnt hole in it (a symbol, perhaps, of their relationship of late). They look at their reflections in the bathroom mirror. She wears some reddish lipstick, although Amit prefers her face without makeup: “It was the face of someone he could imagine living in a previous era, a simpler time, in an America that was oblivious to India altogether” (92). Megan is the archetypal American in her

husband's opinion and by marrying her he connects to the country. What is more, their daughters resemble her and thus by-pass their father's ethnic heritage.

They agree to stay close to each other during the wedding reception so that Amit could help her conceal the flaw in her outfit. After a few drinks, however, Megan no longer cares about the hole in her skirt and Amit is "freed from his duty to stand by her side" (111). The wedding takes place at the precise spot where he had graduated 18 years earlier. Pam is getting married to Ryan, a writer for TV shows, and they are going to move to Los Angeles. At 37, Pam is beginning a chapter in her life; at 37, Amit is trying to revive his marriage. Although he still thinks that Pam is "the most beautiful woman he had ever known" (105), he is letting go of her and, by returning to the site of his childhood's trauma, he is finally closing this chapter in his life.

During the wedding, Amit has a controversial discussion with Felicia, a woman at their table, who asks him questions about parenthood. She is interested whether it was difficult for Megan to become pregnant. He answers that with Maya it happened the first time and he remembers how proud and powerful he had felt: "The first time in his life he'd had sex without contraception a life had begun" (112). He also recalls that he had been more eager than Megan to have children: "It was exotic, the world of parenting, fulfilling him in a way his job did not. It was Amit who'd pushed for a second. Megan was content with one, telling him she'd paid the price for being from a large family. But Amit hadn't wanted Maya to be an only child, to lead the lonely existence he remembered" (113). Then Felicia asks if they are considering a third child, and Amit dismisses the idea and makes a blunt statement which shocks and disgusts the woman. He says that after the second baby their marriage "sort of disappeared" (113-14). He realizes that after Monika's birth they have been devoting most of their energy not to doing things together but to finding ways in which both he and Megan could have some time alone. Even now at the wedding Megan is talking to Felicia's husband and is miles away from Amit, and he sometimes feels as alone in their marriage as he had first been at Langford. So he repeats "It disappeared" (114), with more force the second time.

Because on site there is no service, Amit goes to search for a pay phone so that he can call his daughters and wish them good night. He cannot find one so he walks across the field to the hotel and falls asleep in an instant and all dressed up. He only wakes up at 11 o'clock the next morning and finds Megan on the balcony where she has stayed up to watch the sunrise. She

is obviously mad at him, but Amit apologizes for having abandoned her and she agrees to go to the brunch that was organized for the guests. However, they arrive too late and it starts to rain so they have to go inside Standish Hall, one of the dorms. Megan stresses the fact that their choice of accommodation was not the best one and that they should have stayed here in which case Amit would not have missed the wedding. They have sex in one of the rooms, afraid of getting caught but also excited about breaking rules.

Amit returns to Langford trying to close a cycle and come to terms with the childhood trauma of being abandoned by his parents. He also intends to accommodate the changes in their life and marriage after he and Megan became parents for the second time. Although they do not plan to sleep at the old dorm, they end up making love there, which proves that sometimes a change of place or a return to a particular spot can solve certain problems.

Being practically abandoned in an American boarding school at a young age, Amit is obviously less impregnated with the Indian culture and traditions than Lahiri's other characters. But, unlike his parents who enjoy frequently relocating to different corners of the world, Amit is committed to growing roots in the United States. In fact, his rooting could be a final defiance aimed at his nomadic parents. With his American wife by his side and carefully raising his daughters as "fully American", he has every chance of achieving this goal.

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"Only Goodness" explores the slow fragmentation of the relationship between a sister and a brother. Sudha, the older sister, goes to Penn, and majors in economics and math. Later she gets a master's degree in International Relations. Rahul, her younger brother, graduates from high school and is accepted at Cornell. After his graduation, their parents, who moved from India to Great Britain and finally to the United States, throw a party with nearly 200 guests, "having in their opinion now successfully raised two children in America" (*UE* 129). They also buy Rahul a car, saying that it is going to be a necessity for his life in Ithaca, which is regarded by Sudha as a "remote, majestic place" (129).

Dominique Nagpal writes that first-borns in immigrant families are usually "subdued by a larger, more complex conglomerate of pressures, compared to their siblings, while they (the younger siblings) are already able to draw from the experiences the family gained as a whole.

The adjustment and assimilation processes are smoother and other learning curves are better established by the time the second child arrives” (47). So far, this statement seems to be as true for the Mukherjee siblings, as it was for Ruma and Romi from “Unaccustomed Earth”.

Sudha is six years older than her brother and the night he was born is the first sustained memory of her life. She was delighted no longer to be an only child and to have someone fill the emptiness she felt in their home: “The few things they owned were always in their places, the two most current issues of *Time* in the same spot on the coffee table. Sudha preferred the homes of her American friends, crammed and piled with things, toothpaste caking their sinks, their soft beds unmade. Finally, with Rahul’s arrival, there was a similar swelling and disorder (...)” (*UE* 134). She shares a room with the baby, and loves the fact that her mother comes at night to comfort Rahul, sitting in a rocking chair and singing Bengali lullabies.

The older sister takes pains for Rahul to have a beautiful childhood: she seeks out all the right toys for him, reads him stories, convinces her father to put a swing set in the yard, and thinks up elaborate Halloween costumes for him, while neglecting hers. She is “determined that her little brother should leave his mark as a child in America” (136). Although she adores Rahul, Sudha also envies him in small ways. For example, people can call him Raoul, so he can “introduce himself in crowds without questions” (136). A simple letter (*h* turned into *o*), and his name sounds familiar to Westerners, allowing him to assimilate more quickly.

She also envies him for the fact that he is allowed to wear shorts in summer (since he is a boy) and for his beauty. Interestingly, Rahul does not resemble his parents, and Lahiri implies he looks more like some of their Indian ancestors. In fact, his facial features defy his parents, foretelling the fact that he will defy them with his life choices, too. Although he is the most ‘American’ member of the family, his skin color represents the undeniable proof of his Indianness. Sudha, on the other hand, looks ordinary, and leads an ordinary life, complying with her parents’ expectations:

His face defied the family mold. Sudha, with her father’s rounded chin and her mother’s low hairline, was transparently their offspring, but Rahul looked little like either of them, his genes pulled not from the surface but from some deeper, forgotten source. His complexion was darker, his skin an unmistakable brown, his pronounced features lacking the indeterminate quality she and her parents shared. (137)

Numerous photographs are taken of the baby and Sudha arranges them in a special album. In contrast, there are hardly any photos taken in Sudha’s infancy. She was born in London where

her parents had rented two rooms from a Bengali landlord called Mr. Pal. He offered them a roof when Sudha's mother was pregnant and they had to move from the previous landlady who did not allow children in her house. He is, thus, their savior because most rentals in London in the sixties were for "WHITES ONLY, and the combination of being Indian and pregnant limited her parents to the point where her father considered sending her mother back to India to give birth, until they met Mr. Pal. To Sudha this story was like an episode out of a Greek myth or the Bible, rich with blessing and portent, marking her family as survivors in strange intolerant seas" (135).

Mr. Pal is the one who took the few pictures that existed of Sudha as a baby, and in most of them she was dressed in a white lace dress appropriate for a christening but which her mother had only bought because it looked pretty. When Sudha is four years-old, the family moves to Wayland, Massachusetts. In grad school Sudha has to present her autobiography to the class, but all she can show are these photos which seem boring to her mates. Sadly, apart from these pictures, they took with them little evidence of Sudha's childhood: "None of Sudha's toys had made it on the journey across the Atlantic, no baby clothing or bedding or keepsake of any kind" (136).

In the photos taken in London, Sudha's mother looked "unrecognizably slim, hair styled at a salon", and "even her saris were glamorous back then", whereas her husband dressed "vaguely mod, wearing suits with narrow dark ties and sunglasses" (137-38). In those days, Sudha guessed, they still viewed immigration as an adventure, living with paraffin heaters, and seeing snow for the first time. So, it can be argued that they truly immigrated only when they arrived in the United States:

Wayland was the shock. Suddenly they were stuck, her parents aware that they faced a life sentence of being foreign. In London her mother had been working toward a certificate in Montessori education, but in America she did not work, did not drive. She put on 20 pounds after Rahul was born, and her father put away his mod suits and shopped at Sears. In Wayland they became passive, wary, the rituals of small-town New England more confounding than negotiating two of the world's largest cities. (138)

For Ashima from *The Namesake* immigration is a "lifelong pregnancy" (gravidity without delivery), for the Mukherjees it is a "life sentence of being foreign" (imprisonment without having the option of being released). They left England because of racial discrimination, attracted by American ideals of equality. Even if in the end they do become acculturated, initially they face a terrible shock: the encounter with the foreignness of the new land and its customs.

They have to rely on Sudha to cushion the impact and help with the process of settling in. Sudha is very responsible even as a child and she acts as a cultural intermediary for her parents. Her English is perfect and she has a better, instinctive understanding of American ways. Her brother can hardly comprehend the immigrant experience and minimizes the hardships that come along with it:

While Sudha regarded her parents' separation from India as an ailment that ebbed and flowed like a cancer, Rahul was impermeable to that aspect of their life as well. 'No one dragged them here', he would say. 'Baba left India to get rich, and Ma married him because she had nothing else to do'. That was Rahul, always aware of the family's weaknesses, never sparing Sudha from the things she least wanted to hear. (138)

Thus, the first child of immigrants actually has memories of what it means to be uprooted. Sudha compares the pain of separation from the homeland to an incurable disease, while her younger brother pragmatically underrates the struggle. To him, it is merely a matter of getting rich for his father and of following her man, for his mother.

Sudha decides to go back to London for a second M.A. at the London School of Economics; for her, recuperating moments from her childhood does not mean traveling to India, but to Europe. Her parents, too, are excited by this prospect because it reminds them of a flourishing period in their lives, despite the instances of discrimination. Therefore, they make plans about visiting and reconnecting with old friends, while Rahul is the only one who disapproves and wonders why she needs a second master's degree.

In June, before going to London, Sudha comes home for a week and spends all her time with her parents. Meanwhile, Rahul works part time in a seafood restaurant in Scituate (35 miles away), so he is always drifting in and out of the house. Because his second-semester grades have dropped, Sudha's mother asks her to talk to him. Their father does not hide his disappointment as he has always put pressure on them to succeed in the American educational system, comparing them to other Bengali children who had outstanding results. He and his wife come from humble backgrounds and both their families had made considerable sacrifices to raise them. Sudha suspects this glued their parents together, the fact that they worked hard to be able raise their two children in better conditions than they had benefitted from. This opportunity for progress must have given them the strength to leave India and take on the challenges of asserting their identity as immigrants, first in England, and then in the United States. Other than that, their parents'

marriage is described as “perplexing”, and “neither happy, nor unhappy” (137), without manifest signs of love.

Sudha had a close relationship with her brother until he reached his teens and started to drink. Ever since then he became distant and shut her out of his life after she refused to buy him alcohol. When Sudha goes to Rahul’s room and tries to talk to him about his grades, he is reading Beckett’s plays, drinking and listening to music. He is very aggressive in language and lets her know abruptly that he no longer is her “little brother”. He accuses her of being too insistent and of trying to fix everything all the time: “You don’t even live here. You think you can stroll in and make everything perfect before you disappear to London?” (141). This is his way of rebelling against the fact that their parents always pushed them to live up to their expectations. Perhaps remembering their initial troubles in the United States, they project onto their children (particularly on the son) their ambitions. However, Rahul’s story “becomes the American Dream reversed – a gradual downfall of a young man”, as Filipczak observes (7). Rahul resists following the path they had set out for him and refuses to be the excellent student and the obedient child his sister had been. He even resents Sudha for having complied with the pattern set out by their parents.

Before Sudha’s departure to London, the four of them go out to a restaurant. Everyone is jovial; the parents reminisce about the period they spent there, trying to remember the order of stops on the Piccadilly Line and giving their daughter some final advice. Rahul tells Sudha about all the writers’ homes and graves she should visit while she is there. For the first time it occurs to Sudha that perhaps her brother is “jealous of those years she and her parents had lived in England, those years when Rahul did not exist” (*UE* 142), jealous of the fact that he does not share those past moments with his family. Perhaps that is why he cannot identify with them and with what they underwent. He then leaves without saying where he is going and later that night he calls from the local police station. He has been pulled over for wavering his lane. He is under 21 and has also been drinking so he is arrested and his family has to post bail. Rahul’s license is suspended for six months and he is ordered to attend some alcohol education classes in Ithaca.

After the incident, his father also has to pay \$2000 in fees and fines, and the arrest is mentioned in *The Wayland Town Crier*, the local paper his parents receive, thus subjecting them to public shame. Their mother is outraged, claiming that her son was surely arrested because he is Indian. Sudha finally tells her parents about Rahul’s drinking problem. But they refuse to

accept this fact, and have a similar reaction to Aparna's from "Hell-Heaven", namely they blame it on the 'American way'. Sudha's mother says everyone in American colleges drinks: "That's the problem with this country. Too many freedoms, too much having fun. When we were young, life wasn't always about fun" (143). She denies it is Rahul's fault in any way, but condemns the American lifestyle for her son's personal mistakes.

In London, Sudha immediately receives a British passport due to her *ius soli*. Her parents travel with her and stay for ten days to get her settled in the residence off Tottenham Court Road. They take her to Balham on the tube and show her the house where she was born and spent her first years. The three of them also take a trip to Sheffield, where Mr. Pal now lives. That period in their lives unites them and they rarely speak of Rahul. When old friends ask about him, they always present the impressive facts, namely that he is a sophomore at Cornell. Sudha is busy with school and making friends, but she enjoys London: "Perhaps because it was her birthplace, she felt an instinctive connection to London, a sense of belonging though she barely knew her way around. In spite of the ocean that now separated her from her parents, she felt closer to them, but she also felt free, for the first time in her life, of her family's weight" (144). Thus, London represents a return to her 'roots'. At the same time, only here, thousands of miles away from her parents and brother, can she feel free of their expectations and 'allowed' to run her life as she pleases.

During a visit at the National Gallery, Sudha is admiring *The Arnolfini Marriage* by Jan van Eyck when she meets a man, close to 40, who gives her details about the famous oil painting. Roger Featherstone has a PhD in art history, is the editor of an art magazine and has written a book about Renaissance portraiture. The masterpiece they are looking at portrays a couple in the act of getting married. In fact, art historians consider it unique in that it functions as a marriage contract in the form of a painting. Another peculiar and revolutionary element in *The Arnolfini Marriage* is the convex mirror hanging on the wall behind the wealthy couple and revealing the presence of two other persons, one of whom is most probably the painter himself. Lahiri uses this particular painting to connect Sudha and Roger, who will later on get married, by means of a European artistic creation. She also shows Sudha's willingness to acquire transnational and cross-cultural knowledge, and hints at the fact that "no marriage (...) can exclude others, witnesses or family, who help constitute the individual and social identities of the married couple" (Hai 192).

After this initial bond is created, Roger starts to woo her, “consistently, romantically: flowers every time he knocked on the door, gifts of gloves and earrings and perfumes” (UE 146). Roger was born in India and had lived in Bombay for the first three years of his life. Their stories mirror each other – Sudha is of Indian descent but was born in London, whereas Roger is English but happened to be born in India. He is described as responsible and balanced, just like Sudha. She is charmed by the Englishman and does not fly back home for Christmas, but tells her parents she has work to do. Instead, she escapes with Roger to Seville and Costa del Sol. When she returns she finds a message from her parents, announcing that Rahul is at home but they are again fighting over his bad grades. Once more she is asked to talk to him, so she decides to call and tackle the problem. Rahul surprises her by saying he wants to drop out of college and write a play; he feels trapped in the house because his parents do not let him drive and he accuses his sister of sounding like them. When she returns to Wayland in April to tell her family that she is going to marry Roger and move permanently to London, she finds out her brother has been dismissed from the university, has moved back to his old room in his parents’ house in Wayland and does not work or do anything all day. Their parents have even sold his car as a punishment, so he never goes out: “Their mother, who had always hoped her children would live under her roof, was now ashamed that this was the case” (151).

Eventually Rahul finds a job managing a Laundromat in Wayland three days a week, but the ‘model minority myth’ is partially deconstructed in this story. The first-born immigrant child, Sudha, is among the successful children, now working as a project manager for an organization in London that promotes micro loans in poor countries, but the second-born, Rahul, is alienated in American culture. There is a “horrible imbalance” (152) between Sudha and her brother, whose life does not seem to be going anywhere, who continues to drink, has given up on writing the play and is not even thinking of moving out of his parents’ house. He has become “what all parents feared, a blot, a failure, someone who was not contributing to the grand circle of accomplishments Bengali children were making across the country, as surgeons or attorneys or scientists, or writing articles for the front page of the *New York Times*” (151).

His refusal to live up to the demands of his parents is due to the fact that he lives on the border between two cultures and is unable to translate. His parents pressure Rahul to succeed in American society while also preserving some core Indian values. They believe it is possible to take in only the ‘good’ aspects of their host country (education, job, justice, and equality), while

remaining 'immune' to depression or alcoholism, negative things they pretend do not even exist. I think the title, "Only Goodness", refers to the desire they impose on their children to absorb only the positive sides of American culture. Rahul is stranded between these two worlds and tries to break away from parental control and norms and make it 'on his own'. However, his artistic attempts also fail; therefore the space he has to negotiate his hybridity is limited. Sudha, on the other hand, does manage to balance the conflicting influences. Yet she finds happiness in a third country/culture. She, too, needs to get away from her family in order to achieve personal fulfillment.

In the summer Sudha and Roger fly to Massachusetts so he can meet her parents and ask formally for her hand. They choose to stay in a hotel in Boston and not in her parental home. They announce that they are going to have a registry wedding in London and only a reception in Massachusetts. Her parents do not seem bothered by the fact that Roger has been married before and is 14 years her elder, either. They are content that he was born in India, "that he was English and not American, drinking tea, not coffee, saying 'Zed' not 'Zee', superficial things that allowed her parents to relate to him" (152). Even Rahul agrees that Roger is a "good guy". He is now dating an older woman, Elena (30) who has a daughter from a previous boyfriend and he abruptly announces to his family that they, too, are engaged. Their father strongly disapproves and Rahul takes his girlfriend and storms out of the room. Their parents turn to Sudha to solve the situation once more, but she bursts: "I can't fix him. I can't keep fixing what is wrong with this family" (156). She has moved to London and is getting married, so she is trying to begin a new life and alleviate herself from the responsibilities that burdened her childhood and youth. She seems determined to keep her new family separate from her natal one.

At the wedding reception Rahul makes a toast, telling an embarrassing story about Sudha's childhood, and then leaves. He runs away from home, abandons his car in a bus station, and after a week sends a postcard from Columbus, Ohio: "I don't want to hear from any of you. Please leave me alone" (158). Soon they discover he has stolen his mother's gold jewels, representing her husband's financial success in America and "intended to go to whatever woman Rahul eventually married" (158), even if she was American and not Bengali like they would have hoped.

Feeling guilty for the nights when she and Rahul used to drink beer together, smoking and listening to The Rolling Stones and The Doors, Sudha does not tell her husband about her

brother's drinking addiction. She remembers *The Arnolfini Marriage* and "the small mirror at the back revealing more than the room at first appeared to contain" (157). In her case the mirror would disclose a family secret, if Roger looked close enough. But Sudha wonders "what was the point of making Roger lean in close, to see what she was already forced to?" (157). Thus, she withholds the truth about her brother from her husband. She thinks Roger actually wants to be kept away: "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). The implication is that Roger is not perfectly comfortable with her family's brown skin and wants to keep his distance. This comment is comparable to the British racism that drove them away from Britain in the 1960s.

Their honeymoon in St. Thomas is described as miserable because Sudha is still worried about her missing brother. Yet, she becomes pregnant during this trip and will give birth to a boy they name Neel. The fact that they now have a grandson thrills her parents and they travel to London on every opportunity to see him. The baby somehow closes in the "monstrous hole Rahul left in his wake" (159). Moreover, the name 'Neel' is of Hindi origin, so the boy ensures continuity with ancestral heritage, in a way in which Rahul was unwilling to despite his facial features. When Neel is ten months old, Sudha gets a typed letter from her brother, mailed from a town north of Ithaca. She is stunned to find out that he had not gone as far as possible, to Oregon or California, but returned "near the place where he'd so spectacularly failed" (160). Rahul, who allegedly does not want to be found, keeps sending postcards and letters and goes back to a place close to his city of origins. Traveling on an identity quest, he closes a circle: Wayland, Massachusetts – Columbus, Ohio – Ithaca, New York. In the letter he says he now works as a cook, is writing another play, and lives with Elena and her daughter, Crystal. Elena has even convinced him to start rehab. He apologizes for ruining Sudha's wedding and asks if he can visit them in London. He calls her "Didi", still using the traditional term of respect their parents had taught them.

He does come to London and when Sudha sees him she feels complete. Rahul has been putting on weight and his hair is receding above the temples, so now he is the one who looks older and ordinary. He is proud of his nephew and says he takes after Sudha and their family: "This boy is a Mukherjee through and through" (162). While she is cooking, he looks at the framed photos, most of them of Neel, some in the arms of Sudha's parents, and takes in the fact

that there are no pictures of him. He spots a picture of Neel's annaprasan, the Hindu rite-of-passage that marks a baby's first intake of food other than milk (also referred to as "First Rice" in English). Traditionally, the maternal uncle feeds the child, but in Neel's case it had been Sudha's father, and Rahul seems to understand the tacit reproach that he has failed in this duty as well. However, he proudly takes out a picture of Crystal he keeps in his wallet and brags that he is a parent too, and he cooks for her every day when she comes home from school.

At dinner Rahul does not drink alcohol, he says he wants to visit the British Museum, Freud's house, the V&A, as well as Stratford-upon-Avon, during his seven days there. He earns Sudha's trust and seems to have put the troubled past behind him. This is his first time in London, apart from sitting in Heathrow dozens of times on their way to Calcutta to visit their relatives. Sudha remembers those trips during which they had slept on the same bed, bathed together, and "taken everything in with one pair of eyes" (164). She gives Rahul the news that their father is going to retire and their parents are in Calcutta buying a flat, thinking of moving back for good. They bathe Neel and talk about the next Christmas, when their parents will fly to London and she invites Rahul too, telling him he could come with Elena and Crystal. She tries one more time to bring the family together, especially since Rahul claims he has broken his addiction.

On Rahul's last night in London he offers to babysit Neel while the two young parents go out for a movie. Sudha is worried, instinctively does not trust her brother with her baby so she leaves milk and macaroni that was impossible to choke on for him to feed his nephew. Still, when they return they find Neel alone in the tub, in cold water up to the middle of his chest. He could have drowned while Rahul is downstairs, sleeping after he has gotten drunk. Roger is mad, tries to wake his brother-in-law, packs his bag and argues with his wife: "I don't want your brother to set foot in or home or come anywhere near our child ever again" (170). Rahul wakes up in the morning unable to remember what he has done, saying he had stayed away from alcohol for months, but Sudha is categorical and asks him to leave. Rahul, the Indian-American uncle, is banned from the United Kingdom, like his parents long ago. Unlike his parents, however, he must return to the land where he was born but in which he does not feel 'at home'.

While she is in the kitchen, preparing milk for Neel, Sudha sees the balloon Rahul had bought when they visited the zoo, no longer suspended on its ribbon, but sagging to the floor. She clips the ribbon with scissors and stuffs it into the garbage. In this way she cuts her

relationship with her brother, not feeling the duty to help him anymore, now that he has ruined the second chance he was given. However, Sudha is faced with the task of regaining her husband's trust and thinks of "the fledgling family that had cracked open that moment, as typical and terrifying as any other" (173). The image of the eggs she cooks for breakfast is symbolic of the fact that her baby's fragile life could have ended so easily. It also indicates that there are no perfect families and that all her life she had struggled to behave like an impeccable daughter and sister but this 'egg' has eventually cracked up. The damage comes from the inside, from refusing to accept certain realities, from trying to preserve a fake image of what it means to be Indian-American.

As far as the 'fledgling' family she forms with Roger is concerned, Sudha should learn not to deny or hide problems that arise, like her parents have done, but work to solve them. Perhaps she should concentrate more on her new family, without severing links with her original one. Roger, in his turn, should probably be more open to his in-laws, and more sensitive to the difficulties his wife is undergoing with her process of re-rooting. Sudha hears Neel upstairs, "wanting her, expecting breakfast; he was young enough so that Sudha was still only goodness to him, nothing else" (173). Only to Neel, too young to perceive the struggles humans have to go through, his mother is still pure and perfect.

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Part Two of *Unaccustomed Earth* is entitled "Hema and Kaushik" and gathers three stories around these two eponymous characters and their respective families. The narratives span over three decades and are permeated with familiar tropes, such as space, transplantation, photography, and death. The last two often appear together and I agree with Bidisha Banerjee who contends that Lahiri deliberately uses photography because of its double-edge: "its ability to capture a moment and preserve it for posterity and, conversely, its inalienable connection with absence, loss and even death. The contradictions within photography provide Lahiri with the means to reflect the ambivalent nature of home, belonging and diaspora for characters like Hema and Kaushik" (2010: 445).

"Once in a Lifetime" is the first story of the series; it is a first person narrative, with Hema directly addressing Kaushik. It begins with a flashback to 1974, when Hema is a six-year

old girl and Kaushik is a boy of nine. The first memory she has of his presence in her life dates back to that year, when her parents threw a farewell party for his parents who had decided to leave Cambridge, “not for Atlanta or Arizona, as some other Bengalis had, but to move all the way back to India, abandoning the struggle that my parents and their friends had embarked upon” (*UE* 223). Hema’s mother frets about the quality and quantity of the food and about the fact that snow is predicted for that evening. Most of their friends live less than a fifteen-minute walk away, but some live farther and none own cars, except for Dr. Choudhuri, Kaushik’s father. The Choudhuris are “seasoned immigrants”, the narrator records. They had left India in 1962, before the policies welcoming foreign students changed. Thus, Kaushik’s father already has a PhD, works for an engineering firm in Andover, and drives a silver Saab with bucket seats.

In this story, Indian men and women fall into the traditional patterns of immigrants to the United States from that period. Men are studying, working, and driving, whereas women stay at home, taking care of the house and children. And this is how Hema’s mother meets Kaushik’s mother in the park. She is pregnant but does not know it yet, and they become friends although they come from extremely different backgrounds. Kaushik’s mother left behind a beautiful home in Jodhpur Park, with hibiscus and rosebushes blooming on the rooftop, whereas Hema’s mother’s lived in a modest three-room flat in Maniktala, above a grimy Punjabi restaurant, with seven other people. Kaushik’s mother went to a convent school and her father was one of the most prominent lawyers in town, an Anglophile who smoked a pipe and went to the Saturday Club. Hema’s grandfather, on the other hand, was a clerk in the General Post Office, so he and his family belonged to a different world altogether and Hema’s mother “had neither eaten at a table nor sat on a commode before coming to America” (225).

In Calcutta they would probably have not even cross paths, let alone interact. But class differences are not so relevant in Cambridge where the two women are equally alone. So, they shop for groceries and cook together, dividing up the dishes for their respective families when they are done. For Kaushik’s mother immigration is not a form of emancipation, quite on the contrary, she has followed her husband in order for his career to flourish, whereas for Hema’s mother it is clearly an economic step forward, a chance for a much better life. Although she is not free from the immigrant’s malaise, Shibani (Hema’s mother) likes Western movies and is fascinated by Audrey Hepburn. In fact, cinema of that period is the one thing Hema’s mother

“loved wholeheartedly about the West’ (231). She considered wearing skirts ‘indecent’, yet “she could recall, scene by scene, Audrey Hepburn’s outfits in any given movie” (231).

Kaushik’s parents are the only ones who come to the hospital when Hema is born; she is fed in his old high chair and is pushed along the streets in his old pram. She is already connected to him without being aware, before she is born and shortly after. Therefore, when the Choudhuris move back to India they leave pots, blankets, and small appliances to Hema’s family. Kaushik’s mother even brings clothes that once belonged to him thinking Hema might use some. The girl believes these clothes are ugly and tries to avoid them, but her mother forces her to wear his sweaters and rubber boots. She even has to don his coat, which she hates: “It was blue-black with an orange lining and a scratchy grayish-brown trim around the hood. I never got used to having to hook the zipper on the right side, to looking so different from the other girls in my class with their puffy pink and purple jackets” (226). Her parents insist that a coat is just a coat and refuse to buy her a new one; her mother even irons her name on a label inside it. Hema once intends to ‘forget’ it in a bus that is taking her to her piano teacher but, as she steps off, someone discovers the name tag, calls her name and tells her she has left the coat. In one year she outgrows it, and all the other items that belonged to Kaushik’s family are gradually replaced as well, “until there was no longer any physical trace of you in the house” (227).

They do not keep in contact at all, especially since the Choudhuris moved to Bombay, a city far from Calcutta and unfamiliar to Hema’s parents. But, seven years later Kaushik’s father calls to announce that they are returning to Massachusetts for his new job and to ask if they could stay with Hema’s family until they find a house. All the Bengalis in Massachusetts regard this return as a failure to reconnect to the homeland and conclude: “They should have known it’s impossible to go back” (227-28). Hema’s parents condemn them for having failed both in America and in India, and they add: “We stuck it out as immigrants while you had fled; had we been the ones to go back to India, my parents seemed to suggest, we would have stuck it out there as well” (228).

Nevertheless, they prepare the house for the guests’ arrival: things are rearranged, and new, rather expensive items are bought. It is decided that Kaushik is going to sleep in Hema’s room and she has to relinquish it entirely and sleep in a folding cot in her parents’ bedroom. She is infuriated by this fact, especially since she had slept in the same room with her parents until recently. Her mother considered the idea of a child sleeping alone “a cruel American practice”

(229) and therefore did not encourage it. In India she had slept in the same bed as her parents until the day she was married, and she thought it was normal. Hema, an American teenager by now, knows that it is not, and that her colleagues would ridicule her if they knew. She almost never reveals details of her life to her American friends, aware of the peculiar upbringing she was receiving, and afraid of being labeled as 'different'. Thus, she removes enough of her things so that she does not have to enter her room while Kaushik is in it and compares this whole process of moving out of her room to a trip to India: "It was like deciding which of my possessions I wanted to take on a long trip to India, only this time I was going nowhere. Still, I put my things into a suitcase covered with peeling tags and stickers that had traveled various times back and forth across the world and dragged it into my parents' room" (230).

Before their arrival, Hema studies some pictures of the incoming guests, taken together with her parents at different parties. She tries to remember how Kaushik looks like, but he does not appear in any of the photos. His father is featured in the suit and tie he always wore, his handsome face leaning towards someone in conversation. Hema's mother is a head shorter than Kaushik's mother "and more disheveled, stray hairs hanging by her ears. They both appeared flushed, the color high in their cheeks (...) the bond between them clear" (231). The night of the big return, Hema wakes up from a nap to find them all eating in the dining room. She compares them to the people in the pictures and registers the changes: Kaushik's mother resembles only vaguely the woman from the images, although she is still thin and glamorous, apparently "unburdened by the weight of middle age that now padded my mother's features" (232). His father looks the same and Kaushik is pale like him and has long bangs combed over to one side of his face. His eyes seem distracted, yet apparently missing nothing and this may be due to the fact that, at 16, he is already a passionate photographer.

The conversation during this first dinner together after seven years reveals the fact that financial differences between the two families are still significant. For example, the Choudhuris have flown first class as a gift for Kaushik's mother who has just turned 40. She says this is a "once in a lifetime" extravagance but then brags about the exquisite food they got on the plane, like champagne, chocolates, and even caviar. She has short hair, wears slacks and is described by Hema's mother as "stylish" which is a "pejorative term in her vocabulary" (236). The latter is outraged and slightly envious of her old friend, remarking that twelve people could have flown for the price of one first-class ticket.

Hema's parents come to the intriguing conclusion that Bombay has made their old friends more 'American' than Cambridge. Speaking of Bombay, the Choudhuris remember the apartment they left behind, a flat with a balcony overlooking the Arabian Sea. Then they tell stories about Rome where they had a two day layover to visit the city and Kaushik's mother describes the fountains, the ceiling of the Sistine chapel and the many lovely churches which made her want to be a catholic. Kaushik's father says they must see the Pantheon, but their hosts do not know what the Pantheon is and, in return, they talk of what has become of their old Cambridge crowd and of American politics. Hema is in the middle of learning about Rome in her Latin class, she has just written a report about its art and architecture, and perhaps this talk is decisive for her future career as a Latinist. Kaushik's father gives a photo featuring Kaushik next to Trajan's column to Hema for her school report. She pastes it in but only after having cut Kaushik out and hid 'him' in the blank pages of her diary. The narrator reports: "You were in the picture, standing to one side. You were looking down, your face obscured by a visor. You could have been anyone, one of the many passing tourists in the frame, but it bothered me that you were there, your presence threatening to expose the secret attraction I felt and still hoped would be acknowledged somehow" (246-47). Kaushik, the passionate photographer, either does not appear in photos or is cut out, although his face is "obscured" and he could have been anyone.

When Hema gives Kaushik a tour of the house they will be sharing she is so nervous that he actually ends up leading her, climbing quickly up the stairs ahead of her, opening doors and poking his head into rooms, seemingly unimpressed by the house. They reach her room which is going to be his and Hema is now secretly thrilled that he would be sleeping there, hoping he would absorb her presence, and come to know and like her. The connection between them becomes even more intricate: some years back she wore his clothes, now he is sleeping in her bed, living in her room. Kaushik opens the window and goes out on the roof, telling Hema that he had missed the cold and the snow from Massachusetts and asking about the woods behind the house. Hema replies that they are off-limits because a boy disappeared in their midst the previous year. Nature is thus hostile, as opposed to the safe space of the house, yet Kaushik is attracted by its wilderness.

During the weeks spent in Hema's house he frequently goes for long walks in the woods, the camera slung around his neck, defying the girl's warning. He is a complete puzzle to her: "Because you lived in India, I associated you more with my parents than with me. And yet you

were unlike my cousins in Calcutta, who seemed so innocent and obedient when I visited them, asking questions about my life in America as if it were the moon, astonished by every detail. You were not curious about me in the least” (240). Although he had missed the New England cold, Kaushik tells Hema that he liked living in India, a thing she does not comprehend since she finds India quite dull. His parents, on the other hand, are convinced that even in Bombay they managed to raise an American teenager and they realize how frustrating it is for their son to be twice-displaced: “He was furious that we left, and now he’s furious that we’re here again” (238). Kaushik is caught between cultures: he longs for a home, but as soon as he finds one he has to leave and follow his parents. These dislocations make him confused and unable to translate. Hema, born in the United States and not forced to relocate, grows up like an American, going to McDonald’s now and then, obediently working on school projects, and trying to limit the Indian influence her mother constantly imprints on her upbringing.

One day Kaushik takes Hema to the woods. She follows him and does not feel afraid, as nature seems protective that day: “Covered in snow on that bright blue-skied day, the bare branches of the trees concealing so little, it seemed safe” (249). He has the camera with him and takes pictures from time to time, happy to be outside, “away from the private detritus of life” (309). He loves taking pictures precisely because this activity provides him with the opportunity to get out of the house. At one point during their walk, he uncovers six tombstones from the snow, which belong to people named Simonds (mother, father, and four children). Hema begins to help him unbury the buried. The last one, Emma, died in 1923 and Hema is disturbed by the similarity of the name to hers.

At this point Kaushik reveals his family’s secret: “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” (249). Hence, the real reason of their return to the United States is not his father’s job, but the fact that his mother is dying of breast cancer and she wants to be left alone, running away from her relatives and parents so that they are not forced to witness her decline. She is going to have surgery in spring but only to buy her a little more time. Hema is shocked and remembers the day in which they went to the mall for Kaushik’s mother to get some bras. She recalls having stood topless in a fitting room next to his topless mother, as they were trying on the underclothes. On that occasion, she received her first three bras from Kaushik’s mother. As one woman is dying of breast cancer, a girl abruptly enters womanhood.

Two weeks later the guests move out. They have bought a house on the North Shore, designed by a famous Massachusetts architect. It is a spectacular building, with “perfectly flat roof and whole walls of glass. The upstairs rooms were arranged off an interior balcony, the ceiling in the living room soaring to twenty feet. There were no water views but there was a pool for your mother to swim in, just as she had wanted” (251). The night of the inauguration, Hema’s parents visit and bring over food so that Kaushik’s mother does not have to cook. They admire the beautiful house, the bedroom with a skylight, and the property, still unaware that the empty, echoing rooms “would soon be filled with sickness and grief” (251).

Hema’s parents do not find out about her illness until the end. Meanwhile, they complain about not being invited over to the grand house more often. They feel ashamed by the modest house they own, aware of the difference in class status. They are all first-generation immigrants, but Kaushik’s parents were affluent in India, too, whereas Hema’s parents have bettered their financial condition but still have not closed the gap. The Choudhuris, on the other hand, shut themselves inside their fabulous house, seeking to hide their depression and the implacable truth of an imminent death behind a façade of luxury.

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Symmetrically, “Year’s End” is narrated by Kaushik, but directly addressing Hema. It skips three years after his mother’s death and picks up right after his father remarries. The first sentence is striking: “I did not attend my father’s wedding” (*UE* 252). In fact, Kaushik does not even know that his father has married during a short trip to Calcutta, while visiting his parents. Kaushik is in his final year at Swarthmore and is unsettled by the fact that, all of a sudden, he has a stepmother (Chitra) and two stepsisters. When learning the news, over a phone conversation, Kaushik feels “a diluted version of the nauseating sensation that had 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” (254). Since Chitra and her daughters are going to arrive in two weeks, his father asks Kaushik if the girls can sleep in Kaushik’s bedroom and he in the guestroom whenever he visits.

Chitra is 35, nearly twenty years younger than Kaushik’s father, and a schoolteacher. She is also a widow, having lost her spouse two years before. Her daughters, Rupa and Piu, are ten and seven. Kaushik’s father had known Chitra for just a few weeks and had met her only twice

before they were married. He explains to his son that the whole ceremony was arranged by relatives but he had wanted a new wife because he was tired of coming home to an empty house every night. His first marriage had been arranged too, but Kaushik believes there was also a touch of romance about it: “They had always been affectionate with one another, but it wasn’t until her illness that he seemed fully, recklessly, to fall in love with her, so that I was witness to a courtship that ought to have faded before I was born” (255).

Immediately after the death of his wife, Kaushik’s father gave away some of her things to Bengali acquaintances from Massachusetts (including Hema and her mother) and the remaining saris and gold were sent back to India and given to the poor. He also “took every single photograph of her, in frames and in albums, and put them in a shoe box” (256). Before sealing the box and putting it away in a closet he told Kaushik to choose a few, knowing that pictures are important to him. Her ashes were tossed from a boat off the Gloucester coast, like she had asked, but all the photographs of her were ‘buried’ somewhere in the house she had chosen and loved so much. Kaushik has a very hard time dealing with his mother’s death. The fact that she chose to die in her adoptive country and have her ashes scattered in a foreign ocean disrupts her son’s ties with India. He is thus faced with the task of reconciling both the loss of his mother and of his motherland. The second-generation representative who seemed to belong to multiple locations will henceforth become homeless (literally and metaphorically).

When Kaushik drives to his father’s home for the winter holidays, he notices how isolated, enormous, and impersonal it is, looking more like an institution than a private residence. As soon as he enters he is struck by the heavy smell of Indian cooking. Otherwise everything appeared unchanged, with the black-and-white photographs he had taken of the surrounding woods still lining one wall of the entryway. His mother insisted on framing and displaying these photos, so despite the fact that all the pictures of her were hidden, her presence still subtly lingers in the house. The building is furnished according to his mother’s taste, with pieces true to its Modernist architecture.

But Chitra is starting to take over the house by filling it with the smell of her cooking or by putting a cloth on the fiber-glass table, for example, a thing Kaushik’s sophisticated mother would never have done. Food is waiting for Kaushik, yet he is nervous and uninterested in the Indian cuisine he is no longer accustomed with. He wonders where Chitra and her daughters are, since no voices or footsteps can be heard. “It was as if Chitra and her daughters were discretely

hidden in one of the many cupboards of the house, swallowed up as so many other things were” (260). Chitra finally shows up through the swinging doors that lead to the kitchen. Seeing her is a shock: although her face is pleasant, she is taller than Kaushik’s mother, and she “wore vermilion in her hair, a traditional practice my mother had shunned, the powdery red stain the strongest element of her appearance” (260). She asks Kaushik in Bengali to call her “Mamoni”, her voice is oddly calming and she smiles at him. She addresses him with “Dada” (the way an older brother should be addressed in Indian tradition), but Kaushik says she and her daughters can simply call him Kaushik. Then his father suggests “KD” (short for Kaushik Dada, but an Americanized acronym); his new wife approves but Kaushik finds the nickname inane.

He is hungry and suddenly feels grateful for the vast amount of food in front of him; the arrangement of the bowls is formal, ceremonious, and it reminds him of his grandfathers eating in Calcutta and “being treated like kings after their morning baths” (261). He eats *luchis* and remembers Sunday mornings in Bombay, eating the same dish prepared by their Parsi cook who always worked under his mother’s close scrutiny. Chitra eats after they are finished, the way their maids did in Bombay, and is portrayed as inferior to his mother. Although his mother’s memory is very vivid in Kaushik’s mind and in the space of the house itself, Kaushik behaves politely and compliments Chitra on the food in Bengali. But after lunch he feels suddenly sickened by the sight of his father’s new wife in 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. Though she had rarely done the dishes, though it was in fact I who had mostly done the dishes in those days, I imagined her hands on the taps of the sink, her slim form pressed against the counter. (263-64)

His mother lives on through the plants she has seeded and nurtured. She is also present in all the things she has accumulated during the last years of her short life. However, the new wife is slowly taking over, and her daughters have moved into Kaushik’s old bedroom. During this visit he has to sleep in a guestroom, set up by Kaushik’s mum, having American objects as well as a Madhubani painting. This room has only ever been inhabited by Mrs. Gharibian, a person who nursed his mother during her final weeks. Kaushik is, in fact, grateful not to be sleeping in his old bedroom which shared a wall with his parents’ bedroom, so he does not overhear his father and his young wife talking. What is more, he no longer is a permanent resident in this house, but

a mere 'guest'. The ways in which the space of the house is now used reflect the disintegration of the old family.

Yet, all these changes have been too abrupt and when Kaushik sees Chitra comb the girls' hair and then her own, nearly long to her waist, he feels repulsion. He thinks of the hair that had fallen out in clumps from his mother's head and of "the awful wig she'd worn even in hospital, up until the day she died, that artificial part of her more healthy-looking than anything else" (276). As he watches this ritual, Kaushik imagines her hair turning gray and her growing old alongside his father, the way his mother was supposed to. He realizes how much he hates Chitra for having taken his mother's 'place' and for filling her space. Chitra, in her turn, complains about the house, saying that it is cold in the living room, that there are no curtains, and that the stairs are slippery. Since there is no railing, she thinks her girls are in constant danger of falling. It is clear that the house chosen and decorated by Kaushik's mother is not welcoming to Chitra and her daughters.

The girls look so much alike that they are indistinguishable at first glance, overdressed in the heated house, wearing pink wool sweaters. Initially, the relationship between Kaushik and his stepsisters seems to be going smoothly. He takes them to the Science Museum and the Aquarium. They are having ice-cream together when Piu's loose tooth falls out. Kaushik sops up the blood and tells her about the tooth fairy. Another morning he goes to Dunkin' Donuts to have a coffee and he takes Rupa and Piu along. Chitra trusts him to take her children to a place "she'd never heard of and would not be able to find" (270) since she cannot go anywhere without a car, and does not want to learn to drive. She asks Kaushik if she is going to be safe alone in the house. The girls tell him that she does not allow them to go outside without her because she cannot see neighbors and is afraid of something bad happening in this total isolation. For her, the space of the house is not safer than that of the wilderness surrounding it, and she perceives America as threatening.

When they get to Dunkin' Donuts, Christmas carols are playing and the music sounds foreign to the girls who have just arrived in the Western culture and are afraid to go to an American school. Kaushik explains that he, too, has gone through this experience. Although he was born in the United States, he had to figure things all over again and readjust when he was 16 and they moved back from India. Then "KD" lifts Piu so she can choose a donut; both girls order Kaushik's favorite, Boston Cream. They sit on opposite sides of a table, the girls eating

enthusiastically and Kaushik meditating about the tangled, unexpected connections between them:

I felt separate from them in every way but at the same time could not deny the things that bound us together. There was my father, of course, but he seemed to be the least relevant in a way. Like them I'd made that journey from India to Massachusetts, too old not to experience the shock of it, too young to have a say in the matter. They would recall all of this, perhaps not as clearly as I remember those first months at your parents' home, but nevertheless they would remember. Like them I had lost a parent and was now being asked to accept a replacement. I wondered how well they remembered their father; Piu would only have been five at the time. (...) The knowledge of death seemed present in both sisters – it was something about the way in which they carried themselves, something that had broken too soon and had not mended, marking them in spite of their lightheartedness. (272)

The three of them share common Indian roots, the experience of being uprooted at a young age, and the traumatic memory of losing a parent. Before they go back to the house, the girls want to take a donut for their mother. Kaushik gives them a dollar and they go together to the counter. They have not been allowed to touch money, so it is their first time buying something. As they return to the table and bring back the change, Kaushik explains that they should have said "Hello" and "Thank you" to the cashier and that they should not have pointed to the donut but asked for it. The girls apologize, as if they had done something wrong and then confess they are afraid of speaking English because people might laugh at their accent. Kaushik, in his turn, has had to deal with this insecurity, so he suddenly feels vulnerable in front of two little girls who understand him better than friends who have known him for years.

Kaushik's stepsisters want to know what his mother was like. They ask if he has a picture of her and he lies, although he has one in his wallet. He carries it with him but has not been able to look at it since his mother's death and feels it is too soon to show it to Rupa and Piu. They demand why there is no picture of Kaushik's mother in the house, and then reveal the fact that their mother has been searching in every room.

Before Christmas, Kaushik's father asks his son to help him with a spruce he has bought. They had not celebrated Christmas after his mother's death, although they used to celebrate it even in Bombay, with his mother putting presents under a hibiscus in a pot and talking fondly about their days in Cambridge. This year they prop the tree in one corner of the living room and everyone gathers around it. Kaushik goes to the basement to find the box where they kept the ornaments and is surprised to find that his father had not tossed them away, as he had done with other things that reminded him of his first wife. In the basement he finds his enlarger, tongs, a set

of trays, and old bottles of fixer for the darkroom he had set up in his last year of high school. The whole house speaks of his mother's absence, but in the basement he feels it most profoundly.

The link between death and photography is strengthened when Kaushik remembers the times his mother came down to the dark room. She would keep him company,

sitting quietly in the blackness as I struggled to load film onto the developing reel. Together we would breathe in the chemical smells, their corrosiveness, from which my hands were protected by rubber gloves, nothing compared to what was taking place inside her body. (...) "It must be something like this," she said once in that perfectly dark, silent, sealed up space, and I understood without her saying so that she was imagining what it might be like to be dead. "This is how I want to think of it. (278)

Kaushik returns upstairs and lies that he could not find the box; he does not want Chitra to touch the old ornaments. Instead, he offers to go out and buy some new ones. Although he gets some impersonal decorations, which make the tree look like one from a bank office, the girls are delighted and exclaim they have never seen anything more beautiful. Kaushik's father brings the presents which can only be opened on Christmas morning. Ironically, he suggests that Kaushik take a picture, but the latter cannot because he has forgotten the camera at school. His father does not hide his irritation, knowing that Kaushik always has the camera with him, even on quiet weekends when he visited his father and saw no one else. However, not taking pictures and not using the old decorations are actually Kaushik's deliberate ways of denying the legitimacy of this Christmas spent with his father's new family: "This time I had left it behind, knowing that I would not want to document anything" (280).

On Christmas Eve the five of them go on a trip to Boston, to show Chitra and the girls the city. Kaushik sits in the back with the girls, as his father drives into Cambridge to show them Harvard and MIT. Chitra asks why Kaushik had chosen a college so far away. His father replies in his stead, saying that he wanted to get out of Massachusetts. As they drive around Boston, his father points to the golden dome of the State House, and the beautiful homes that lined the steep streets of Beacon Hill. Behind those homes is Mass General, the hospital they had gone to so many times. But, as Kaushik is looking towards the hospital windows, undoubtedly associating the building with his mother's pain, his father turns to his new wife and jokes: "This is where America's Brahmins live" (282). She smiles at him, and Kaushik realizes the woman is falling in

love and his father is committed to his new wife. This bond excludes Kaushik from the emerging family structure.

A few days before the New Year, Kaushik's father, his wife and daughters are invited to a party. The girls want to stay home with Kaushik and he agrees, offering to order pizza. But this is the quiet before the storm and, while he talks to his girlfriend on the phone, Rupa and Piu uncover the shoebox with pictures of Kaushik's mum in a closet in their bedroom. He enters to check on them and finds them looking at the photos and commenting that his smile is similar to his mother's. Seeing the photos triggers a violent reaction from the young man because, as Bidisha Banerjee puts it, "they encapsulate an inescapable realization of loss" (450). All the grief he had kept boxed up until this point is disinterred and laid out in the open: "Even from a distance the banished images assaulted me: my mother wearing a swimsuit by the edge of the pool at our club in Bombay. My mother sitting with me on her lap on the brown wooden steps of our house in Cambridge. My mother and my father standing before I was born in front of a snow-caked hedge" (*UE* 285-86).

Photographs capture certain moments, yet these moments are always in the past and impossible to retrieve. Kaushik is mad at the girls for intruding in his memories and Piu, the younger sister, starts to cry. Then he picks up the photos and puts them face down on his old dresser, so that he does not have to see them anymore. He grabs Rupa and shakes her, asking where they found the box. She also starts to cry while pointing to the closet. Kaushik pushes Piu away from the box, as if her contact with any evidence of his mother is unbearable. Pandora's Box has been opened and the past has made its overwhelming comeback, denying the legitimacy of the family as it is at present. The girls are still crying and trembling, but Kaushik continues to shout, crushing them with his words: "Well, you've seen it for yourselves, how beautiful my mother was. How much prettier and more sophisticated than yours. Your mother is nothing in comparison. Just a servant to wash my father's clothes and cook his meals. That's the only reason she's here, the only reason both of you are here" (286-87).

Kaushik feels the urge to remove the pictures from the house as far as he can. He takes the shoebox, packs a few things, gets in the car and sets off, leaving the children alone in the house. He drives up the coast for five days, going through New Hampshire and Maine, until he reaches the border with Canada. He likes traveling alone, realizes how much he had needed to run away from the house where everything reminded him of his mother. He parallels his reckless

journey to death: “No one in the world knew where I was, no one had the ability to reach me. It was like being dead, my escape allowing me to taste that tremendous power my mother possessed forever” (290). The weather is cold, the landscape is unforgiving; nature is hostile again and it mirrors his inner, bitter self. The water is cold enough to kill him and violent enough to break him apart. But he is already broken and spends most of the day driving aimlessly or ‘hiding’ in motels, drinking, feeling sick to his stomach for having harmed the two girls, afraid of himself and ashamed. He calls his father who scolds him for having left Rupa and Piu alone in the house. He adds that Chitra is worried that she has done something to make him depart so suddenly, and then it dawns on Kaushik that her daughters did not tell her about his brutal reaction.

The year ends, but Kaushik continues his itinerary upward. He chooses a spot close to the Canadian border to bury the shoebox in the ground of the easternmost state park in the country. He tries to look at the pictures one last time, but there are so many that, like his father, he “could no longer bear their sight” (290). The decision to bury the box mimics his father’s gesture and it shows that they are not so different after all. It also means that at some point he could return to this place with cliffs overlooking the Bay of Fundy and uncover all the evidence that was left of his mother’s existence.

Somewhere on the coast of Maine, during the trip which symbolizes an initiation, Kaushik thinks of Hema and the time spent in her parents’ house. He remembers having made her cry and having hated every day spent under their roof. Yet, he knows it was the last place that had really felt like a home. He thinks of the house he cannot go back to, the one bought and decorated according to his mother’s taste. He remembers the numerous medicine bottles which took over every corner of every room, and realizes in spite of all the effort and money, they never really ‘lived’ in that house. It was merely a brief stop before his mother’s permanent departure “for another place altogether, one where we would be unable to join her, and from which she would not return” (291).

A few weeks before Kaushik’s graduation, his father calls to tell him he is selling the house and moving with his new family to an ordinary residence in a less isolated suburb of Boston. There are other Bengalis nearby and an Indian grocery, things that are more important to Chitra than the proximity of the ocean and the Modernist architecture Kaushik’s mother had loved. The break up with his first wife is sealed. His father tells him that they should both be

moving on and there are new roads to explore for each of them. Yet, it is clear that these are separate roads. Nevertheless, they are “both thankful to Chitra for chafing under whatever lingered of my mother’s spirit in the place she has last called home and for forcing us to shut its doors” (293). They all attend Kaushik’s graduation, his father taking pictures, and the girls being polite but refusing to address him. The memory of the things he had said that night is now the only tie between the three of them, the dark secret impossible to bury and eclipsing everything else.

*

“Going Ashore” is the final story of this trilogy and is told by an omniscient narrator. Hema has a PhD now, and teaches Classical Studies at Wellesley. In the autumn of 2004, she gets a grant which enables her to travel to Rome and stay in a colleague’s apartment for two months before going to Calcutta in December. There she is going to get married to Navin; his parents are Hindu-Punjabis living in Calcutta and he came to America for his PhD. He now teaches physics at Michigan State, but will move to MIT to be with Hema in Massachusetts after the wedding.

Before getting engaged to Navin, Hema had spent just three weekends with him, spaced out over three months, Navin traveling each time from Michigan to see her: “They wandered chastely around Boston, going to museums and movies and concerts and dinners” (*UE* 297). He kissed her during the second weekend, in front of her door, but stopped there because he was old-fashioned when it came to a future wife, even though he had had affairs in the past. Hema is 37 and touched to be treated like a teenage girl. Her parents found him for her and, after years of refusing similar requests, she agreed to meet him: “She refused to think of it as an arranged marriage, but knew in her heart that that was what it was” (297). Until then she had hoped for nearly a decade that Julian, her lover, would leave his wife and children. But with her parents living in India now, after a lifetime in Massachusetts, she pragmatically decides she needs someone to divide chores with. She had scorned this attitude to love in the past, yet now she finds it liberating.

She and Navin are both aware of her age and are eager to start a family. However, when she visits the Villa Giulia in Rome, Hema ponders that a loveless marriage is dead from the beginning. She tries to focus on the impressive ancient objects which are still intact, even if those

who had used them are long dead. But at the sight of sarcophagus of a bride and groom she bursts in tears at the thought of her future husband: “Like the young smiling couple sitting affectionately on top of a shared casket, there was something dead about the marriage she was about to enter. And though she knew it had every chance, over the years, of coming to life, on her way home, in the yellow light of evening, she was conscious only of its deadness” (301).

Hema has been to the Italian capital twice before: once with Julian, who had to present a paper so they flew there secretly, and the second time with a girlfriend after graduating from Bryn Mawr. This time she is alone in Rome, always eating at the same restaurant, overlooking the remains of the Portico di Ottavia. She has told Navin and her parents that she has a visiting lectureship at an institute of Classical Studies; hence, she can savor her isolation and enjoy the city, free of her past and of her future. She finds the Roman noise very soothing and certain elements remind her of Calcutta: “[t]he grand weathered buildings, the palm trees, the impossibility of crossing the main streets. Like Calcutta, which she’d visited throughout her childhood, Rome was the city she knew on the one hand intimately and on the one hand not at all – a place that fully absorbed her and also kept her at bay” (299). She knows everything about its past, even its ancient language, but does not know a single person in present-day Rome, except for the lady whose apartment she is occupying, but who is away at the time.

Besides visiting the city, she studies every day, and this has always been of utmost importance to her. Since eighth grade she has been fascinated by Latin, which she deemed sacred, especially because it enabled her to bring a dead world to life. Her focus is now on the Etruscans, “[t]hat mysterious civilization prior to Rome, people who had possibly wandered from Asia minor to central Italy and flourished for four centuries, who had ruled Rome for one hundred years before turning obsolete” (300). She visited the Etruscan collections at the Vatican and at the Villa Giulia. Hema’s research allows her to delve further back into the past and uncover details about their funerary habits: “Their literature was nonexistent, their language obscure. Their primary legacy was tombs and the things that were put in them: jewels, pottery, weapons to accompany the dead” (300).

One evening she finds a message from Edo, one of Giovanna’s friends, who invites her for lunch at his house. Amazingly, she meets Kaushik here, for the first time in many years. It turns out he is a friend of Edo’s wife, Paola, who is a photojournalist. Kaushik himself began his life as a photojournalist in 1987 right after graduating, when he took a few months off to wander

through Latin America. He went from Mexico to Guatemala and El Salvador which was a war scene then. He took pictures while exploring this country which was smaller than Massachusetts, but seemed at war with itself. The places he seeks seem to echo his inner turmoil. He befriends a Dutch journalist, Espen, and they travel around together, taking in the history of the conflict, witnessing various atrocities. Kaushik becomes used to the sound of machine-gun fire, and accepts with relative ease the fact that he could be killed at any moment. After losing his mother to cancer and also symbolically losing his father to Chitra, he is not scared of death because he has nothing more to lose.

In a village in El Salvador, Kaushik and Espen are eating in a restaurant when a man is shot outside. They go to see what happened and find the man lying in a pool of blood:

Kaushik's camera was around his neck as usual, and Espen told him to take a picture. He did not have a long lens with him, had to get in close, expecting at each step for someone in the group to obstruct him, curse him, shoo him away. But no one paid attention, and so he crept forward and lifted the camera to his face. When he thought back to that afternoon, he remembered that his hands were shaking but that otherwise he felt untouched by the situation, unmoved once he was behind the camera, shooting to the end of the roll. (304-5)

Kaushik manages to control his emotions and assume a different personality in a tense situation. He does not intervene and save the man's life, yet he brings his contribution from behind the camera. The photographer has the unique ability and opportunity to document such crimes for international audiences. Moreover, as Roland Barthes argues in *Camera Lucida*, "[a]s soon as the click of the shutter takes place, the subject is transformed into object" (qtd. in Banerjee 445), so the person taking the picture cannot intervene.

This will be Kaushik's first published photo, the turning point in his life and career. Paradoxically, it is a shot of a dead man that changes his life (which had been so powerfully affected by the death of his own mother). He is hired by Associated Press and remains in Latin America, stranded between different foreign places. A few years later he gets a job with *The New York Times* and is sent to Africa and then the Middle East, where he photographs more dead victims, until "[h]e could no longer remember all the corpses he'd photographed, their faces bloated, their mouths stuffed with dirt, their vacant eyes reflecting passing clouds over their heads" (*UE* 305).

He stays away from the United States, without establishing a permanent residence anywhere else, and he does not keep close contact with his father and his new family. Still, he

occasionally washes up “on his father’s doorstep, in the form of his photo credit in one of the news magazines his father read, announcing that he was alive, indicating where he’d been and what he’d seen” (306). Then he moves to Milan for a woman named Franca, after many years in which “he had drifted across the globe without making meaningful ties” (306). He cannot bring himself to propose, perhaps because of fear of settling down, so he relocates to Rome where he rents an apartment in Trastevere. Kaushik is drawn to Rome by invisible strings. Remembering the layover he had had with his parents on their way back from India to Massachusetts, he looks for the hotel close to the Spanish steps in which they had stayed. Coincidentally his mother was forty that year and he would turn forty the following year.

In contrast, his father and Chitra also have a layover in Rome, but on a reverse journey, on their way from the United States to visit their relatives in Calcutta. They meet in the Italian capital and Kaushik shows them the popular touristic sites, takes pictures of them, and gives his father the rolls of film as if it was any other job. By acting professional when he photographs them he again delineates himself from their family; he is not a part of it and therefore does not want to keep any photos of them. While visiting a graveyard, next to Keats’s tomb which his father had insisted on seeing, Kaushik becomes aware of a small gray speck in his left eye:

In the lush grounds of the Protestant Cemetery, Kaushik had thought that a gnat was circling his head, and he kept swatting at it, putting out his fingers trying to flick it away. But the speck continued to accompany him wherever he went, quietly tormenting him, and he realized it was within him, that it was not possible to remove it or make it stop. (...) He was told he would grow used to it, and he had, more or less, not bothered these days unless he were in a bright room with white walls, or outside without his sunglasses. It did not affect his driving or his picture-taking. And yet it felt like an invasion of the part of his body, the physical sense that was most precious: something that betrayed him and also refused to abandon him. (307-8)

Doctors tell him the speck is a sign of aging, but it is also possible to connect it to photography, since the photographer’s eye sees through the lens of the camera. This metaphor reiterates the connection between photography and death, because Kaushik notices the speck next to Keats’ grave and it is only bothering him when he has contact with strong light, which would ruin any photo created in a darkroom. Moreover, it can also anticipate Kaushik’s own end by drowning because Keats’s final request was to be buried under a tombstone without his name on it and having only the words: “Here lies one whose name was writ in water”.

A few days before reconnecting with Hema, Kaushik decides to move to Hong Kong and books a flight with a layover in Thailand, where he is going to spend the last weekend of December. Disregarding Paola’s warning that this static job means “death to the photographer”

(308), Kaushik accepts a position as photo editor of an international news magazine, because he longs to be still for the next few years. Apparently he chooses a sort of rootedness, not in India or the United States, but in unaccustomed earth. This is the first job which would require him to go to the same place every day. Nevertheless, the move is very different from the times he relocated with his parents,

those two colossal upheavals he had experienced as a boy, first leaving America, then returning seven years later, the furniture and paintings and tea sets his mother thought she could not live without following them slowly, both times on cargo ships. His mother had set up households again and again in her life. It didn't matter where she was in the world, or whether or not she was dying; she had always given everything to make her homes beautiful, always drawn strength from her things, her walls. But Kaushik never fully trusted the places he'd lived, never turned to them for refuge. (309)

It cannot be said that Kaushik immigrates to Hong Kong, since he takes up a temporary job there. This experience of moving differs from those he had undergone as a youngster, carrying the material and cultural 'luggage' that immigration usually entails. At the same time, Kaushik realizes he does not want to set up a permanent household anywhere, like his mother had done several times. He does not care about the houses he lives in, and is unwilling to be tied down to a geographical place or emotionally attached to the walls of a building. Rootedness equals death in his mind.

Every time he visits refugee camps he remembers his family's dislocations, and he thinks that life is reduced, for most people, to a few earthly possessions. But he wants to believe that he is different, not connected to a place or dependent on material things. He is free and in a few minutes he could be on his way to any spot in the world. In Rome he lives in a rented room with rented furniture, and in a corner he keeps his camera bags and tripods always packed, his passport always in his pocket, his mental frame always set on 'go'. Banerjee argues that Lahiri uses the trope of photography "to impart to her immigrant characters a sense of rootedness and belonging that ultimately proves to be tenuous" (445). Thus, despite the fact that he has few possessions of his own, through his photography Kaushik, too, needs to be rooted and connected to things: "He knew 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" (*UE* 309).

When she invited him to lunch, Paola told him an Indian woman would also come. Yet, when he meets Hema he addresses her in Italian first, before realizing who she is. Their common origins mean almost nothing to him since he has a weak connection to his parents' homeland:

“He had so little to do with India. He had not gone back since the year his mother died, had never gone there for work. As a photographer, his origins were irrelevant. And yet, in Rome, in all of Europe, he was always regarded as an Indian first” (310). Banerjee asserts that, rather than being transplanted somewhere, Kaushik “becomes the quintessential translocated citizen of the world, occupying a number of fractured spaces” (447).

After lunch he drives Hema to his place, a small apartment with a room, a bathroom, and a two-burner stove. They go on the terrace where they catch up; they have not met in many years, but Kaushik remembers Hema has had the gold bangle she wears around her wrist since childhood. Indeed, it was a gift from her grandmother and she never removes it. She confesses she is getting married to Navin because she thinks it might fix things that are not going well in her life, but then makes love to Kaushik.

Hema looks at his website, is upset by the war images he has captured, and glad that in Hong Kong he will stay out of harm’s way. She sees pictures of unknown people and understands Kaushik’s need to connect to strangers. Then realizes she, too, is a stranger to him and soon their roads will part again. Although intimacy is growing between them, in two weeks they will be in different countries. Their Indian origins seem less relevant in the transnationalized world they are living in. They do not discuss their common past, the friendship between their parents formed in the 1960s precisely because of their shared Indianness. Four decades later, representatives of the second generation meet briefly in Europe before departing again: Kaushik to Asia, Hema to India and then to the United States.

They visit Volterra, the ancient city founded by the Etruscans, and it is in this “austere, forbidding, solitary place that they spent their remaining days together” (*UE* 318). Hema tells him about the history of those places and about the Etruscan necropolis. Her work is on the past, his depends on present and future events, yet both jobs include violence and death. At the Guarnacci Etruscan Museum, they see the hundreds of urns used to store the ashes of their dead:

They were called urns but were more like little caskets, made of alabaster or terra-cotta, the lids topped with figures with large heads and disproportionately small bodies, grotesquely but indisputably alive. (...) The sides were covered with carvings showing so many migrations across land and departures in covered wagons to the underworld, so many fantastic beasts and fish-tailed gods of the sea. (319-20)

Like the Etruscans, Hema and Kaushik also have a past of migrations across lands. But for the second generation notions of home and return to a homeland, central to diasporas, are more problematic. A phantom image of homeland nevertheless haunts the eponymous characters.

Hema asks him if he is going to come back to Italy in case he does not adapt to the new lifestyle in Hong Kong. But he answers firmly that he has reached an end here and will not return. Then he asks her to join him in Hong Kong, aware she is the only woman he had ever been intimate with who had also known his mother and who is able to remember her as he did. He knows he could only ever settle somewhere with someone who understands his past. However, she turns him down, telling him she cannot just give up her life and move to a continent to which she has no ties. She is the opposite of Kaushik, and instead of taking a risk and following him to an 'unaccustomed earth', Hema settles for a semi-arranged marriage to a man she does not love but who promises stability and continuity.

The next day Kaushik drives her to the airport. After boarding she realizes she has left her gold bangle in the plastic tray before passing through the security gate. She knows that, according to Indian traditions, it would be replaced tenfold in the course of her wedding. Still, she feels as if she had left a piece of her body behind. Growing up, she was told that losing gold was inauspicious. But she could not go back and recuperate it since "[a]lready on the screen at the center of the plane there was a map with a white line emerging away from Rome, creeping toward India. And this simple graphic composed her, making clear the only road available now" (324). Just like photos feature moments, persons, or events to which it is impossible to go back, the trajectory on the map also indicates the impossibility of returning to what she has left behind in Rome. She is on her way to India to be married, and she will return as Navin's wife to America. The lost bangle symbolizes the connection to Kaushik which will be impossible to retrieve.

Meanwhile Kaushik lands in Thailand, and after only three days he is already tired of doing nothing. The shifting speck constantly distracts him, especially in contact with the brightness of the day. In a photographer's darkroom, no ray of light is allowed, lest it ruin the pictures. He is aware that Hema is somewhere in the Bay of Bengal, across the Andaman Sea. Yet he has not swum in the ocean for years, not trusting it anymore after nearly drowning in an undertow off the coast of Venezuela. But on December 26, Kaushik lifts the camera to his face, takes one last picture, and then enters the water with the intention of showing his mother he was

not afraid: “He took off his sunglasses, leaving them in the boat next to his camera. The speck in his vision rose and fell, erasing its random trail. He held on to the edge of the boat, swinging his legs over the side, lowering himself. The sea was as warm and welcoming as a bath. His feet touched the bottom and so he let go” (331). Ironically, he dies because he fails to come ashore, being caught in the terrible 2004 tsunami. In death, Kaushik lets go of childhood traumas of dislocation and loss.

In Banerjee’s reading, Kaushik “comes to the shores of the afterlife, as the Etruscans believed, by making a final migratory journey, which, like all diasporic journeys, forecloses the possibility of return and must necessarily be linear” (453). His mother ‘retreated’ to America, a foreign land, and she died there, her ashes thrown in the waters of the Atlantic. Kaushik also dies in foreign ‘waters’, on his way to relocate in a different country. He is a rare example in Lahiri’s gallery of characters as he dies an untimely death. He never really recovers from the melancholia brought about by the early loss of his mother and of a motherland.

The last two pages of the story are narrated by Hema (like the first pages of this trilogy), who hears the news of the calamity on television. She buys newspapers, studies every picture, looking for his name, hoping he had survived and continues to do his work, namely photograph dead bodies and document sorrow. She checks his website and sees the pictures from Volterra he had uploaded just hours before his death. Hema is not in any of them but strands of her hair sometimes intrude in front of the lens, being blown by the wind, marking her presence by his side, connecting her to him in subtle ways.

She marries Navin although she is repulsed by his sight, and by the fact that he had “countless more days to live”, and together they return to Massachusetts. When Giovanna eventually confirms the news of Kaushik’s death she no longer needs any proof of his absence because she “felt it as plainly and implacably as the cells that were gathering and shaping themselves in [her] body” (333). Lahiri juxtaposes life and death here: Hema is carrying a new life inside her, but mourning a lost one. She could have been pregnant with Kaushik’s child and her long-time love could have lived on in this way. Now she laments that “this was not the case. We had been careful, and you had left nothing behind” (333). Nothing but photos, none of him.

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Lev Grossman has described Lahiri's stories as reserved and static (2008, para 2). Yet what appears like stasis is, in fact, a quiet but enormous tension between forces pushing in opposite directions. Her second-generation characters are torn between attachment to their parents and a desire to form their own family and follow their own path, independent from their parents' values and expectations. At the same time, they have to accommodate their hybridity. The variables are the same, but the resolution in each case is different.

The volume begins with Ruma who is eventually transplanted to a new American city. She moves across the country in which she was born, not without difficulty though. Unlike her, fellow second-generation characters Sang and Sudha relocate to London (in a third country, promising a 'third space' they need to explore). While Sang seems to cover the distance with ease, Sudha seems closely attached to her family in the United States, yet she starts her own family on a different continent. Sudha's brother, Rahul, is not able to cope with his hybrid status. He stays in the United States, but one feels he is disconnected from his Indian heritage and lost in American culture at the same time. Kaushik is in a similar position, but he cuts all roots after losing his mother and travels the world without any intention to settle down. Yet he is unhappy with his mobility and rootlessness and finally loses his life in a foreign ocean. Hema also travels, but she does not have the courage to uproot herself and follow Kaushik. She chooses a safe, semi-arranged marriage with an Indian-American, although this path is bound to make her unhappy. After a lifetime in the United States, Hema's parents have moved back to Calcutta and this might contribute to her decision of staying put in the soil where she was born.

Feeling unhomey in America and India, Amit finally manages to reconcile his position of in-betweenness. He is a successful transplant, like Usha, who narrates her mother's story in order to understand how difficult it is sometimes to immigrate. Aparna is powerfully affected by the move from India; her husband is insensitive to her emotional needs, and the younger man she falls in love with, Pranab, does not match her feelings. However, she finds the strength to deal with these troubles and to raise Usha in a balance between Indian and American culture. Her daughter needs the third space opened up by narration in order to make sense of the two spaces she has had to negotiate while growing up.

Ruma's father is a very important character who is not named by Lahiri probably because his links to India are surprisingly weak for a first-generation immigrant. Like Aparna's husband (also unnamed), he focuses more on assimilating into American society than on his wife's pains with immigration. Both men's priority, it seems, is to take financial care of their families. Ruma's father, however, is nurturing towards his daughter as she grapples with various problems in her late 30s. He helps with her transplantation, but does not want to be pinned down himself. Therefore, after retirement he keeps an apartment in the United States but prefers to spend most of his time traveling the world, becoming a transnational citizen.

Like the title announces, first-generation Indian immigrants create conditions for their children to strike roots into 'unaccustomed earth'. Yet at the end of the book one realizes that some of them do and are happily transplanted, others do and are not satisfied. Others choose to immigrate in their turn and reopen the cycle, while others free themselves of any roots. Life does not always go 'according to plan' and people's journey is never a smooth, predetermined path.

Chapter IV

The Lowland: Away, but Living in the Yesterday

Jhumpa Lahiri's fourth book, and second novel, *The Lowland* (2013), tells the story of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan Mitra, who are born only fifteen months apart and are inseparable while growing up. Subhash is more careful and pragmatic, so he leaves the troubled city of Calcutta in order to pursue an academic career on the East Coast of the United States. His younger brother is more radical and, driven by a sense of equality and justice, joins the Naxalite movement in the 1960s. Caught in the midst of the communist movement taking place in West Bengal, Udayan is eventually executed by the police in the lowland behind his parental house. His sibling returns home, hoping to pick up the pieces of the shattered family, and marries Udayan's widow out of a sense of duty. He takes Gauri to Rhode Island with him, although she is pregnant with his brother's baby.

In this novel, Lahiri goes back to post-independence India, but draws attention to the poverty that determined young and idealist intellectuals to envision violence against wealthy landowners and then self-sacrifice as the only possible solutions to change the system. The tumultuous political context in the wake of colonial rule in India marks the personal saga of a family deeper than in any other Lahirian book. As Stephanie Merritt remarks in her review for *The Guardian*, "*The Lowland* is a sweeping, ambitious story that examines in intimate detail the intersection of the political and the personal, encompassing nearly 50 years of Indian and American history through the lives of one family." (Merritt, 2013, para. 2)

Thus, even though Lahiri's latest book also includes instances of cultural translation, hybridity, and transnationalism, I am arguing that the focus remains on India throughout the narrative. Permanently scarred by feelings of nostalgia and guilt, Gauri and Subhash are not able to concentrate on their present in a foreign country. Therefore, the plot-generating chronotope (literally meaning time-space) in *The Lowland* can be summarized as follows: the two main characters leave Calcutta physically, but temporally they remain stuck in Tollygunge. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, chronotopes "are the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative" (250). The

knot of this Lahirian text is tied at the intersection of the spatial distance from the homeland and the temporal proximity to the traumatic events of the Indian past.

Gauri, in particular, never really gets away. A revolutionary herself, studying philosophy and passionately identifying with her beloved Udayan's ideology, Gauri departs from the homeland after his death. She is the most feminist of Lahiri's women and achieves astonishing professional success by becoming a philosophy professor at a college in California. Immigration is empowering her in her career, yet Gauri abandons her daughter and chooses an individualistic life path which does not make her happy. She travels thousands of miles, away from both Calcutta and Rhode Island, but actually continues to be a prisoner of the past.

The central difference compared to the other books is that the spotlight is on India, the country left behind presumably in search of a happier life abroad. The novel starts and ends in India, the title refers to a lowland in the neighborhood of Tollygunge, and the motto reads: "let me return to my home town entombed / in grass as in a warm and high sea" (Giorgio Bassani, "Saluto a Roma"). There are numerous other chronotopic references and flashbacks to Calcutta, the Communist Party, and the Tolly Club (a recurrent symbol representing class difference and the colonial legacy). In fact, the whole plot hinges on some incidents that take place in India during a brief time span in the 1960s.

Growing up in Tollygunge, Subhash and Udayan are put in the same class at a Bengali medium school for boys. The two brothers learn how the neighborhood was formed: around 1770, the English "started clearing the waterlogged jungle, laying down streets" (*Lowland* 13). Major William Tolly makes shipping trade possible between Calcutta and East Bengal; later, when the English shift back to the center of Calcutta, Tollygunge becomes populated by Muslims. After Partition some Muslims stay behind, and the small mosque at the crossroads of Deshapran Sashmal Road remains a local landmark. In the early 1930s the tramline is extended so that the British can easily reach the Tolly Club, "to escape the city's commotion, and to be among their own" (14).

In the 1950s Tollygunge is a rather poor neighborhood, with lower middle-class Indian families living in simple huts, in stark contrast to the exclusive Tolly Golf Club. Besides the golf field it has a swimming pool, a tennis court, stables, as well as a billiards and bridge rooms; it is restricted to rich British-educated Indians and visiting foreigners. Characteristically, a portrait of Queen Elisabeth II still hangs on the wall. Living in its proximity, Subhash and Udayan often

jump the walls of the Tolly Club in order to explore this forbidden space. Udayan, the younger brother, is always the one who initiates the trespassing. Subhash prefers to spend his time studying the flora and fauna of the nearby ponds, and he is often frustrated with Udayan's daring and with his lack of it. Nevertheless, he has "no sense of himself without Udayan. From his earliest memories, at every point, his brother was there" (6). One evening they are caught by a policeman who punishes Subhash by striking him with a putting iron. Udayan avenges his elder brother's pain and humiliation when he contributes to the assassination of another policeman, many years later. Subhash is already in the United States by then, unaware of his brother's act.

The brothers look almost identical and their voices are nearly indistinguishable. However, their temperaments differ greatly. Udayan "was blind to self-constraints, like an animal incapable of perceiving certain colors. But Subhash strove to minimize his existence, as other animals merged with bark or blades of grass" (11). As a child, Udayan's most enduring transgression is disregarding the instructions to remain indoors the day the dirt surface is paved. He steps outside and leaves his trail of footprints in the cement. By analogy, Udayan leaves his prints on the lives of his family members and on Gauri's existence.

The boys are admitted at two of the city's best colleges: Udayan studies physics, and Subhash pursues chemical engineering. They put together a shortwave radio because Udayan is eager to hear more news of the world than what comes through their parents' old radio, or what is printed in the daily Bengali papers. He searches for any foreign signal, listens to news bulletins from Radio Moscow, Voice of America, Radio Peking, or the BBC. In the summer of 1966, they listen together to the World Cup football final between England and Germany.

In the spring on 1967, they start hearing about peasants revolting in Naxalbari, a village in the Darjeeling District, at the northern tip of West Bengal. Located at the foothills of the Himalayas, nearly four hundred miles away from Calcutta, Naxalbari is closer to Tibet than to Tollygunge. But Udayan is impressed by the injustice of ruthless landowners against hardworking villagers in that faraway region. Still living in a feudal system, they are denied revenue from the crops they grow, some of them starving for lack of food. Bengali communists help organize the uprising in Naxalbari, while several demonstrations take place in Calcutta in support of the peasants' cause. For a few months there are fights with the police, some peasants lose their lives, and a few landowners are also abducted and killed. In July, the rebellion is brought to its heels, but for Udayan it represents "an inspiration, an impetus for change" (23). He

is outraged that the government has turned “victims into criminals” (22). Ironically, this is what will happen to him also: from a young intellectual genuinely concerned with the well-being of poorer countrymen, he imperceptibly changes into an accomplice to terrorist acts.

As usual, Subhash is more cautious and wonders: “What good are bows and arrows against a modern state?” (21) Even after attending a Naxalite meeting with his brother and helping him paint slogans on neighborhood walls he still is not convinced that the Maoist ideology can solve India’s problems. Their father, a government employee, also dismisses the movement saying his generation has built a nation and there is no need for further upheavals: “We’re independent. The country is ours” (23).

The Naxalite Party is formed, and on May Day 1969, ten thousand people march to the center of Calcutta in support of the movement. Udayan is excited: “The revolutionary situation was ripe, both at home and abroad (...) A high tide of revolution was sweeping through the world” (33). He joins the guerrilla warfare against the Indian state, while Subhash starts applying for PhDs in the United States. His younger brother senses that once he leaves, he will not come back. He accuses Subhash of being selfish, of not wanting to jeopardize his career and personal future for their country’s prosperity. All their lives they had been as one, but now their paths are parting.

Subhash arrives in Rhode Island in 1969 to pursue a PhD in marine chemistry. In the beginning, he has to make huge efforts to translate between Indian and American cultures: “The difference was so extreme that he could not accommodate the two places together in his mind. In the enormous new country, there seemed to be nowhere for the old to reside. There was nothing to link them; he was the sole link. Here life ceased to obstruct or assault him. Here was a place where humanity was not always pushing, rushing, running as if with a fire at its back” (34). Despite the discrepancies, Subhash sees the positive side of immigration: nobody knows him in the United States, so he can begin anew.

Soon he manages to find some common points between the two places initially impossible to compare: both Rhode Island and Calcutta have “[m]ountains to the north, an ocean to the east, the majority of land to the south and west” (34). Both places are close to sea level, with estuaries where fresh and salt water combine. Tollygunge had been flooded by the sea, and all of Rhode Island had once been covered with sheets of ice. Subhash needs an imaginary geographical juxtaposition between homeland and adoptive land so that he can relate to the

unfamiliar place. He has no roots here, so he refers to the land's age-old past in order to imagine a present.

The oceanography campus overlooks Narragansett Bay. There is a small beach nearby where Subhash enjoys eating his meals alone, looking at the two bridges (Jamestown and Newport) leading to islands offshore. He has learned from one of his professors that the wires of all the suspended cables used in the construction of Newport Bridge “would span just over eight thousand miles. It was the distance between America and India; the distance that now separated him from his family” (65). Bridges both connect and separate. The small islands bear names that evoke the Protestant ethos: Patience and Prudence, Hope and Despair, and on the mainland there is an old church Subhash feels “the strange urge to embrace” (39). He wants to enter one day, but the door is locked, so he only peers through the windows at the interior which is “at once pristine and vibrant, bathed in light” (39).

He shares a house with Richard Grifalconi, a Quaker from Wisconsin. Richard is a PhD student in sociology who strongly opposes the Vietnam War and even organizes peaceful protests against it. Gandhi is a hero to him and Subhash thinks his brother “would have scoffed, saying that Gandhi had sided with enemies of the people. That he had disarmed India in the name of liberation” (35). However, Subhash is proud he has taken a step his brother never would have: coming to America alone and building a career in a very foreign culture, one that his brother resents.

In the second year of his PhD program, Subhash inhabits the house alone after Richard moves to Chicago. Before leaving he teaches the Indian how to drive, and Subhash loves this activity. For Thanksgiving everything is closed and Americans are celebrating in their families, so what is left for the immigrant to do is drive with no destination in mind, listen to American pop songs on the radio, and take in the beautiful landscapes. Although he still feels “uncertain, improvisational” (40) in the United States, his acculturation is going smoothly. Yet when he sails east for three weeks on a research vessel, Subhash is inevitably reminded how far away he is from his family in both space and time: “Isolated on the ship with the scientists and other students and crew, he felt doubly alone. Unable to fathom his future, severed from his past” (62-3).

In spite of his rebellious acts, Udayan has stayed by his parents' side, attached to the ancestral land. Subhash, on the other hand, sends money to help his parents with the house

renovations, but has not traveled back to see them in a year and a half. What is more, Subhash starts dating Holly, an American woman older by almost ten years. He is fascinated by her skin color: “The range of tones and shades she contained, not only the inverse shadows from tanning, highlighting portions of her body he was seeing for the first time, but also an inherent, more subtle mixture, as quietly variegated as a handful of sand (...) (72-3). Holly has lived in Rhode Island all her life, in a tiny and isolated cottage by the beach, which had belonged to her grandparents. Subhash, the recent migrant, is probably also fascinated with her firm roots. Holly asks if he likes it here, and he replies: “There are times I think I have discovered the most beautiful place on earth” (65). He adds that only here, “in this minute but majestic corner of the world” (65), he can finally breathe.

Holly knows everything about seabirds and the love for nature unites them, yet Subhash is also “aware of the great chasms that separate them” (68). Besides the age and the cultural differences, Holly’s life experience is in stark contrast to his. She has a son and is separated, but not divorced, from her husband who now lives with another woman. Her relationship with Subhash unfolds during weekends, when her son is staying with his father. They go out and make love, which Subhash surely would have refrained from with a woman in Calcutta before getting married. By now settled comfortably in Rhode Island, he still feels somewhat uneasy for defying his parents’ expectations to return and marry an Indian girl of their choosing, for “forging this new clandestine path” (77).

One evening, at Holly’s place, he glances at the calendar and notices that the following day is August 15, Indian Independence Day, a holiday in his home country, an ordinary day in the United States. He remembers that in August 1947, while India was celebrating, both Subhash (close to four) and Udayan (just two) had a fever and were taken to the doctor. This represents the earliest memory of his childhood, one that comes back to him in an American woman’s house, reconnecting him strongly and unexpectedly to his past, his family, and his country. After a while Holly breaks up with him and tries to mend things with her husband, and Subhash longs to return home. And he does so when the tragic news of Udayan’s death reaches him.

While his brother is studying abroad, Udayan befriends another Naxalite, Manash, and falls in love with his sister. A student in philosophy, Gauri shares Udayan’s ideas as well as his love for Calcutta. Her grandfather, a professor at the Sanskrit College, “died with a book on his chest” (57) and inspired her to study. From her balcony, overlooking the Cornwallis intersection,

they gaze at their beloved, “impossible” city, bustling with life. Decrepit, overcrowded, and noisy, their hometown nevertheless mesmerizes the two young idealists:

Together they took in the stone buildings, with their decrepit grandeur, that lined the streets. Their tired columns, their crumbling cornices, their sullied shades. (...) On the other side of the street were a few gold and silver shops all in a row, with mirrored walls and ceilings. Always crowded with families, endlessly reflected, placing orders for wedding jewels. There was the press where they took clothes to be ironed. The store where Gauri bought her ink, her notebooks. Narrow sweet shops, where trays of confections were studded with flies. (...) The clamor of so many motors, of so many scooters and lorries and busses and cars, filled their ears. (53)

Udayan becomes more and more involved in Naxalite activities; he even loses the fingers from a hand in the explosion of a bomb he placed at a safe house. By 1970, the Naxalites are operating underground, carrying out attacks and ransacking schools, blasting cinemas and banks. They are responsible for “sadistic, gruesome” (87) killings of unarmed traffic constables, affluent businessmen, members of rival parties, and even educators. They take control of certain neighborhoods, including Tollygunge. Udayan and Gauri get married in secret, without celebrations. His parents find out after the civil registration and they are outraged to have been excluded. Not only did they not arrange his marriage, but they actually had no idea he was seeing someone.

Gauri loves her husband so much that she helps him plan the assassination of a police officer. While tutoring two students in Sanskrit, she observes from the window a policeman’s timetable. The comrades need him out of the way, and she tells Udayan the fact that his day off is Thursday. On this day the officer is unarmed and he always takes his son home from school. That is when they attack and murder him. Before leaving for America, already five months pregnant, Gauri goes back to the Jadavpur neighborhood and briefly intersects with the policeman’s widow and their boy. At twenty-three, Gauri is in a similar situation: already a widow, she is about to become a mother, too.

She is pregnant and grieving: “Udayan’s ghost was palpable within her, preserved in this room where she spent all her time” (99). She shuts the door and the window shutters, trying to keep inside “whatever invisible particles of him floated in the atmosphere” (108). During Pujo, the whole city celebrates, but their house is in mourning. Goddess Durga returns to her consort, Lord Shiva, in a yearly symbolic rite that marks the end of Pujo. Simultaneously, Gauri separates from her first husband and is preparing to marry his brother in a desperate attempt to get away.

After Udayan is executed by the police, Subhash returns to Calcutta for the first time in three years. The streets are clamorous and packed with people, just as he remembered them. Upon reaching Tollygunge, Subhash is “assaulted by the sour, septic smell of his neighborhood, of his childhood. The smell of standing water. The stink of algae, of open drains” (89). Calcutta, the “city with nothing, with everything” (89), is unchanged. But the small house Subhash has grown up in “had been replaced by something impressive, ungainly” (90). Udayan’s footprints are still visible in the concrete, but nothing else is the same. The house feels unwelcoming, its layout is confusing, and there is no space for the remaining members of the Mitra family to gather. Subhash feels he does not belong anymore; his parents are always on the top terrace, gazing at the neighborhood, shutting their only remaining son out. Every day, at the same hour, his mother goes to a memorial stone put up by Udayan’s comrades in the place where he was executed. She and her husband are still shocked by what they have seen: their son being shot, his body taken away in a van, never returned to them. Subhash thinks his brother “had given his life to a movement that had been misguided, that had caused only damage, that had already been dismantled. The only thing he’d altered was what their family had been” (115).

Feeling awkward in the new house, Subhash walks aimlessly the streets of Calcutta. He now feels an allegiance to the foreigners he sees: “He shared with them a knowledge of elsewhere. Another life to go back to. The ability to leave” (112). He buys a turquoise shawl for Gauri, an inappropriate color for a widow. He is ready to return to the United States and is determined to take Gauri with him: for his sake (he is alone), for hers (she would have been driven out by her in-laws after giving birth), and for the baby’s (it would be raised in a place where nobody knows the painful truth and they could be a family). And yet, the bond between Subhash and Gauri is “a shared awareness of the person they’d both loved” (115). They are connected by the past and project a future together, although they do not share a love in the present.

A few months later, Subhash, “the wrong father” (124), waits for Gauri at Boston airport. He is her brother-in-law and her husband, but resembles Udayan only externally: “The same height, a similar build. Counterparts, companions, though she’d never seen them together. Subhash was a milder version. Compared to Udayan’s, his face was like the slightly flawed impression the man at Immigration had just stamped into her passport, indicating her arrival, stamped over a second time for emphasis” (123). His eyes are kind but weak, his voice is the

same as his brother's, and this aspect of Udayan is perfectly replicated in Subhash's throat. Yet he is a mere replacement of his brother, and Gauri has married Subhash as a way of staying 'in touch' with her lost love. Everyone opposed the marriage: the Party, her in-laws, her own family. Even Gauri understands that it is a useless act, "just as it was useless to save a single earring when the other half of the pair was lost" (127-28).

By marrying Subhash and leaving India, she has the opportunity to put the ghastly events behind her, and the child can come into the world "ignorant and safe" (125). However, the town is called Providence and Gauri knows the meaning of the noun: "foresight, the future beheld before it was experienced" (125). She carries the future inside her, but is keenly aware she cannot free herself of Udayan's memory: "She felt as if she contained a ghost, as Udayan was. The child was a version of him, in that it was both present and absent. Both within her and remote" (124). She changes place, but is unable to let go of the past. Indeed, even on the plane "it was time, not space, she'd been aware of traveling through" (125).

Gauri appreciates the privacy and freedom on the peaceful American campus. Subhash is independent and performs his morning routine without needing her, as opposed to his brother who "had wanted a revolution but at home he'd expected to be served" (126). During the first months in the United States, Gauri spends most of her time in her bedroom and seldom goes out of the house. She watches insipid TV shows and news of America, as she is getting settled. Later she begins to explore the campus, goes to the library, and attends philosophy lectures twice a week. She still wears saris, but wants to look like the other girls on the campus, "like a woman Udayan had never seen" (134). So, without warning Subhash, she cuts her hair short, tears all her saris, and starts to wear slacks and sweaters. Gauri violently delimits herself from Indian patterns of femininity; in Rhode Island she is free to separate from stifling cultural norms.

The contractions begin in the library, and Subhash takes her to hospital. However, "[p]art of her wanted the pregnancy simply to continue, for the pain to subside but for the baby not to be born. To delay, if only for a little longer, its arrival" (144). Is immigration "a lifelong pregnancy" for Gauri, too? In her case, I think the metaphor refers to her inability to escape the past and 'deliver' a completely new self in the United States. She gives birth to a child, but never really becomes a mother. She lives in a time before Bela was conceived, before her biological father was killed. She stays away from India for forty years, yet she behaves as if she were perpetually pregnant with feelings of guilt and unresolved traumas. Gauri thrives professionally in the United

States and travels the world to attend various conferences. Immigration thus empowers the woman in her career and enables her to become a transnational citizen. But on a personal level she is not empowered; on the contrary, she is unable to cope with powerful emotions so she literally runs away a second time. When her daughter is twelve, Gauri moves to California and dedicates herself to teaching and research. This radical, seemingly unexplainable act performed by an Indian mother, can be interpreted as a self-imposed punishment for being Udayan's accomplice in his terrorist acts, then betraying him and marrying his brother, and for lying to Bela about her father's identity. Running away from her daughter and not contacting her for over two decades add to her penitence.

In fact, Gauri's foremost ambition is to stop time's inexorable flow forward: "She wished the days and months ahead of her would end. But the rest of her life continued to present itself, time ceaselessly proliferating" (111). Pregnancy, the life forming inside her, forced Gauri to stay alive. Even after delivery, "there was an acute awareness of time, of the future looming, accelerating. The baby's lifetime, so scant, already outdistancing and outpacing her own. This was the logic of parenthood" (144). Gauri's every action, even that of abandoning her girl, is an attempt to escape the loop of time.

Obsessed with time, Gauri studies its philosophical conceptualizations: "She saw time; now she sought to understand it. (...) Did it exist independently, in the physical world, or in the mind's apprehension? Was it perceived only by humans? What caused certain moments to swell up like hours, certain years to dwindle to a number of days? Did animals have a sense of it passing, when they lost a mate, or killed their prey?" (151). Actually, the narrator records that Gauri "had been born with a map of time in her mind. (...) Her strongest image was always of time, both past and future; it was an immediate horizon, at once orienting and containing her. Across the limitless spectrum of years, the brief tenancy of her own life was superimposed" (110). The phrase 'map of time' accurately renders the inseparability of space and time. As Mikhail Bakhtin has theorized, "[i]n the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" (84).

Interestingly, Gauri's timeline only includes the past and the future, eluding the present. To the right she sees the recent past, the year she had met Udayan, the year she was born, 1948, "prefaced by all the years and centuries that came before" (*Lowland* 110-11). To the left she sees the future, "the place where her death, unknown but certain, was an end point" (111). The baby's

existence is “represented by a separate line creeping forward”, and “Udayan’s life, no longer accompanying her own as she’s assumed it would, (...) formed a grave in her mind’s eye” (111). However, she is unable to pin the ‘now’ on this map: “Only the present moment, lacking any perspective, eluded her grasp. It was like a blind spot, just over her shoulder. A hole in her vision” (111).

She begins her research of Hindu philosophy, in which “the three tenses – past, present, future – were said to exist simultaneously in God. God was timeless, but time was personified as the god of death” (151). She continues with Descartes, who writes “that God re-created the body at each successive moment. So that time was a form of sustenance” (151). On earth, time is marked by the sun and moon and regulated by clocks and calendars. In Gauri’s vision, the present “was a speck that kept blinking, brightening and diminishing, something neither alive nor dead. How long did it last? One second? Less? It was always in flux; in the time it took to consider it, it slipped away” (151).

Udayan had explained to her the laws of classical physics concerning time, Newton’s theory that time is an absolute entity, and Einstein’s claim that time and space are intertwined in a continuum. Udayan described something called “time reversal invariance”, a concept “in which there was no fundamental distinction between forward and backward, when the motions of particles were precisely defined” (151). People usually look ahead and plan for the future; but Gauri still expects to receive some news from Udayan, for him to travel not only the distance between India and the United States, but the one between death and life. Her sole aspiration is to make time elapse backward, so that she can live in the yesterday, by her first husband’s side.

She agrees to name her daughter Bela, which was suggested by Subhash. His name is registered on the birth certificate as father, a falsehood no one in America questions. Bela’s name connects her to her Indian heritage and has also got to do with time: “Pronounced slightly differently, Bela’s name, the name of a flower, was itself the word for a span of time, a portion of the day. *Shakal bela* meant morning; *bikel bela*, afternoon. *Ratrir bela* was night” (149). Apart from her name, Bela’s complexion is another link to the Indianness. She does not resemble either of her parents; her lighter complexion was passed down from her paternal grandmother.

When Bela is four, the word ‘yesterday’ enters her vocabulary: “(...) its meaning was elastic, synonymous with whatever was no longer the case. The past collapsed, in no particular order, contained by a single word” (149). In Bengali, the word *kal* means both yesterday and

tomorrow, so an adjective or the tense of a verb is needed in order to actually “distinguish what had already happened from what would be” (149). In English, the language Bela grows up in, the past is unilateral. Interestingly, however, the child sometimes says ‘the day after yesterday’ instead of using ‘today’, showing that “[t]ime flowed for Bela in the opposite direction” (149).

Gauri’s philosophy is close to her daughter’s version of time: “According to Bela, Udayan might still have been living the day before, and Gauri might still be married to him, when really almost five years had passed since he was killed” (152). Now Subhash’s legal wife, far from India spatially, the tragic events she had witnessed seem to fade, but are not completely erased: “Space shielded her more effectively than time: the great distance between Rhode Island and Tollygunge. As if her gaze had to span an ocean and continents to see. It caused those moments to recede, to turn less and less visible, then invisible. But she knew they were there” (152). It is more difficult to overcome geographical distances than it is to leap mentally back (and forth) in time.

In 1976 America celebrates its bicentennial and Subhash marks his seventh year there. He and Bela share a connection “at once false and true” (156). She is extremely attached to him, ignorant of the reality that he is “an uncle, an imposter” (146). Gauri is increasingly dedicated to her research, detaching herself from both Subhash and, more importantly, her girl. She engages in some activities with Bela, but they are perceived as chores which prevent her from studying. She rarely smiles when she looks at Bela’s face and seldom kisses her spontaneously. Gauri does not complain to Subhash about her life with him, but she seems incapable to love him or Bela with all her heart. In fact, “it was as if she’d reversed their roles, as if Bela were a relative’s child and not her own” (159).

Subhash pushes for a child, “to correct the imbalance” (160) and close up the distance between them, but Gauri continues to take the pill. She only sleeps with Subhash “to extinguish Udayan’s ghost. To smother what haunted her” (161). She sometimes even craves for Subhash’s body, “as she had craved odd combinations of food when she was pregnant” (161). At the same time she resents him for being free to go to work or attend conferences in other cities, while she has to sit at home with her young daughter:

With Bela, she was aware of time not passing; of the sky nevertheless darkening at the end of another day. She was aware of the perfect silence in the apartment, replete with the isolation she and Bela shared. When she was with Bela, even if they were not interacting, it was as if they were one person, bound fast by a dependence that restricted her mentally, physically. At times it terrified her that she felt so entwined and also so alone. (163)

Despite all the hours they spend together, the love she had felt for Bela's father is not transferred to the child: "Instead there was a growing numbness that inhibited her, that impaired her" (164). Motherhood restricts, inhibits, and impairs Gauri, so when she flees she rids herself of it the way she rid herself of her long hair and saris. She never regrets the new look and the independence immigration brings her, but years later she will regret cutting her connection from Bela.

Anger starts to take the place of her enormous love for Udayan: "She no longer searched for signs of him. The fleeting awareness that he might be in a room, looking over her shoulder as she worked at her desk, was no longer a comfort. Certain days it was possible not to think of him, to remember him. No aspect of him had traveled to America. Apart from Bela, he'd refused to join her here" (164). Gauri resents Udayan for having betrayed her trust and sacrificed his life, Subhash for his freedom and his closeness to Bela, her daughter for needing her and 'wasting' the time she would rather spend working. At the same time, Bela is a constant, 'living' reminder of what had happened in India. It is easy to change place and uproot oneself, but impossible to escape the consequences of past decisions and actions.

One day, after a heavy rain, thousands of earthworms come out. Bela is terrified and begs her mother not to make her go to school on that day. But Gauri is implacable: she drags her daughter to the school bus, thinking that she would lose a day of study if Bela skipped classes. When Bela is on vacation, Gauri starts sneaking out of the house, leaving her six-year old girl unsupervised, longing for fifteen minutes alone. Soon she enrolls in a class of German philosophy and spends every evening away from her family. She is the only woman in the class, and feels a kinship with her professor, Otto Weiss. As a boy he had been put into a concentration camp and his family perished there. They share the trauma of losing their loved ones and then fleeing their country of origin in an attempt to forget. Therefore, Gauri is comfortable to confess her story to the professor: "My first husband was killed. I watched it happen. I married his brother to get away" (166).

Professor Weiss recommends her for a doctoral program in Boston and she is accepted. Her dissertation is born slowly, behind the closed door of her bedroom which also serves as her study. Gauri dedicates herself to writing the thesis, aware that she is neglecting her parental duties. In fact, she refers to her book as if it were an infant, telling Subhash it sometimes worries her to leave the pages "unattended in the house" (201), even though she has left Bela unattended many times. She sometimes fears failing at this task as well, like she failed at being a good

mother. But when she is finally done, Professor Weiss calls to congratulate her, saying he is proud of her work.

When Bela is almost twelve, Subhash takes her to Calcutta. Tollygunge is changed and changing – water is turned into land so that new houses can be built. Udayan’s mother still takes flowers to his stone every day and tries to keep the area uncluttered by the garbage. Time has passed, but Udayan’s ghost still lurks inside the house and around it, as it does throughout the novel. Udayan’s mother, now a “ghostly presence” (189) herself, remembers how much they had loved the house, how they had extended it to accommodate their two sons and their families. But now “[t]he house stood practically empty. A mockery of the future they’d assumed would unfold” (181). With one son dead and the other in America, she and her husband cling to a past when things were still promising a happy future. Strangely, the same can be said about Subhash and Gauri. They have left the (low)land, but have not broken up with the past, and Bela is their most powerful reminder.

Subhash delivers several lectures at the University of Calcutta, so Bela is left with her grandmother and Deepa, a servant. In Tollygunge, the girl is not permitted to leave the house alone. In Rhode Island, her mother had allowed her since third grade to wander the campus which seemed “enormous to her, with streets to cross, cars to be mindful of” (203). At first she is afraid of the Indian metropolis, “at once ramshackle and grand” (195). Then Subhash starts taking her out shopping, or to visit the Zoo and to eat at Chinese restaurants. Bela records the heavy traffic, noise, and pollution. Her twelfth birthday is celebrated inside the Tolly Golf Club. She swims in the pool, rides a pony, speaks English to other children. Subhash walks with her across the golf course and tells her how they had to sneak in when he and his brother were little. He lies that Udayan had died of an infection. Ironically, they have access to a space previously off-limits to Indians from the lower classes because Subhash has returned to the neighborhood as a foreigner and Bela was born in the United States. Udayan would have surely disapproved and accused Subhash of siding with the enemy.

Upon their return to Rhode Island, after six weeks in India, the landscape is unchanged, but the house is empty. The windows are shut and locked, leaving the rooms dark and the soil of the houseplants dry. There is no food in the fridge and no sign of Gauri. Subhash finds a letter in which she announces she has moved to California to teach at a college. From now on, Bela only ‘sees’ her mother in a shadow that appears briefly on her wall each day, reminding the girl of

Gauri's profile: "In this apparition, every morning, Bela recognized her mother, and felt visited by her. It was the sort of spontaneous association one might make while looking up at a passing cloud. But in this case never breaking apart, never changing into anything else" (213). Gauri is now just a ghost in her daughter's room. The narrative is replete with haunted houses and ghostly presences looming over spaces and people's lives. The past perpetually overshadows the present and menaces the future.

Gauri goes as far from Rhode Island as she can and lands on the opposite side of the United States, in Los Angeles, "[a] place she knew would contain her, where she knew she would be conveniently lost" (232). For the second time in her life she crosses a threshold and hopes to start afresh in a place where nobody knows her. Besides the spatial distance, the time lag between the two coasts also cuts her off from the people she has abandoned: "The three hours on her watch that separated her from Bela and Subhash were like a physical barrier, as massive as the mountains she'd flown over to get here. She'd done it, the worst thing she could think of doing" (232). Still, she constantly fears that Bela or Subhash would materialize, "[c]onfronting her, exposing her. Apprehending her, the way the police had apprehended Udayan" (231).

Yet they never look for her, in twenty years. She moves around freely, takes up teaching jobs in Santa Cruz and San Francisco, before settling in a small, unnamed college town in Southern California. She teaches a seminar on the hermeneutics of time, and relocates for a year to Heidelberg, where she is invited as a visiting scholar. She still carries the shawl from Subhash during her journeys, but always avoids coming to Providence, believing it is "[t]oo illicit to cross that line" (235).

She has a good relationship with her colleagues and students, but otherwise lives like a widow though continuing to wear the wedding band. Gauri has brief affairs with different men and even with a woman (a graduate student at UCLA who asks Gauri to be the outside reader of her dissertation). In the United States she has had the opportunity to reinvent herself several times: "She had generated alternative versions of herself, she had insisted at brutal cost on these conversions. Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end" (240). Thus, as Udayan's widow she becomes Subhash's wife, as Bela's mother she abandons her daughter and behaves like a "childless woman" (240), as a woman who is not divorced she gets involved with other men and a woman. But her controversial life choices have led her to a place where she is irredeemably lonely. She has actively chosen to take these steps, yet she has failed at turning

back time, and hence has lived unhappily. Walking away from Bela does not turn out to be a redemption. Instead, it “had been her own act of killing. A connection she had severed, resulting in a death that applied only to the two of them. It was a crime worse than anything Udayan had committed” (242).

However, Gauri often searches on the Internet for traces of Udayan and Bela. No results show up, and she regrets her daughter does not exist in the ‘virtual’ world. She does come across information about the Naxalite movement, still operating in India and Nepal, and about Kanu Sanyal, the leader whom Udayan had followed blindly. Articles call Sanyal both a hero and a terrorist. Gauri is captivated by the Internet and its power to dive so quickly into the past (time and space): “At every moment the past is there, appended to the present. It’s a version of Bela’s definition in childhood, of yesterday” (275).

Gauri still has an Indian passport, although she never returned to India after Udayan’s death. Over the years, California has become “her only home” (235). She loves the climate, the familiar vegetation, and its vastness. She feels “protected by that impersonal ongoing space” (236). Although their marriage did not work out, Gauri is grateful to Subhash for having taken her away from Tollygunge: “He had brought her to America, and then, like an animal briefly caged, released her” (242). Immigration frees Gauri from societal demands and empowers her professionally. Yet she continues to bear an unusual name, the first given by her parents, the last by the two brothers she had married. She still speaks English with a foreign accent, her complexion is still dark and, against the backdrop of most America, she is still an atypical woman.

After her mother deserts her, Bela enters puberty and shuts Subhash out, probably blaming him for Gauri’s departure. Her grades drop, she has no friends, sees a psychologist but the results are not encouraging. She even tries to commit suicide. After a critical year she turns outward: she joins the marching band, plays the clarinet, and embraces ecology and recycling. She is never at home anymore and does not reconnect with her father. Bela majors in environmental science at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest, but does not want to “spend her life in a university” (221) so she moves to Western Massachusetts to work on a farm, weeding and harvesting, cleaning animal pens. She instinctively rebels against her parents, despises and dismisses the academic lifestyle they dedicated their lives to.

Bela takes up jobs on farms across the country; her aspect is careless – she wears denim overalls and heavy soiled boots. Subhash notices “calluses on her palms, dirt beneath her nails. Her skin smelled of soil. The back of her neck and her shoulders, her face, turned a deeper brown” (222). She travels like a nomad, working American soils from Washington State to Arizona, Kentucky, or Missouri. Bela plants trees, maintains beehives, raises animals; she lives for a few months in Montana, in a tent. She has no insurance, no fixed address, and no concern for her own future. She lives in a productive, generative time, linked to agriculture (seasons, growth, and reproduction). Individual time is subordinated to collective time and well-being. Bakhtin writes that agricultural time is “a pregnant time, a fruit-bearing time, a birthing time and a time that conceives again. This is a time maximally tensed toward the future” (207). He explains that generative time is irreversible and “*profoundly spatial and concrete*” (208, emphasis in the original), binding together the earth and the laboring hand of humans.

Later Bela moves for a while to Baltimore and Detroit, and helps to convert abandoned properties into community gardens, before settling in Brooklyn for a short period. Here she trains teens to turn a dilapidated playground into vegetable beds. She is comfortable to share a house with ten other people, rotating chores. In Brooklyn she overhears some workers from Bangladesh speaking Bengali, “[a] language she stopped hearing after her mother left” (*Lowland* 256). She meditates that “[h]er mother’s absence was like another language she’d had to learn, its full complexity and nuance emerging only after years of study, and even then, because it was foreign, a language never fully absorbed” (256). At the same time, she thinks about the past she shares with the Bangladeshi workmen: “Ancestors for what was once a single country, a common land” (256).

Motherless and rootless, Bela concentrates all her efforts on her work. She opposes consumerism and scolds Subhash for buying fruit and vegetables from supermarkets: “What we consume is what we support, she said, telling him he needed to do his part. She could be self-righteous, as Udayan had been” (224). She is rebellious and idealistic like her father. Unlike her father, though, she convinces Subhash of her ideology, so he starts buying local. At times Subhash still feels haunted and threatened by Udayan’s influence and fears he “would come back, claiming his place, claiming Bela from the grave as his own” (225). His life is marked by his brother’s ghost, his uneventful existence in the United States is troubled only by a crucial

choice he has made decades ago in India: marrying his brother's widow and raising their baby as if it were his own.

Neither of them have had any contact with Gauri for over two decades: "On either side of the enormous country they lived apart, Bela roaming between them" (222). Subhash accepts Bela for what she is but cannot help being worried for her future: "She had eschewed the stability he had worked to provide. She'd forged a rootless path, one which seemed precarious to him. One which excluded him. But, as with Gauri, he'd let her go" (224-25). And Bela is miraculously able to be reborn and discover meaning in her life: dedicating all her time and effort to the prosperity of the community, that is her goal.

According to Shoma Sen, the novel features two types of feminism: "an individualistic kind of feminism in the character of Gauri, (...) who abandons everything to pursue a career in philosophy, and a kind of eco-feminism in her daughter, Bela" (141). Immigration changed Gauri radically: in Calcutta she had been devoted to the collective good, in the United States she leads a hyper-individualized life, focusing solely on her research. Ironically, her American-born daughter takes up organic farming instead of pursuing higher education, and supports an anti-capitalist lifestyle. At thirty-four, Bela is "brown, sturdy, unadorned" (*Lowland* 261). She becomes pregnant but does not want to tell Subhash who the father is, nor does she want to involve him in the child's upbringing. Still, she asks for Subhash's help with raising her baby: "The coincidence coursed through him, numbing, bewildering. A pregnant woman, a fatherless child. Arriving in Rhode Island, needing him. It was a reenactment of Bela's origins. A version of what had brought Gauri to him, years ago" (264).

Burdened by his past decisions, Subhash avoids involvement in American society and leads an individualized existence – he has a stable job, but otherwise remains quite passive. Nevertheless, he does not want to become a 'grandfather' in the same fraudulent way, so he finally tells Bela the truth. At first she is angry and leaves, but after a few months she makes peace with the facts and returns to the house she grew up in, determined to live with the one who raised her and loved her like a father. She gives birth to a daughter and names her Meghna, after a river that flows into the Bay of Bengal.

After four decades of burdening guilt, Subhash eventually manages to move on. He meets Elise Silva at his friend Richard's funeral. She has been Bela's American history teacher and now works at the local historical society. Her husband died and her three children have made

their lives in Lisbon, Denver, and Austin. She is a woman who lives in the present, despite her job which makes her deal with stories of the past. She takes Subhash on different activities, including a visit to the house he had shared with Richard, now a museum. At 70, Subhash finally writes a letter asking Gauri for a divorce. He marries Elise in the church he had admired as a PhD student long ago, and they go on a honeymoon to Ireland. In this third country/space, Subhash realizes there is “so much of the world he is still ignorant to” (331).

Bela likes Elise and the fact that she and Subhash form an affectionate couple, united like he and her mother had never been. The cold relationship between her parents prevented Bela from having an enduring romantic engagement of her own. She cannot imagine herself in a solid and happy relationship: “Bela will never marry, she knows this about herself. The unhappiness between her parents: this has been the most basic awareness of her life” (258). However, she meets Drew, a farmer whose family had lived on the same homestead for several generations. Bela has traveled to India and across America, while Drew is rooted in an idyllic Rhode Island. They become close and, after initially lying to Drew that her mother died of an illness in India, she confesses that Gauri abandoned her. She admits this is the reason why she avoids being with one person, or staying in one place. The ‘home’ Subhash tried hard to build for her in Rhode Island reminds her too much of her mother’s absence.

As the plot approaches its denouement, Gauri stops in Boston on her way to a conference in London. She plans to sign the divorce papers in a face-to-face encounter with Subhash, so she rents a car and works up the courage to drive to Subhash’s house. The building is unaltered, but everything else is very different. Subhash is away with Elise, so only Bela and her daughter are at home. The encounter is shocking to both Gauri and Bela. Gauri remarks that Meghna resembles her mother and tries to communicate with the girl. But Bela brutally interrupts the tentative conversation, telling Meghna her grandmother had died and Gauri is just an aunt. She speaks with hatred, her words are “like bullets” (312). After Gauri leaves, “Bela felt the urge to strike her. To be rid of her, to kill her all over again” (314).

This brief and harsh contact determines Gauri to change her plans: instead of traveling to Europe she flies to Calcutta for the first time in forty years. Her brother and a part of his family still live in their grandparents’ apartment. She visits Tollygunge and finds the Tolly Club still there, as well as the old mosque the Mitra brothers passed by every day. Yet the two ponds and

the lowland are gone, dwellings built in their place. Nevertheless, the house in which Bela was conceived is still standing, seemingly oblivious to what had happened in Gauri's youth.

"The purpose of her return was to take her leave" (323), both metaphorically and literally. She considers committing suicide, jumping from the balcony of the guesthouse in which she is temporarily lodged. She thinks "[h]er time would end, it was as simple as that" (323). She closes her eyes and her mind is blank, holding "only the present moment, nothing else. The moment that, until now, she'd never been able to see" (323). Then she rewinds her life's movie and "one by one she released the things that fettered her. Lightening herself, the way she'd removed her bangles after Udayan was killed. What she'd seen from the terrace in Tollygunge. What she'd done to Bela. The image of a policeman passing beneath a window, holding his son by the hand" (323).

The final image that comes back to her is standing next to Udayan on her balcony in North Calcutta. Two balconies are juxtaposed: the one in which she is standing now, looking down at the street, thinking about ending her life, and the one in which they were side by side, leaning forward and looking down at the streets of Calcutta, the future spreading before them. Another day begins, and Calcuttans start going about their usual business. Gauri opens her eyes after this intense cathartic moment and finally lets go of the past. Only by returning to the spot where time and space fuse together can she achieve this break-up. Now she leaves India again, this time without looking back.

Throughout her life, Gauri experiences what Mikhail Bakhtin calls an 'extratemporal hiatus' between two biological moments: when Udayan dies and she leaves Calcutta and when she returns to her hometown and goes through the catharsis. Bakhtin also calls it "empty time" (90) because it leaves no trace of its passing; it is as if one is frozen in-between two moments of a real time sequence. The gap between them lies outside biographical time. But when Gauri eventually gets out of this extratemporal loop, she is transformed. The heroine undergoes some trials and hits rock bottom before being reborn.

Several months later, a letter arrives in her mailbox in California. Bela writes that Meghna is asking about her and says maybe one day when Meghna is older and knows the truth they might try to meet again. For once, time starts to move forward for all the three characters: Gauri envisions a future relationship with her granddaughter, Subhash starts to travel with his new wife, and Bela commits to a romantic relationship with Drew, leaving the door slightly open

for a possible reconciliation with the mother who had rejected her. However, the novel ends with another flashback to India. It is revealed that Udayan did not kill the policeman, but dipped his hand in the dead man's blood and wrote the party's initials on the wall.

Jhumpa Lahiri, who has moved with her family to Italy, confesses in a recent interview with Megan O'Grady (2013) that she is now trying to write in Italian, about things and places other than Indian or American. Moreover, she admits she is actively trying to get away from her main focus so far: immigrants negotiating at least two worlds. She explains: "I feel as though I've gotten to a point where I don't really want to set a book in any real place ever again. So I may write about Italy, but refer to it much more obliquely. I don't want to write another book set in real geographical space, especially after *The Lowland*. I can't do it anymore. I just can't do it." (O'Grady, 2013, para 10) Lahiri adds that her literary project was intended to make an absent world (India) present for her parents (living in America). But this last novel ends a temporal and spatial cycle: "With *The Lowland*, I've reached the end of something that I was trying to work out over four books. And now I just want to work with another set of concerns and constraints. For whatever is coming next, an abstracted setting is the one thing I really feel certain about." (O'Grady, 2013, para 11)

Therefore, Lahiri returns to India in her latest book only to close a circle and depart again for different fictional territories. *The Lowland* is a novel in which the main characters migrate, but their primordial concern is not that of assimilating in the hostland. Processes of cultural translation and instances of hybridity are superseded by an overwhelming preoccupation with family secrets and unresolved past traumas, drawing them back like a magnet to their country of birth.

Conclusions

Space and Time: The Lahirian Chronotope

My thesis has looked at the importance of space and place in identity formation processes of Indian-Americans. Keeping in mind that spaces of articulation are closely intertwined with the location occupied by subjects, I have looked at the relationships of Lahiri's characters with the lived space of the house, with the city, and with each other. Focused on family and on (re)creating a home in the new land, the Indian immigrants portrayed by Jhumpa Lahiri invite readers to abandon dichotomous notions of diasporans who either long for a permanent return to a mythic homeland (the *desh* in Hindi), or struggle to integrate in a foreign hostland (the *videsh*). The alternative that opens up is a transnational space that migrants, men and women, first- and second-generation alike, can explore freely. The inherent transitionality of diasporic experience bears, in Lahiri's works, an empowering and productive potential similar to Homi Bhabha's 'third space'.

Starting from the theory developed by Homi Bhabha, I have constructed a three-stage model of migration which reflects the sequence of Lahiri's fictional texts and I have shown how her narratives intricately communicate with each other. Bhabha posits that the concept of hybridity comes from notions of difference and cultural translation. The critic claims that if

the act of cultural translation (both as representation and as reproduction) denies the essentialism of a prior given original or originary culture, then we see that all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which a third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (Rutherford 1990: 211)

My project demonstrates how Lahiri uses the space of the house in order to move from cultural translations, through cultural hybridity, to a third space of transnational encounters. There is a consistent development from her first work, *Interpreter of Maladies* (dealing predominantly with different instances of cultural translation), through her novel *The Namesake* (including acts of translation, but shifting the focus to cultural hybridity and transnational connections), to *Unaccustomed Earth* (which further investigates the 'third space' of transnationalism). Lahiri's latest novel, *The Lowland*, gravitates around the axis of time. The main female character, Gauri, is obsessed with ideas about the past and the future, and unable to live in the present moment.

Interestingly, she does not perceive immigration as an uprooting. Quite on the contrary, she feels instantly comfortable in the United States and other transnational spaces, and avoids traveling back to India. In spite of her reluctance to do so, Gauri has to go back to Calcutta in order to resolve the interior conflict that has tormented her for four decades. In her place of birth the two pivotal axes (space and time) intersect and she is finally able to see the whole picture. Her subsequent return to the United States strengthens the overall message that a transnational model of belonging is the most suitable for contemporary migrants.

Hence, in her last text published to date, the author returns to India and delves into its historical legacy deeper than ever before. There is a marked dialogic communication between her four books along the space-time continuum, prompting me to view Jhumpa Lahiri's oeuvre in its own chronotope. In this concluding chapter I will connect the findings of my investigation with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory and in this way define the Lahirian chronotope.

Home away from home: The significance of the house as lived space in the experience of Lahiri's transnational migrants

The house stands out as a symbol of paramount importance in Lahiri's fiction. It illustrates stages of migrant development from establishing physical roots in the United States, to locating a transnational space for some of her characters.

In Chapter 1, I show that the house appears as a recurrent metaphor for security and permanence. Conversely, not owning a house represents displacement and alienation in the host country. Possessing a residence in the adoptive land seems to be the ultimate evidence of belonging and assimilation for personages featured in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri's debut volume. Usually recent migrants, characters are in a frenetic search for rootedness. Trying to deal with processes of linguistic and cultural translation, they deem the house to be a fundamental pillar. The author rounds up her first book with a story, "The Third and Final Continent", in which an unnamed narrator and his wife eventually buy their own house, become perfectly acculturated, and raise their only son in a harmonious space between Indian and American culture. Although they do travel to Calcutta from time to time, the place they now call 'home' is a house with a small garden on a quiet, tree-lined street in a town about twenty miles from Boston. Consequently, immigration is a positive phenomenon, allowing diasporic members

to be anchored at once in the local and the global, to inhabit both imagined and encountered communities, and to feel at home even away from home.

Chapter 2 looks at *The Namesake*, Lahiri's first novel, and marks a move from cultural translation to hybridity and the 'third space' of transnationalism. The house initially appears as the locus where Ashima Ganguli, a first-generation immigrant and the main female character, aims to preserve her Indianness and recreate homeland traditions while raising Indian-American children. But I demonstrate how it gradually becomes a transnational space. After her husband's death she decides to abandon any permanent residence and travel back and forth between her homeland and her adoptive country. She will spend six months in India and six in the United States, staying with relatives. The house, representing her desperate search for stability in the early years in the United States, becomes something she must let go of. Although it breaks her heart to be "picking the bones of the house clean" (*Namesake* 277), by cutting the physical connection to the building she has come to love, she actually achieves greater freedom.

Immigration has often been associated with traumas of uprooting and making efforts at re-rooting, but Avtar Brah (2003) posits that diasporas are also potential sites of hope and new beginnings. Ashima Ganguli's example is a case in point; virtually homeless at the end of the novel, Lahiri's character starts living according to the literal meaning of her name "she who is limitless, without borders" (*Namesake* 26), a transnational citizen without a fixed home. Ashima's flexible identity is constructed in "borderlands", to use Gloria Anzaldúa's famous phrase, and it straddles across geographical, cultural and psychological boundaries. In fact, Ashima no longer needs a single house to call 'home', but she feels at home wherever members of her family may be.

Chapter 3 of this thesis further explores the permeability of borders typical of emergent transnational spaces. For most Indian-Americans featured in Lahiri's third volume, *Unaccustomed Earth*, the physical house is not vital anymore and they do not cling to it in order to feel at home somewhere in the world. In general, first- and second-generation representatives look forward to extensive travels across the world and no longer want to be tied down to a specific house or place. However, in the last three stories, grouped under the subtitle "Hema and Kaushik", the house has a radically different significance for the two eponymous characters. While Kaushik chooses a rootless existence after his mother dies and his father remarries, Hema is unwilling to renounce the security provided by a fixed home. He lives like a nomad, relocating

from place to place for his job as a photojournalist, not feeling the need to establish a permanent residence. She, on the other hand, travels to Rome for her research on the Etruscan civilization before returning to the United States to share a house with an Indian husband she does not love. Unlike Hema, two other Lahirian women from *Unaccustomed Earth*, Sudha from 'Only Goodness' and Sang from 'Nobody's Business', leave their American houses behind and move to London without looking back. While some characters are successfully transplanted, others are having troubles negotiating the space between multiple cultures.

In Chapter 4, I prove that immigrants from Lahiri's *The Lowland* adapt relatively easily to a foreign country and culture. Therefore, the houses they inhabit are not so important anymore. Paradoxically, Subhash and Gauri leave India physically, establish a home in Rhode Island, but continue to live mentally in a tumultuous Indian past. They struggle with a traumatic historical legacy, but the solution still lies in the transnational. Thus, the way to free themselves from the dramatic political events that have marred their family's story is to fully embrace transnational encounters and experiences.

Negotiating real and imagined spaces and the emergence of a 'third space'

The relationship of the first generation to the place of migration is, of course, very different from that of the following generations. Primary migrants usually struggle to relocate, to form new social networks, and get accustomed to new economic, political and cultural realities, all while retaining certain homeland traditions. Most of them do not seem aware that the India they left behind has changed and continues to change, so they project onto their children some idealized images of a lost homeland. Consequently, the second generation is suspended between the American environment by which they are formed and the ancestral values of their parents.

The first generation left in pursuit of the American dream, choosing to assimilate in order to achieve 'happiness', but for their children things are more complicated and they are sometimes unable to reconcile their in-betweenness. Their attempts to establish a coherent sense of self are made more cumbersome by the fact that they must harmonize the Bengali upbringing they receive at home with mainstream American culture *and* increasing global influences.

As shown above, Ashima Ganguli (*The Namesake*) evolves unexpectedly from her traditional roles of immigrant wife and mother into a transnational figure who at the end of the novel inhabits a "Thirdspace" like the one described by Edward Soja. The Thirdspace he

theorizes is grounded in the ideas of Henri Lefebvre and Homi Bhabha and is a creative recombination and extension of the 'real', material space, with the 'imagined' representations of spatiality. There is an extraordinary openness to this resulting space, stretching beyond physical and mental dimensions, while encompassing them at the same time. Lahiri's female character moves freely in this third space, actively forging her fluid identity. For Ashima, happiness is no longer connected to a place, nevertheless keeping in close touch with children, relatives, and friends from and in different places does bring her happiness.

Although her son's displacement is not physical (having been born in the United States), Gogol Ganguli feels he does not fully belong because he has to continuously move between his family space (where Indian traditions are upheld by his parents) and the American social space (with its own, very different demands). Moreover, his names further complicate the situation: his first name is Russian and his surname is the Anglicized version of an Indian name. At eighteen he changes his first name into Nikhil, a decision which opens up a space in which he can negotiate his notion of self. Throughout the novel he explores a series of sequential identities, and his troubles come precisely from the lack of a unitary sense of self. He finally realizes it is in fact the name of 'Gogol' that has held the key to self-knowledge all along and he embraces his position in the interstices between several cultures. After his father's death, Gogol understands that his name has always been an invitation to explore his uniqueness, a cultural chance to step out of restrictive matrices such as Bengali, Indian, American, Bengali-/Indian-American. In fact Nikhil, his 'new' name, means "he who is entire, encompassing all" and "sky" in Bengali at the same time. One can be many things at the same time, and plural identities are in fact preferable to either/or self-definitions.

Born in England to Indian parents, having lived in the United States before fleeing to France, Moushumi is a hybrid, just like her husband Gogol. Her dislocation is more violent though: he changes his name but stays in the United States, close to the place where he was raised, whereas she rejects the two countries that could 'claim' her and escapes to a third, totally unrelated, where she eventually asserts her individuality by denying any roots. Moushumi seeks refuge in French culture, and after graduating from college she moves to Paris, running away from her family and the two cultures she had been caught in-between for her whole life. Everything is effortless in this third space provided by a foreign language and culture, so Moushumi feels at home in a European city with which she has cultural affinities rather than

blood ties. She is a global citizen, rejecting definitive links to her place of birth and her parents' homeland.

Representatives of the first generation have had a traditional arranged marriage, usually before coming to the United States, and they insist on their children marrying fellow Indian-Americans as a way of safeguarding and passing on their ethnic heritage. Many second-generation characters who populate Lahiri's prose give in to the insistence of their parents and get together with co-ethnics, but this does not guarantee a lasting matrimony. After a trip to Europe, Gogol and Moushumi separate. He returns to New York and continues his work as an architect; apparently he is now ready to build his identity outside the constraints of ethnicity (name and family pressure) and relationship status (intra-ethnic marriage).

The first generation achieved extraordinary success by transplanting themselves in a new soil. Gogol's generation, on the other hand, gives up on the need for firm roots and travels globally, uncovering unlimited opportunities. Lahiri's fiction celebrates these contemporary journeys, showing that concepts like national belonging tend to be unsettled in our times. Ethnicity, then, appears less relevant in this transnational world in which everyone is liable to be displaced, and the negative prefix 'dis-' no longer bears the violent connotation it used to.

Characters from *Unaccustomed Earth* have even more dynamic relations with the transnational spaces they come in contact with. Ruma's father, the unnamed protagonist from the title story *Unaccustomed Earth*, is a first-generation immigrant who surprisingly feels more at home in the United States than his daughter who was born and raised here. In fact, in his old age he has become a world traveler, going on long trips to other continents. Ruma has lived in a 'third space' all her life, but her mother's death, followed by her relocation to Seattle, and her second pregnancy, seems confusing and unmanageable. Ruma falls back into traditional women's roles and relives her mother's experience (moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household). Her father turns down the offer to move in with them, reluctant to migrate from the East Coast to the West Coast this time. He does not want to be attached to a place or responsible for another family, remarking: "How freeing it was, these days, to travel alone, with only a single suitcase to check" (*UE* 7). He grew roots once, when he emigrated from India, and now chooses a life that involves traveling but not settling down. Thus, he helps with Ruma's transplantation, before leaving again for other lands.

In her third book, Lahiri places the spotlight more on the second generation, revealing ways in which they resolve both a generational *and* a cultural clash, as they try to build their own family. Borders become porous and places are replaced, in the imaginary of the transmigrants that populate Lahiri's third volume, by shared meanings. Sudha, for example, is a character from 'Only Goodness' who marries an English art historian and moves to London. She manages to translate while her brother, Rahul, remains fixed in the United States but feels lost in the space between cultures. Other characters from *Unaccustomed Earth*, such as Kaushik or Sang, do not feel the need for a concrete homeland anymore, but continuously negotiate their state of being in-between the place of origin and that of destination. Having lived in several countries, they no longer need to imagine a community as tied to a particular location.

The majority of Lahiri's characters, both first- and second-generation, manage these cultural interstices successfully. They often turn the third space between India, the United States, and other countries as well, into a productive one. The resulting transnational consciousness provides them with possibilities of negotiating their identities and of becoming empowered.

Immigration and gender: Indian women's gain

In her works, Jhumpa Lahiri sheds light on complex identity-formation processes, at the intersection of at least two cultures, and against the backdrop of past and present realities. The interplay between gender and ethnicity becomes more compelling in transnational contexts. Initially, a combination of factors plays out differently for men and women in the migration cycle. The Indian man is the primary migrant who later brings his wife along. He thrives professionally, while the Indian woman, usually a housewife, seems to have limited options for development.

However, a gender balance is more likely to be achieved abroad. In two stories from *Interpreter of Maladies*, Indian men take up household chores that are traditionally 'reserved' exclusively for women, while the female characters are going to work or study. Thus, Shukumar prepares dinner every night while his wife is at the gym or working late at her office downtown, and Sanjeev cooks elaborate dishes for a housewarming party while Twinkle is getting a manicure. In this way Lahiri prompts readers to rethink strict gender role divisions in which the Indian man is an oppressive patriarch and his wife a submissive partner.

In *The Namesake*, Ashoke Ganguli has his own office in the university building and gives lectures to American students, while Ashima's only 'job' is to make Indian food once a week and sell it at the international coffeehouse. Womanhood and motherhood in a foreign land involve exclusion for Ashima who is a mere visitor of educational institutions, leading her to conclude that for women immigration is like a 'lifelong pregnancy'. The acculturation process is long and painful, with the migrant woman being subjected to a double bias before finally being empowered. Ashima, for one, manages to blend core Bengali components and new cultural elements while rearing her children. She uses the experience of living abroad to her advantage, and gains access to things unavailable to women in her traditionalist home country. In the end she emerges as an independent woman who can afford to travel regularly between Bengal and New England. Her moves across borders are extremely bold, particularly since she is first translated from postcolonial to immigrant, then to American and finally to transnational citizen. Ashima crosses frontiers with ease, showing how identity can become a matter of choice even for a first-generation Indian woman immigrant.

The majority of Lahiri's first-generation female characters first go through processes of disorientation and loneliness in foreign cities. Ultimately, however, they are able to negotiate these transnational urban environments in their favor. Eventually, they develop a more flexible relationship with their home(s), have an occupation other than taking care of the house, and educate their children to choose the best elements from the two cultures in which they are raised. Still revolving around the hinge of the family, Indian women migrants develop in diverse ways and gradually overcome the 'subaltern' status Gayatri Spivak has described.

There is a clear progression in Jhumpa Lahiri's works from first-generation women who struggle to reconcile home and alien culture (Mrs. Sen from *Interpreter of Maladies*), to fellow first-generation characters who become transnational migrants (Ashima from *The Namesake*), and finishing with second-generation representatives who have allegiances to multiple places and a much more dynamic relationship to the concept of 'home' (Moushumi from *The Namesake* and several female characters from *Unaccustomed Earth*). Paraphrasing Salman Rushdie's words, I believe Lahiri's women definitely have more to gain from being 'borne across the world'. Immigration in her first three published works starts out as a sort of 'lifelong pregnancy', but this process eventually results in the delivery of a powerful and autonomous, transnational and transcultural self.

In *The Lowland*, readers find the most feminist of Lahiri's characters, Gauri, who becomes professor of philosophy at a Californian college. From the beginning, she is strangely comfortable in the United States and in the transnational spaces she explores. Thriving professionally, she nevertheless wrestles with feelings of guilt for abandoning her daughter and has a strong urge to stop time from inexorably flowing forward. Although anchored mentally in tragic past events, she is reluctant to return to India for almost forty years. When she finally takes this journey, it proves purifying and liberating. Upon her return to the United States, Gauri is cured of earlier traumas and starts living in the now.

Space and Time: The Lahirian Chronotope

In his book *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), the Russian philosopher and critic Mikhail Bakhtin coins the phrase 'chronotope' in literary criticism. The term was first introduced as part of Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity, and Bakhtin posits that in literary criticism 'chronotope' refers to the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84). Hence, space and time (as the fourth dimension of space) are inseparable, "fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" (84).

Chronotopes are the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel, functioning as they do as the primary means for materializing time in space. In fact, "All the novel's abstract elements – philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect – gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work. Such is the representational significance of the chronotope" (Bakhtin 250).

What is significant for my dissertation is the fact that several chronotopes often co-exist in a text or in several pieces of the same writer. Bakhtin explains:

Within the limits of a single work and within the total literary output of a single author we may notice a number of different chronotopes and complex interactions among them, specific to the given work or author (...) Chronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in even more complex relationships. (252)

These interactions are always dialogical and they occur along the space-time continuum. This dialogue defines each narrative and "enters the world of the author, of the performer, and the

world of the listeners and readers. And all of these worlds are chronotopic as well” (252). Therefore, the chronotopes of the world (re)created or (re)presented in literary texts are renewed continually through the perception of readers in various places, time zones, and so on.

In Lahiri’s first three published works, characters are concerned primarily with spatial aspects. They either yearn for a return to the homeland, or preoccupy themselves with recreating a home in the United States. Some straddle geographical distances with more ease and negotiate transnational spaces more skillfully, but the focus is definitely on space. In *The Lowland*, however, there is a shift from space to time, in the sense that Gauri settles without trouble in Rhode Island and then chooses to relocate to California, again without great efforts. Topographical distances or the buildings she lives in are not important to her. Gauri’s foremost concern is time, particularly the past. Quite indifferent to spatial coordinates, she lives through the memory of her dead husband, Udayan. For most of her life she studies the hermeneutics of time, hoping to make hours flow backwards and have him by her side again. At the end of the novel, Gauri’s path of life takes her back to Calcutta, where the temporal and spatial dimensions overlap, and she is able to make peace with ghosts of the past.

Lahiri has stated that with this novel she has reached the end of something she had been trying to work out in the course of her four published books. Already known for her narratives of Indian immigrants, mainly intellectuals flourishing professionally in the United States, Lahiri turns to the political situation in 1960s India in *The Lowland*. She sets the story in Tollygunge, the poor neighborhood where her father grew up, dominated by a British country club. In doing so, she addresses in detail social and historical themes she has not dealt with previously: “The Tollygunge Club was a metaphor for my own life and continues to be a metaphor for my life,” Lahiri says in an interview with Andrew Keuler of *The Daily Free Press* (2014, para 4). “I have always felt like someone on the outside looking in”, she continues, hinting to issues of class, identity, and belonging (both in her childhood trips to India, and in her experience growing up in America). Individual and historical life sequences interweave in this novel, more than in any other of her fictional works.

The writer travels back in time and space in order to complete a cycle and then start anew. All her texts come together as the spatial and temporal axes are subtly entangled, allowing us to view Lahiri’s oeuvre in its own chronotope. The metaphors she uses related to immigration are profoundly chronotopic as well. In the last story from *Interpreter of Maladies*, immigration is

compared to ‘a journey into outer space’, in *The Namesake* it is described as ‘a permanent pregnancy’, and in *Unaccustomed Earth* a character meditates that immigration is similar to ‘a life sentence of being foreign’.

Interestingly, Jhumpa Lahiri finished writing *The Lowland* in Rome, Italy, where she has moved with her family. “Italy is literally, geographically, in the middle, between India and the US. It is also culturally situated somewhere between these two societies”, she acknowledges in an interview with Somak Ghoshal (2014, para 28). Living in a third country/space, the author is now immersing herself in a third culture and envisioning different chronotopes. Tellingly, she claims she does not want to set her plots in a ‘real’ setting anymore; nor does she intend to tackle the same issues or events (Indians leaving their country, the troubled historical and social realities that triggered their decision, the subsequent nostalgia that scars their lives, the hybridity of the second and third generations).

Attempting to write in Italian, she is starting a fresh chapter, nevertheless her oeuvre can be placed in a new type of ethnic American writing. It is safe to conclude that the future of ethnic fiction and identity lies in the transnational because it provides characters with an outlet from stifling social, historical, and psychological conditions. The cure for not knowing the language, not feeling at home, and not belonging, seems to be not having to belong anywhere anymore. Indeed, all of Lahiri’s narratives emphasize this liberating transnational pattern of belonging.

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