

“A Sad and Terrible Thing”

Diasporic Melancholia in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Fiction: Selected Readings

by

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*For my sister.*



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## Abstract

Acclaimed author Jhumpa Lahiri artfully weaves together the lenses of gender, nation, and generation to more closely showcase the daily lived experiences of diasporic South Asians in the United States. Destabilizing binary ways of thinking about nation and diaspora, her stories account for the constantly evolving processes of identifying self, nation, and citizenship, while simultaneously asserting the diasporic South Asian subject as defying expectations, breaking down stereotypes, and resisting commodification. Though some have critiqued Lahiri's work for its narrow focus on well-educated, middle-class and upper-class, mostly Bengali, English-speaking migrants, this thesis contextualizes her work within the historical and theoretical framework of U.S. immigration, South Asian diaspora, and transculturalism to argue that this emphasis on privileged characters is precisely what makes her stories so uniquely primed for radically reversing national and diasporic scripts of immigrant success. Here, this thesis proves through the close-reading of several stories from both *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* that Lahiri's work should be read as an engagement with the lives and experiences of those who appear to have class privilege and somewhat iconoclastic modes of citizenship, because they are closely linked to the second wave of South Asian immigration, and yet nonetheless remain trapped by the same melancholia that permeates the rest of diasporic literature. Tracking the progression of such melancholic narratives from the quiet trauma and failed relationships of her earlier work, to the devastating personal catastrophes of her later work, by its conclusion, this thesis will attempt to finally address the question: why this insistence on melancholia, or rather, what does Lahiri accomplish in producing story after story of miscarriage, miscommunication, and misinheritance?

Keywords: short fiction, melancholia, gender, diaspora, hybridity, immigration, South Asian American literature, transculturalism, model minority myth



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## Introduction

The term “diaspora” in its simplest form is used to signify immigrants and their descendants outside the context of an ancestral homeland. Stemming from Ancient Greek, the term originally had a primarily negative connotation associated with the dislocation of peoples and communities. Therefore, it was first used mainly as a theological concept to describe Jewish populations outside of Israel, as related to their displacement, exile, and longing for a homeland (Kenny 5). During the twentieth century, the term gradually expanded from this specific context to include the involuntary migration of other populations, such as the people of Armenia and Africa. Since the 1980s and entering into the contemporary period of globalization, the concept of diaspora has extended even further to migrants of almost every kind. Its popularity as of late can be traced back to the series of developments occurring after World War II, perhaps the most important of these changes being decolonization (Kenny 89). Throughout these transitions in context and usage, the word itself has been imbued with a host of complicated and rich connotations, at times contradictory, that are necessary to unpack in order to understand what this category encompasses fully. Most notably, diaspora seems to necessitate a form of belonging or state of being that is permanently marked by its “inbetweenness”— in between displacement and citizenship, cultural continuity and assimilation, and ultimately, allegiance to a homeland and a host country.

Homi Bhabha, a scholar most well-known for his contributions to the theory of hybridity, argues in his pivotal work, *The Location of Culture*, that the nature of culture and cultural identity is marked by notions of ambivalence and mutable inbetweenness. He writes:

It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself...that ensures that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity...[thus] open[ing] the way to

conceptualizing an international culture based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. To the end we should remember that it is the 'inter'— the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in between space— that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.

(Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 55)

Bhabha uses the term "Third Space," to insist that culture, not limited to simply diaspora, can be defined in terms of its strict national or geographic boundaries, but must be understood as something without distinct, fixed limits. That is, Bhabha's location of culture is neither here nor there, but in between these places, inhabiting its very own Third Space. Bhabha also introduces the term "hybridity" to explain this way of thinking through culture and cultural identification. The word "hybrid" similarly encompasses the idea of inbetweenness as related to the mixing together of dissimilar facets of one's identity. Here, when the competing entities are brought together, neither overpowers the other, instead becoming irrevocably linked into new formations.

In Bhabha's ideas about cultural hybridity and Third Space more generally, the cultural identity of the diasporic subject can be seen as even more unstable, mutable, and decidedly in between. Moreover, this provisional process of diasporic identification can be described using the critical lens of transculturalism. Transculturalism is defined in a number of different ways by various scholars of transnational and global literature. Though Bhabha writes from a primarily British framework, one scholar, Anupama Jain, applies similar ideas to a United States context in her book *How to be South Asian in America: Narratives of Ambivalence and Belonging*. She suggests that the primary goals of transculturalism are to be "sensitive to both postcolonial and national histories" and resist "a binary opposition between nationalisms and diasporization," while "paying attention to 'mixing' rather than fruitlessly searching for an authentic original"

(230). Her definition rests mainly on the principle of critically assessing and marinating within the interstitial space between opposing sides of the binary rather than the extremes at either end. Following her argument, reading through this lens would allow for a productive questioning of problematic discourses that focus either on the diasporic subject's unwavering loyalty to the ancestral homeland or else their blind assimilation into the host nation's cultural formations. Ultimately, this lens leads to a deeper understanding of diaspora and cultural analysis, decentralizing any one outcome or complete transformation of the diasporic subject and instead focusing on their processes of evolution and testing the limits of citizenship.

The critical consensus around transculturalism seems to adhere largely to Jain's ideas, acknowledging how categories of identification must be viewed as ambivalent. The notion of ambivalence continually resurfaces in discourses of the South Asian diaspora. Jain defines ambivalence as the condition of having mixed responses or feeling genuinely torn between seemingly opposite choices. In the context of diaspora, especially as it manifests in a United States context— in many ways ideal for the study of diasporas— this type of uncertainty or instability is relevant not only to shifting identities and identity categories for the diasporic subject, but also to the ways in which their status of becoming American or achieving national belonging is persistently deferred (Jain 12). That is, the United States' history of hosting many diverse immigrant cultures, supposed “melting pot” ideology, and ambivalent attitude towards immigration render it a particularly complicated host country for diasporic subjects to take up residence within. Immigration and assimilation into the United States require the diasporic subject's reconciliation of its slippery and indefinite national ideals such as the American Dream, as well as its historical hostility towards myriad immigrant groups and attempts to preserve a type of racial and ethnic purity that never truly existed, as its founding depended on the mass

displacement and colonization of indigenous peoples. Therefore, the diasporic subject's achieving belonging as an American is an especially challenging, if not impossible, process. While assimilation, diaspora, and the endless search for belonging are inherently ambivalent processes, ones that are never complete but rather are defined by their constant state of flux, this ambivalence is further exacerbated in an American context. This layered historical and theoretical framework serves as the basis for my understanding of diaspora at large, and within the United States in particular.

The history of South Asian immigration is typically grouped into two “interlinked but historically separated diasporas” (Mishra 421-22). The first of these encompassed the movement of indentured, unskilled and mostly uneducated, peasants and laborers from India, at the time still a British colony, to the sugar plantations of Trinidad, Guyana, Surinam, Mauritius, Fiji and South Africa. Deeply affected by the influences of colonialism, the immigrants of this historical moment were chiefly categorized in relation to the British Empire, its expansive influence, and devastating effects. Facing extreme poverty, famine, and societal collapse, these migrants reluctantly turned to indentured labor under the assumption that it would afford them a better chance at survival and perhaps some prospect of economic capital. However, it soon became clear that they had entered into these contracts under false pretenses, unwittingly agreeing to a life entirely “subhuman and without dignity” (Mishra 35). The aftermath of this first wave of notably forced migration resulted in the displacement of approximately one million people from India to various destinations along transoceanic trade routes by the early twentieth century (Kabir 390).

The second large wave of South Asian immigration, peaking in the mid to late twentieth century, had to do mostly with the dispersal of middle-class to upper-class migrants and their

families to “the metropolitan centres of the Empire, the New World and the former settler colonies” (Mishra 421). Largely due to their newly attained, postcolonial political freedom, migrants categorized within this second wave had many “expectations of major economic transformation and rising standards of living, not least because of the rhetoric of nationalism and anti-colonialism” (Brown 20). While decolonization of India and resulting Indian nationalism should have influenced these migrants to stay and rebuild their homeland, other international factors convinced them to immigrate. Especially, the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, which eliminated national origin quotas from immigration policy, along with its burgeoning ascendancy on a global stage, made the United States uniquely primed to receive these South Asian migrants. As scholar Sandhya Shukla argues, “It was this very coincidence, I would suggest, that was part, though not all, of the absence of a need to ‘choose’ national affiliation or attachment, that choice so fundamental a part of American national mythology, that made immigrants leave the old land behind for their new American-ness” (169). While India’s newly independent, postcolonial infrastructure was only just beginning to develop and recover from centuries of colonialism, the promise of rapid upward mobility that immigration to the United States offered was more enticing and beyond that, readily achievable, than ever before. This context of decolonization, along with the simultaneous trend toward economic, social, and political globalization, offers a clear explanation for not only the scale, but also the demographic of this wave of the South Asian diaspora. Namely, this wave of immigration involved mostly specialized, educated, English-speaking, middle-aged South Asians pursuing greater employment opportunities and social mobility for themselves and their kin. In the time that has followed, the community of diasporic South Asians, with roots in countries such as India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, has grown rapidly and significantly, now

accounting for over two million people in the United States. Both diasporas reflect the specific histories that produced them— while the first was prompted by the desperate circumstances of nineteenth-century indenture, manipulation, and a palpable lack of alternatives, the second can be seen as a byproduct of globalization, decolonization, and increasing hypermobility and economic opportunity among the middle-class.

Recognizing this uneven pattern of immigration of South Asians to the United States is crucial for understanding the South Asian diaspora. Today, the term “South Asian diaspora,” when used generally, encompasses the legacy of both of these large waves of immigration, though tending to lean more heavily on the second. The latter wave of the South Asian immigration, perhaps unsurprisingly, figures greatly into the literary, social, and cultural production of diasporic South Asians living in the United States. With this historical context in mind, I have chosen to analyze the short fiction of South Asian American author and icon, Jhumpa Lahiri. Her contribution to the South Asian American literary corpus is in many ways emblematic of the genre as a whole, not only because of its thematic resonances with the South Asian diaspora, but also because of the critical attention and cultural fervor it has garnered and sustained over time.

Lahiri’s work has often been credited as a means by which to better understand South Asian immigration and diaspora, and as such, has earned an abundance of prestigious recognition, scholarly attention, and public interest. Following her acceptance of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000, Lahiri has gradually distinguished herself from her literary counterparts and assumed position as a celebrity author and cultural icon. As the first Indian American to win this significant and distinctly American literary prize, following in the footsteps of irrefutably canonized authors such as John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, Lahiri has

come to represent the pinnacle of South Asian American achievement. Of her success, Lahiri comments in her newest literary work, *In Other Words*, "rather precipitously, I became a famous writer...I received a prize that I was sure I did not deserve...and yet it changed my life" (167). Lahiri has become a household name. In recent years, former President Barack Obama awarded her with the 2014 National Humanities Medal, and actress and comedian, Mindy Kaling, has publicly applauded her work for the profound effect it had on her own sense of self, even going as far as to include the acclaimed author in the imagined backstory of her fictional alter ego, Mindy Lahiri of *The Mindy Project*. Lahiri is referenced time after time in discourses academic and otherwise, and has become a mainstay of both the American literary canon and popular culture more broadly. She is, in many ways, the ideal cultural producer through which to analyze South Asian diasporic literature.

Furthermore, Lahiri uses her work as a means of grappling with a very specific facet of the South Asian diaspora. Her realistic fiction treats personal themes of family, community, and belonging in addition to the larger context of migration, displacement, and assimilation. Her characters are pictured in pursuit of finding their own identities and feelings of belonging as they attempt to navigate American spaces as diasporic subjects. By engaging with these themes on an individual or familial level, detailing the daily lived experiences of those tied in some capacity to South Asian cultures, Lahiri comments on the broader and lasting implications of this historical phenomena. That is, her treatment of diasporic histories renders her work increasingly representative and even revelatory of the diasporic condition. Yet these stories, as I have mentioned, offer a very particular picture of the South Asian, or more specifically Indian, diasporic subject. Her characters are, for the most part, able to gain access to spaces of immense privilege with ease and belong to primarily upper-class and middle-class families. Stated simply,

Lahiri's stories usually involve highly educated, professional, affluent, English-speaking, Bengali immigrants.

This narrow focus has undoubtedly attracted its fair share of criticism, mostly having to do with how Lahiri supposedly perpetuates the model minority myth. Asian Americans have long occupied a position as the “model minority,” a term that became popular after first appearing in the *U.S. News and World Report* in 1966. The report comments, “At a time when Americans are awash in worry over the plight of racial minorities— one such minority, the nation's 300,000 Chinese-Americans, is winning wealth and respect by dint of its own hard work” (“Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.” 6). Since this publication, the term has been extended to describe Asian Americans more generally— their “otherness” is defined in terms of ethnicity rather than race, perceived potential rather than perceived danger. The Asian American iteration of the model minority subject is most notably characterized by high work ethic, flexibility, opportunistic mindset, and imperviousness to outside factors such as reorganizations of economic and social systems, not unlike many of Lahiri's characters. In fact, one particularly harsh critic, Vennila nr Kain, suggests that Lahiri's work “may also possibly be titled ‘The model minority's guide to social climbing’ or ‘The model minority's attempt at sophistication and the resulting angst.’”

There are other scholars and literary critics who remain skeptical of Lahiri's successes, attributing them to the ways in which her writing caters to mainstream and popular audiences. Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes write extensively about how Lahiri's writing reaffirms Orientalist conceptions of Asian and Asian American identities by reproducing harmful and reductive stereotypes in their book, *Re-orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental Other Within*. Using the term “re-orientalism,” they explain that creators like Lahiri

succumb to certain practices or narratives that reinforce antiquated and stereotypical notions of Asian identity due to pressures that have arisen out of the global system of consuming cultural production. Other examples of this type of re-orientalist production can be seen in Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire*, in which Indian poverty is exoticized to a primarily Western audience, and Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice*, wherein Indian stereotypes are blended with the popular genre of period drama to better tap into marketing niches. These scholars argue that Lahiri perpetuates a similar type of Orientalism through the self-positioning of herself and her characters as "others," even while occupying positions of relative power (Lau and Mendes 4).

Furthermore, many argue that Lahiri's success was achieved, not in spite of, but because of these issues that critics have identified. That is, her writing's focus on the class privilege and "otherness" of her characters ultimately has led to her increasing palatability for mainstream audiences and corresponding popularity. Lavina Dhingra Shankar is one such proponent of this argument, suggesting that "authors' identity, language choices, and their translations and mediations between cultures directly affects their audience and canonization" (25). Shankar argues that the success of South Asian American authors such as Lahiri is closely related to how accessible their work is to mainstream or "non-native" audiences. Thus, using Lau's reading of Lahiri as a re-orientalist cultural producer, one could argue that these re-inscriptions of Asian stereotypes allow a non-native reader to feel more comfortable engaging with texts that present stories outside of their own experiences. In her article, Shankar describes both Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Divakaruni as cultural translators, closely engaging in the mediation of multiple competing audiences by relaying diasporic experiences in their most relatable or easily communicable form. Lahiri's work can be said to do just that as her stories discuss the most

universal of experiences with which many can identify regardless of their own cultural background, namely, marriage, child rearing, love, and loss, all served on a platter of palatable exoticism.

However, rather than allow these arguments to devalue the work that Lahiri has done and her larger contribution to American literary and popular culture, I argue that it is precisely Lahiri's focus on a socioeconomically privileged class of diasporic South Asians that makes her work so compelling. Despite their privilege, Lahiri's diasporic characters are still portrayed as ambivalent, unstable, and traumatized. In this way, the ethnographically realistic and detailed portraits that Lahiri offers could be understood as not perpetuating but rather wholeheartedly defying common cultural misrepresentations and Asian stereotypes as related to the model minority myth. Thus, Lahiri's work acts not as an avoidance of class inequality, but rather a sustained engagement with the lives and experiences of those who appear to have class privilege, as they are closely linked to the second wave of South Asian immigration, and yet nonetheless remain trapped by the same condition of melancholia that permeates the rest of diasporic literature.

Like diaspora, the term "melancholia" is difficult to define explicitly and is embedded in several contexts, critical conversations, and fields of study. In its broadest sense, melancholia refers to a specific relationship with grief and loss that is unique from similar conditions such as mourning. In his pivotal essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis, remarks that:

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on. As an effect of the same influences, melancholia instead of a state of grief, develops

in some people, whom we consequently suspect of a morbid pathological disposition.  
(153)

Mourning is a reaction to grief that can be completed—it centers on a concrete lost object, occurs in the conscious mind, and allows the person grappling with it to eventually recover. However, “in melancholia the relationship to the object is no simple one” (Freud 167). In melancholia, the person afflicted grieves for a loss that is not fully identifiable and therefore the process becomes pathological, indefinite, ongoing, and fraught instead of healthy and natural as it would have been in mourning.

Scholars of diaspora build on this idea of melancholia by applying it to experiences of migration and displacement. In these cases, the lost object is, of course, the ancestral homeland, or fatherland as Freud mentions above, that has been left behind by the diasporic subject. Yet, the diasporic subject cannot properly mourn this loss of their homeland due to their undeniably complicated relationship with it. For the diasporic subject, the homeland is neither a fixed and unchanging object nor one that can be recaptured or returned to. The losses provoked by migration are mostly left insufficiently acknowledged, let alone symbolized and properly mourned. Prominent scholar Vijay Mishra comments in his book, *Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, on this very problem using his discussion of the diasporic condition of impossible mourning. He explains that due to the diasporic subject’s failure to objectify, or make concrete, this “ever-lost symbol of origin,” the emptiness and impoverishment of the loss is internalized as a never healing wound which is subsequently passed down to and inherited by subsequent generations (Mishra 9). Delphine Munos builds on this idea of diasporic melancholia in her book, *After Melancholia: A Reappraisal of Second-Generation Diasporic Subjectivity in the Work of Jhumpa Lahiri*, theorizing that the diasporic subject begins to identify with and yearn

for, not the lost object of the homeland itself, but rather with the ghost of the homeland. She explains that in this process, “the melancholic subject cannibalizes himself... ‘growing rich in self-improvement’” (Munos xxiv). Here, the diasporic subject’s identification with the shadow of an abstracted Indian homeland that is constantly evolving beyond the subject’s memory of it ultimately transforms the natural process of mourning into an incurable and pathological condition of melancholia.

I will track the progression of such melancholic narratives in selected stories from two of Lahiri’s collections of short fiction, namely *Interpreter of Maladies*, published in 1999, and *Unaccustomed Earth*, published in 2008. Using these stories, I will argue that despite their privilege and their somewhat radical modes of citizenship, Lahiri’s diasporic characters are still portrayed as deeply ambivalent, traumatized, and above all, melancholic. Without denying the impact that her project of destabilizing reductive binaries and critiquing surface-level or stereotypical understandings of the South Asian diaspora has, I will also bring to the surface her deeper mission of entirely upending the immigrant success story. As Nigamananda Das writes in his book, *Dynamics of Culture and Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri*, “the expressions in Lahiri’s works are replete with the images of loss and longing. The narratives are necessarily the narratives of pain” (ix). I will demonstrate how Lahiri’s narratives of pain tamper with the celebratory rhetoric and idealization of diaspora, from the quiet trauma and failed relationships portrayed in her earlier work, to the utterly devastating personal unravelings depicted in her later stories.

In my first chapter, “The Miscarriages of Culture,” I use two stories from the collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, namely, “A Temporary Matter” and “Mrs. Sen’s,” to track the characterization and subject formation of two diasporic women characters. I argue that both of

these protagonists are actively engaged in disrupting or destabilizing an otherwise rigid binary between ancestral homeland and host country, and yet are not quite elevated as wholly radical or heroic figures. Instead, each is deeply entrenched in the pervasive experiences of diasporic melancholia, or more specifically a quiet trauma or personal stasis resulting from their failure to carry and preserve the cultural continuity and domestic stability of their ancestral homeland into their host country. This chapter aims primarily to describe the way that Lahiri's writing pays attention to the productive qualities of hybridity while not foreclosing trauma and melancholia.

I will go on to analyze two other short stories from *Interpreter of Maladies*, namely the titular story and "Sexy" in my second chapter, "The Miscommunications of Culture." I discuss how specific forms of racialized femininity in a diasporic context can both solicit and interrupt cross-cultural desire by tracking two heterosexual pairings and noting how each is formed and initially sustained by the desire for a form of racialized beauty that ultimately denies such identification processes. This chapter will build upon the ideas from my first chapter by noting other ways that gender and sexuality function in a diasporic context, pointing to how Lahiri overturns problematic binaries and stereotypes, and drawing attention to the growing melancholia of her protagonists. Specifically, I will highlight the misunderstandings and mistranslations that come with these cross-cultural negotiations, and the melancholic failure of her protagonists to understand one another as they are.

My final chapter, "The Misinheritances of Culture," will skip forward in Lahiri's oeuvre to her more recent short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, focusing primarily on second-generation and American-born characters that have inherited and intensified the diasporic melancholia passed down to them from their parents. Using the stories, "Hell-Heaven" and "Nobody's Business," I will look at how two diasporic individuals respond to, push back against,

and even ignore, the various expectations placed upon them, and the larger significances of these defiant acts in a neoliberal context. I argue in this chapter that Lahiri's previously subtle erosion of the immigrant success story has now become far more overt as she radically subverts the model minority myth. In these stories, Lahiri demonstrates that even the younger generation, though more removed from the initial trauma of diaspora and more actively engaged in iconoclastic resistance, is nevertheless implicated in diasporic melancholia.

The image of the South Asian diasporic subject that Lahiri projects through her cultural production and significant literary contribution is revelatory of the deeply rooted ambivalence, melancholia, and instability that often goes unnoticed in other narratives of the South Asian diaspora. Moreover, the version of melancholic, rather than solely celebratory, cultural hybridity that is showcased and circulated through her texts has specific implications for readers who might be struggling with their own hybrid identities. In this way, the persistent melancholic drumbeat that drones throughout Lahiri's work acts as a type of consciousness-raising for the real experience of juggling two competing worlds. These rich and complicated works, denying the prospect of fully belonging anywhere, serve as an acknowledgement of the homelessness experienced by those torn between too many.

## Chapter One: The Miscarriages of Culture

The experience of physically moving to a new location within the context of diaspora has specific implications for one's processes of identity formation, including their experiences of gender, race, national belonging, and sense of self. Undoubtedly, the same holds true for migrants of the South Asian diaspora undergoing the twin processes of migration and assimilation into a new culture and society. As Izabella Kimak writes in her book, *Bicultural Bodies: A Study of South Asian American Women's Literature*:

Whereas it takes a while for the mind to leave home, to register the changes brought about by migration and to adjust to them in a process of acculturation, the body finds itself immersed in the new physical and cultural environment the moment the emigrant steps off the boat or plane. While the mind may linger on memories of home, the body is instantly exposed to a variety of stimuli which assault all the senses with their striking novelty. (11)

The emotional and mental adjustment required of migration is evidently much more involved than mere physical transplantation. This disorienting delay in the acculturation of the mind is what ultimately ties the diasporic subject irrevocably to the idea of binary opposition between the homeland and new host country, the old memories and novel experiences, the traditional and innovative. Yet, as alluded to in my previous discussion of transculturalism and hybridity, several scholars of culture and diaspora refute the idea of fixed binaries which stabilize meaning.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall is one such scholar who challenges the notion of cultural identity as a stable and fixed entity, defining it not based upon a collective set of values that people with a common ancestry share, but rather something which recognizes the complicated and intertwined processes of identity formation. In his article, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora,"

Hall includes the various historical transformations, ruptures, discontinuities, and moments of contradiction in his definition of cultural identity, describing it as a point of suture between discourses of history, culture, memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 236). Just as nations and places, along with the various cultures associated with them, cannot be seen as wholly static, the cultural identities that grow out of out these shifting spaces are similarly mutable, heterogeneous, and unstable. This perspective of diasporic identity formation disallows a binary that seeks to pit ancestral homeland and host country against each other.

Generally, scholars like Stuart Hall view this type of diasporic inbetweenness as productive, or even revolutionary in some key ways. Homi Bhabha’s theories of hybridity celebrate Third Space as a marvelously liberating location where one need not become entrapped within national or cultural boundaries. As Hall corroborates, “Diasporas are composed of cultural formations which cut across and interrupt the settled contours of race, *ethnos*, and nation” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 172). Hall and Bhabha, like other scholars, can be seen as elevating the diasporic subject for the part they play in refuting the logic of national boundaries or identities, and consequently disrupting hegemonic or conventional categories of identification more broadly. However, Lahiri’s fiction seems to make an important and distinct deviation from this vein of diaspora and postcolonial studies. Although, like other writers of the South Asian diaspora, Lahiri is clearly invested in displaying the hybridity and inbetweenness of her unique and multifaceted characters, she is not projecting such narratives as successful. Instead, unlike those who view hybridity as dynamic and radical, Lahiri sees this very same Third Space as a trap. For Lahiri’s characters, inhabiting Third Space is not liberating, but rather alienating— they seem to be imprisoned in a sort of permanent limbo, unable to move either forward or backward.

Thus, one can see melancholia operating in Lahiri's early work through the character development and identity formation of her central protagonists and how they experience their own hybridity and corresponding ambivalence as a form of quiet trauma.

Scholars of quiet trauma agree that while trauma studies is mostly dominated by discussions of large-scale catastrophes and other dramatic events such as the Holocaust, there are other quieter, more mundane traumas of everyday life. E. Ann Kaplan writes in her book, *Trauma Culture*, that one cannot deny such "daily experiences of terror" as traumatic because most survivors of such quiet traumas experience similar feelings of loss, grief, shock, insecurity, and betrayal, however simply "within the sacred walls of the home" (19). Unlike large-scale trauma, quiet or family trauma occurs in private, domestic spaces, and beyond that, most frequently amongst women and families as opposed to men. Judith Lewis Herman echoes many similar thoughts about the intersections of gender and trauma in her work, stating that the privacy of the home has rendered women's trauma as largely invisible, outside of discourses both public and scholarly (3-4). The category of quiet trauma recognizes these private, individual, and often hidden experiences, offering them the significance that the larger umbrella of trauma studies often leaves out.

In Lahiri's work, one can see that her protagonists' trauma not only stems from their understandings of diaspora and migration in the public sphere of the nation, but also encompasses their individual experiences in private and domestic spaces. Their strife results as much from their difficulties in negotiating relationships that are floundering and navigating their own identities. As Vijay Mishra comments, these stories "[touch] 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" (192). Thus I argue that in the

stories, “Mrs. Sen’s” and “A Temporary Matter,” while Lahiri certainly challenges binary ways of thinking about nation and diaspora by portraying her characters’ dismantling the authority of nationalist versus assimilationist dichotomies, she does not exonerate them from the pervasive experiences of diasporic melancholia, or more specifically quiet trauma. Far from being celebrated as heroic figures, these diasporic characters are instead each depicted as trapped in a melancholic stasis.

One way that Lahiri rethinks binaries in her short fiction is by offering a counter-narrative to the popular discourse which aligns the homeland with constricting conservatism and the new host country with increased levels of agency and choice. Lahiri’s writing takes a more nuanced approach that uses individual stories to destabilize this problematic binary. As Kimak argues, Lahiri’s work “cannot be said to operate according to the...dualistic mode of contrasting America/ freedom/ opportunity with South Asia/ limitation/ oppression” (16). Lahiri’s purposeful disentanglement of oppressive restraint from ancestral homeland and idyllic freedom from adopted nation is evidenced in her story, “Mrs. Sen’s.” This story revolves around the migrant wife of a university professor who takes on the job of babysitting Elliot, a young American boy born to a single, working mother.

Upon their first meeting, Elliot is quick to notice Mrs. Sen’s distinct physical appearance. Of Mrs. Sen’s style and physical characteristics, Lahiri writes, “She was about thirty...her eyes were beautiful, with thick, flaring brows and liquid flourishes that extended beyond the natural width of her lids. She wore a shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisley” (“Mrs. Sen’s” 112). Mrs. Sen’s physical characteristics, clothing, and style immediately mark her adherence to her Indian homeland. She is dressed in a traditional sari and wears her eyeliner in a way that fits closely within a traditional Hindu Indian aesthetic. Moreover, it is clear that she is

not only wearing and exhibiting Indian aesthetics, but also representing a sort of Indian ideal. Words like “flaring,” “flourish,” and “shimmering” display the extravagance and exuberance of Mrs. Sen’s appearance— she is literally depicted as sparkling. Mrs. Sen in this early introduction is unquestioningly beautiful, and beyond that, her beauty seems to stem directly from her distinctly Indian appearance. The way in which Mrs. Sen is most at ease when leaning into her unwavering allegiance to and nostalgia for her homeland is also noted through Elliot’s keen observations of her behavior. As Lahiri explains, “Two things, Elliot learned, made Mrs. Sen happy. One was the arrival of a letter from her family...the other thing that made [her] happy was fish from the seaside” (“Mrs. Sen’s” 121-3). Mrs. Sen is most content while staying in touch with and feeling close to her family back in India, and cooking traditional Indian dishes.

Contrary to Mrs. Sen’s determination to remain faithful to her homeland is the pressure she feels to learn to drive a car. In India, the skill is hardly necessary. As she remarks to Elliot’s mother, “At home, you know, we have a driver” (Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen’s” 113). Accustomed to a certain lifestyle and following the norms of her homeland, Mrs. Sen has never seen any reason to learn to drive. In fact, based on the fact that she hired someone else to do this task in her stead, it is probable that her not knowing how to drive acts as a symbol of her high social status. However, upon moving to the United States, she is coerced by the people around her, such as her husband and Elliot’s mother, to subscribe to this American ideal. Driving, in a United States context, is saturated with a variety of connotations related to agency, freedom, mobility, and power. As Mrs. Sen comments, “Mr. Sen says that once I receive my license, everything will improve” (Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen’s” 119). As Mrs. Sen has been told time and time again by others who more closely conform to American standards, to drive or “be in the driver’s seat” is to be successful, and beyond that, to be in control.

However, the actual events of Mrs. Sen's life sharply deviate from this proposed model of agency in which driving is synonymous with control. As Mrs. Sen drives, Elliot observes, "how the stream of cars made her knuckles pale, her wrists tremble, and her English falter" (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 121). Far from heightening Mrs. Sen's sense of agency, the act of driving actually does the opposite, stripping her of her once confident and self-assured demeanor. As she drives, she becomes overcome by fear such that even the skills that she does possess, like her ability to speak English fluently, "falter." At the end of the story, when Mrs. Sen finally decides to use driving to her advantage in order to pick up the fish she likes from the seaside market, "the accident occurred quickly" (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 134). Mrs. Sen temporarily buys into the notion that driving will revive her sense of agency and decides, rather impulsively, to buy fish for herself instead of relying on her husband or public transportation. Following her car accident, Mrs. Sen loses her job as a babysitter, her only structured activity, and retreats into her bedroom while her husband tries to remedy the situation on her behalf. Working against the very American genre of the road romance, Lahiri writes the character of Mrs. Sen as someone who does not view the car and open road as symbols of individualism or freedom, but rather further restraint and alienation. If at first Mrs. Sen is a competent figure, secure in her identity and encompassing a type of Indian ideal, her forced assimilation into American culture strips her of this previously good standing and renders her worse off. Therefore, in portraying a character whose sense of agency is directly tied to her allegiance to an ancestral homeland, Lahiri disproves the notion that Americanization, or assimilation into American culture and values, is the primary way to achieve social success. Just as scholars of hybridity like Hall and Bhabha argue, Mrs. Sen's diasporic identity can be seen as constantly producing and reproducing itself

anew in a circular rather than linear fashion such that it refutes an assimilative, or more specifically Americanized, model of diasporic citizenship.

Lahiri's project of disrupting the binary logic of the South Asian diaspora is continued in her stories involving South Asian diasporic migrants who have not only just recently arrived. One such story, entitled "A Temporary Matter," details the events that transpire as a husband and wife share secrets in the dark and discuss their relationship honestly as they wait out the blackouts and power outages that plague the city of Boston. In it, the central protagonists, Shukumar and Shoba, watch their marriage slowly dissolve in the aftermath of a traumatic, late-term miscarriage. In this story, Shoba subverts the defining characteristics associated with both Indian and American identities in a way that weakens both of these categories. "A Temporary Matter" resists binary modes of thinking through diaspora through the subject formation of Shoba, especially with regard to her role as a wife and potential mother.

Beyond simply aligning oppression with the homeland and freedom with the host country, binary ways of thinking through South Asian diaspora also seek to assign diasporic subjects to specific ends of the traditionalist versus assimilationist paradigm based on gender. As Kimak explains, South Asian immigrants tend to "respond to the pressures of the world outside the diaspora by tightening up the rules governing female behavior" in a way that anchors the woman firmly to the homeland (14). Anupama Jain corroborates this claim by describing the pressure that diasporic women more frequently face to be "bearers of an alleged 'ancestral culture' in a new host country" (138). The diasporic woman is expected to be firmly committed to her role in the preservation of her ancestral or home culture, functioning as a type of cultural anchor. Shoba's early characterization seems to portray her as acting within the confines of this gendered diasporic social position. Lahiri points out that "Shukumar hadn't spent as much time

in India as Shoba had” (“A Temporary Matter” 12). While Shukumar merely copies her recipes and meticulous notes when cooking Indian meals, Shoba is described as having crafted these recipes, expanding upon them, and preserving them in her cookbook. As with Mrs. Sen, Shoba’s cooking and preserving of traditional Indian recipes has many symbolic resonances related to her sense nostalgia for her homeland. Of the pair, on the surface, it appears that Shoba has a closer relationship to her Indian identity, preserving the culture of her homeland for the both of them just as a diasporic Indian woman is expected to do.

Yet, Lahiri pushes Shoba’s characterization further, complicating the notion of the diasporic woman as unable to escape the limiting social position of cultural anchor. Lahiri’s resistance to this trope is epitomized in Shoba’s experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. Shoba silently suffers through the aftermath of a traumatic, late-term miscarriage that takes a great toll on her relationship with her husband, Shukumar. Pregnancy and motherhood act as clear signs of cultural negotiation in narratives of diaspora because of how differently they are viewed in various cultural contexts. South Asian women are typically linked in literature to a romanticized version of pregnancy that draws heavily on stereotypes of an exoticized “Earth Mother” figure (Kimak 63). In these narratives, the South Asian woman subject is bestowed with mystical powers of fertility that are used to protect a conventional familial structure and secure a cultural legacy through the next generation.

However, in “A Temporary Matter,” though Shoba seems to fill this role at first, as she has “hips that her obstetrician assured her were made for childbearing,” the outcome of her pregnancy ultimately distinguishes her from this archetype (Lahiri 7). Lahiri describes:

The baby had been born dead. Shoba was lying on a bed, asleep, in a private room so small there was barely enough space to stand beside her, in a wing of the hospital they

hadn't been to on the tour for expectant parents. Her placenta had weakened and she'd had a cesarean, though not quickly enough. ("A Temporary Matter" 3-4)

The circumstances of Shoba's miscarriage render her characterization as an exceptionally fertile, idealized Indian woman invalid. Lahiri notes that the room Shoba is resting in post-procedure has "barely enough space [for Shukumar] to stand beside her." The miscarriage literally forces Shukumar out of Shoba's immediate space and creates a distance between them. Rather than Shoba's pregnancy contributing to and reinforcing a conventional family structure, it serves as a barrier to further intimacy and negatively impacts her marriage. Also, this private room is depicted as not having been "on the tour for expectant parents." This inclusion emphasizes that Shoba's experience has deviated from the "normal" course of action associated with pregnancy. Her outcome is not predicted or prepared for and has defied expectations. Moreover, it is her placenta, an organ which is chiefly responsible for nourishing and providing nutrients for the fetus during pregnancy, which weakens and leads to Shoba's miscarriage. Shoba's womb, which should anchor her firmly to her homeland through childbirth, is instead categorized by its inability to sustain life. Thus, like Shoba's at times tenuous connection to her homeland, her womb is too anemic to maintain her cultural legacy. Noting the limitations and failures of Shoba's reproductive capacity immediately disassociate her from the racialized fertility and romanticized motherhood employed in traditional representations of South Asian women. Lahiri uses Shoba's specific experience of miscarriage to contest the link between South Asian women's bodies and cultural continuity. Kimak explains, "Diasporic women writers challenge the widespread image of the sexed and racialized female body as the visual symbol of their ethnic group's cultural affinity...by endowing their female protagonists with the agency to subvert the attempts of the national culture, or the diaspora, to fossilize South Asian women into

unchanging models of cultural stability” (14). Lahiri’s short fiction attempts to more fully capture the complex and intertwined processes of cultural transformation and translation undergone by the women of this community by destabilizing the notion of cultural anchor.

At other times in the story, Shoba adopts traits and makes decisions that are simultaneously indicative of both her Indian background and adopted American values. Shortly after the blackouts in Boston ensue, Shoba suggests that she and Shukumar play a truth-telling game from her youth to pass the time (Lahiri, “A Temporary Matter” 12). This game, something that Shoba played during her childhood in India with her family, represents both the traditions of her homeland and the immediacy of these memories in her mind. However, by the time the blackouts have passed, Shoba reveals the true reason for her wanting to play this game with her husband. Lahiri writes, “All this time she’d been looking for an apartment...It sickened Shukumar, knowing that she had spent these past evenings preparing for life without him...This was what she’d been trying to tell him for the past four evenings. This was the point of her game” (“A Temporary Matter” 21). Under the veil of darkness, the couple is finally able to reach a state of heightened clarity. Though at first glance, Shoba’s dedication to playing this game seems to be indicative of her ties to India and desire to reconnect with her husband, it is actually a method that she employs to reveal her plans for divorce. Shoba uses this remnant of her homeland in a way that breaks with its traditions by ending a marriage contract and the promise of a continued cultural lineage. She uses this game to exercise agency by propelling herself towards a markedly different future of her choice.

Additionally, as Rosemary George comments in her book, *The Politics of Home*, the space of the home typically connotes “the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, nurture, comfort, and protection” (19). Going against these conventional

conceptions of the home as a stable space of domesticity and cultural preservation, in this story, Shoba and Shukumar's home becomes a site of both remembrance and rupture— Shoba uses the resurfacing of the past, through the truth-telling game, as a distancing strategy both from her marriage and ancestral homeland. Scholar Mridul Bordoloi builds on these implications of Shoba's decision in his discussion of the home and diasporic domestic spaces. He comments that in "A Temporary Matter," the home becomes "an interstitial space of resistance where discursive strategies are adopted to delocate the self from his/her remembered past" (Bordoloi 29). Shoba's trying to pursue a separation from her husband is in many ways her attempt to distance herself from the type of domesticity that she now associates with failure and inadequacy. While Shukumar has adopted many domestic chores around the house in a sort of gender role reversal to compensate for his failure to finish his dissertation, Shoba's body has made it impossible for her to become a mother. The space of their home and the fractured and broken domesticity it has come to represent is no doubt something Shoba would be eager to escape from. Furthermore, this new apartment and the more independent life it entails can be read as symbols of reinvention and success, both of which are undoubtedly deeply held American values. Therefore, Shoba's decision to play this game hints at the ways in which she does not fit perfectly within an Indian or American identity in such a way that resists her categorization as either and undermines the authority of both.

Lahiri's writing, especially when viewed through a transcultural lens that has the potential to disrupt binary ways of thinking about migration, diaspora, and cultural identity, productively acknowledges both identities and identity categories as constantly shifting and evolving. Lahiri's resistance to display any sort of fixity or stability in diasporic identity epitomizes Bhabha's and Hall's notions of hybridity. "Mrs. Sen's," in which the titular character

is ultimately rendered more disadvantaged than she is successful after succumbing to the societal pressure to conform to American values, and “A Temporary Matter,” wherein the protagonist’s Indian and American identities do not necessarily supersede one another, but instead symbiotically coexist, both work against any singular model of diasporic success while simultaneously resisting the urge to privilege either Indian or American identity over the other. Lahiri ultimately showcases these two identities as intertwined, mutable, and equal, each taking turns being temporarily on top of a delicate, ever fluctuating seesaw. As Hall writes, “Identities are always open, complex, under construction, taking part in an unfinished game” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 174), and that is precisely what Lahiri’s characters seem to show.

And yet, neither Mrs. Sen nor Shoba seem particularly freed by their hybridity, instead each rendered somewhat ambivalent or else entirely immobile. Trauma scholar, Michael Rothberg, writes in his article, “Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response,” about experiences of trauma within the context of postcolonialism. He explains, “Attention to hybridity and heterogeneity need not distract from hierarchies of power— as, arguably, it tends to do in some postcolonial work inspired by Homi Bhabha” (228). Rothberg describes that many postcolonial scholars writing about the productive qualities of hybridity do not give equal space to the “hierarchies of power” or rather the insidious melancholia and trauma resulting from colonialism. In fact, even Bhabha’s own later work seems to make a similar turn. In his essay, “The Vernacular Cosmopolitan,” Bhabha comments that “to occupy such an ‘in-between’ space is often the result of oppression and inequality;” that is, diasporic subjects “have no option but to occupy such interstitial spaces” (139). Here, though he does not completely leave behind his previously celebratory attitude towards diaspora and hybridity, he acknowledges how such acts of cultural translation are not always victorious or radical, but instead riddled with “ambivalence

and antagonism” (Bhabha, “The Vernacular Cosmopolitan” 141). Lahiri’s writing seems to directly address Rothberg’s concern and Bhabha’s later paradigm shift, paying attention to hybridity and denying her characters any stable ground for identification while not ignoring their trauma and melancholia.

For instance, Mrs. Sen rejects a linear trajectory into Americanization, surely, but at the cost of her own fossilization and failure to adjust to a new environment. She spends hours each day meticulously spreading out her various vegetables and ingredients and preparing them using a “blade from India” (Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen’s” 115). This ritual is less about cooking a meal or honing a skill than it is about reconnecting to a time and place that has since been lost. Through her cooking, as she presumably did in India with her friends and family, Mrs. Sen can feel temporarily close to them and her homeland even though she is now physically far away. For Mrs. Sen, home is not only a stable, gendered, domestic space, as George would suggest, but also closely tied to cultural preservation. As if it were a museum, within the confines of her home, Mrs. Sen is able to carefully curate the feeling of her homeland, the place she has just left and where she once felt truly safe and at ease. Mrs. Sen’s home, insofar as it desperately attempts to recreate many of the traditions and conditions of her homeland, acts as a shield from an outside world utterly alien to her. It is immediately clear to both Elliot and the reader that “when Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables” (Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen’s” 116). Here, Mrs. Sen seems to be melancholically grasping for a homeland that she cannot reobtain despite her best efforts, in many ways a perfect example of Freud’s lost object, instead distancing herself further and further from a world moving on without her.

Undoubtedly, Mrs. Sen can also be read here as one of Lau’s re-orientalist figures, perpetuating the stereotype of the newly arrived female migrant as strikingly conservative and

unrelenting in her pursuit of cultural continuity. By the end of the story, she “went into her bedroom and shut the door” (Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen’s” 134). The result of Mrs. Sen’s resistance to assimilate into her new surroundings leaves her further alienated and utterly stagnant, literally retreating into her home and confining herself within the bedroom. Also, the type of disenfranchisement that Mrs. Sen experiences leading up to and in the aftermath of her car accident goes largely ignored or unnoticed, Mr. Sen seems unaware of his wife’s distress and Elliott and his mother simply move on with their lives, befitting Herman’s notion of quiet trauma as mostly invisible. While Mrs. Sen does not function exactly as a cultural anchor because her unwavering allegiance to her homeland is not forcefully placed on her or for another’s benefit, her conservative cultural identity is indeed weighing her down.

Similarly, while Shoba in many ways appears to be Mrs. Sen’s opposite— the freethinking, independent, assimilated counterpoint to the newly-arrived, fiercely conservative migrant identity, she is equally paralyzed and alienated. During their game, when Shukumar reveals the gender of their lost child, “Shoba looked at him now, her face contorted with sorrow” and “they wept together, for the things they now knew” (Lahiri, “A Temporary Matter” 22). Following his realization of Shoba’s plans to divorce him, Shukumar delivers the statement that he knows will hurt her the most, just as he feels himself to have been hurt. While Shoba’s miscarriage does indeed defy the stereotype of South Asian diasporic women as perfect cultural anchors and hyper-fertile Earth Mothers, she is devastated, not relieved by this loss. In this way, though she expels the cultural demands of motherhood and wifely commitment, instead of being liberated, she is deeply unhappy, weeping alongside her soon to be ex-husband.

Here, the seemingly opposed characters of Shoba and Mrs. Sen are fundamentally linked through the quiet trauma they experience within the walls of their respective homes. As Hall

comments, while “diaspora subjects bear the traces of particular histories and cultures, the traditions of enunciation, the language, texts, and worlds of meaning that have shaped them irrevocably....the cultural identities that a diaspora succeeds in constructing cannot...be just a repetition of the selfsame. Diaspora cultures...will always be inevitably syncretized” (“Nations and Diasporas” 173, 166). While Mrs. Sen and Shoba alike appear to carry and preserve many facets of their homeland into their new host country, these cultural relics are ultimately transformed, or else bastardized, in the processes of transportation and recreation, thus resulting in their experiences of melancholic paralysis.

## Chapter Two: The Miscommunications of Culture

In Chapter One, I describe the ways in which Lahiri's diasporic characters are implicated in a form of quiet trauma or domestic, private melancholia, resulting from their miscarriages of culture and homeland. This chapter investigates how such a melancholia only swells with their efforts to assuage their own alienation through the formation of cross-cultural relationships which ultimately fail. Using two other stories from *Interpreter of Maladies*, namely "Interpreter of Maladies" and "Sexy," I demonstrate how Lahiri employs racialized and culturally-imbued forms of gender expression and extramarital sex to actively destabilize the fantasy of a perfect symbiotic or syncretic cross-cultural experience. I argue that Lahiri portrays heterosexual, interracial, and extramarital encounters based upon heavily exoticized, cross-cultural desire as being unable to produce a heightened state of cosmopolitan cultural fluency in either of the involved participants, despite their sustained efforts to bring about such an outcome.

In both "Interpreter of Maladies" and "Sexy," Lahiri sets up racialized forms of femininity and female beauty, and their relationship to desire and exoticism, as seemingly crucial points of attraction between culturally distinct people. In "Interpreter of Maladies," Mr. and Mrs. Das, an affluent Indian American couple visiting their supposed homeland of India while on vacation with their children, temporarily hire an Indian tour guide, Mr. Kapasi, to show them local sightseeing destinations. As Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma comment in their book, *New Cosmopolitanisms*, the diasporic subject inhabits different modalities of travel and migration (4). While the wealthy Das family is easily able to travel across the world to India for this family vacation, Mr. Kapasi is deeply grounded in his homeland. The distinction between the Das family and Mr. Kapasi's respective social positioning and relationship to Indian culture is immediately evident as Mr. Kapasi notes, "the family looked Indian, but dressed as foreigners

did” (Lahiri, “Interpreter of Maladies” 43). His description emphasizes how the Das family does not readily belong in India despite their appearance of ethnic or national similarity. To a certain extent, he is correct in his initial reading of the family. They dress and act the way most tourists might, have given their children anglicized names, and seem to align themselves more closely with and take pride in their Americanness.

The cross-cultural interaction that specifically transpires between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das is punctuated by his immediate exoticization of and fixation on her physical appearance and gender expression. The narrator comments:

He observed her. She wore a red-and-white-checkered skirt that stopped above her knees, slip-on shoes with a square wooden heel, and a close-fitting blouse styled like a man’s undershirt. The blouse was decorated at chest-level with a calico applique in the shape of a strawberry. She was a short woman, with small hands like paws, her frosty pink fingernails painted to match her lips, and was slightly plump in her figure. (Lahiri, “Interpreter of Maladies” 46)

The attention to detail in this passage highlights how Mrs. Das’s physical presentation of herself is distinct and deviates sharply from the norms associated with her current setting. The description displays a distinctly American brand of femininity— Mrs. Das’s clothing, nails, and makeup are carefully manicured and well-matched, and her clothing fits well within the aesthetic of late 90s American fashion. However, Mr. Kapasi’s objectifying gaze is notably undersexualized. The description he offers ignores the erotic features of Mrs. Das’s body in favor of her other, almost caricatured physical characteristics. For instance, he describes the blouse she wears as “close-fitting” in such a way that might hint at its revealing nature, and yet immediately juxtaposes this quality against the idea that it is “styled like a man’s undershirt.” Her blouse is

emphasized, not for the ways that it is attractive or suggestive, but instead because of how it stands out in this particular environment and deviates from standard Indian modes of dress for Hindu women. It is clear that Mrs. Das's gender expression is markedly different from the traditionally feminine, if not stereotypical, Indian aesthetic that a character like Mrs. Sen might embody. This confusing portrayal of desire is more overtly apparent later on when Mr. Kapasi begins to further objectify Mrs. Das with his quick glances through the rearview mirror "at the strawberry between her breasts, and the golden brown hollow in her throat" (Lahiri, "Interpreter of Maladies" 53-4). This gaze focuses not directly on her breasts, but on the bright, childish icon between them. The Americanness and eroticism of Mrs. Das's physical appearance are closely intertwined in such a way that categorizes Mr. Kapasi's desire for her as primarily based on her perceived exoticism. In fact, Mr. Kapasi's sustained attention and insistence on the "American" aspects of Mrs. Das's physical appearance and style act as a type of whitewashing of her identity, almost reducing her in such a way as to better contrast his more conventional, stereotypical Indian wife.

The interplay between Mrs. Das's exoticism and eroticism in this context is further highlighted by the ways in which she is juxtaposed against Mr. Kapasi's wife. He is married to a woman who "even when they made love, kept the panels of her blouse hooked together, the string of her petticoat knotted around her waist" (Lahiri, "Interpreter of Maladies" 58). The blouse and petticoat are garments paired with a sari, signaling Mrs. Kapasi's close ties to her Indian culture. Moreover, the fact that she does not undress fully, but rather keeps her erotic features hidden during sexual intercourse, hints at her motivation for participating in sex with her husband. The sex in this scene feels like a primarily copulative or dutiful act rather than an erotic or pleasurable one. Mrs. Kapasi is shown as conforming to Indian sexual and social norms far

more closely than Mrs. Das. Therefore, Mr. Kapasi's temptation to embark on an illicit relationship with a married woman far different from his wife displays his desire for a more cross-cultural experience.

Like Mr. Kapasi's exoticization of and eventual infatuation with Mrs. Das in "Interpreter of Maladies," in the story, "Sexy," Miranda, a white American woman native to the Midwest, becomes similarly attracted to Dev, a married Indian American man. However, unlike Mr. Kapasi, whose fantasies of Mrs. Das never fully come to fruition, Miranda and Dev quickly embark on an extramarital affair. Dev and Miranda's relationship is initially born out of sexual desire and attraction to "otherness." Miranda notes how early in their relationship, "Dev said he liked that her legs were longer than her torso, something that he'd observed the first time she'd walked across the room naked" (Lahiri, "Sexy" 89). The proportions of Miranda's body are one of her many anglicized physical traits, along with her white skin, light eyes, and slender facial features. Dev's attraction to and complementing of Miranda is closely tied to his sense of her American aesthetic. This attraction is most clearly apparent in the scene which gives this story its title. During one of their many excursions to a museum with interesting acoustic properties, such that she could hear his whispers from a far distance away, "[Miranda] watched his lips forming the words; at the same time she heard them so clearly that she felt them under her skin, under her winter coat, so near and full of warmth that she felt herself go hot. 'Hi,' she whispered, unsure of what else to say. 'You're sexy,' he whispered back" (Lahiri, "Sexy" 91). Perhaps the most intimate scene that transpires between the two encompasses Dev's proclamation of Miranda as sexy. Unlike other terms of flattery such as beautiful or cute, the word "sexy" is deeply indicative of erotic desire. In this way, Miranda's "American" form of femininity and the erotic desire she evokes in Dev appear to be closely related.

Also, like Mr. Kapasi, Dev also has a wife who is far more closely tied to her Indian cultural background. Almost immediately after he meets Miranda, Dev explains that his wife is “going to India for a few weeks” (Lahiri, “Sexy” 88). The wife’s vacation back to her ancestral homeland of India clearly demonstrates her efforts to maintain a relationship to her cultural background and homeland, unknowingly providing Dev with the space he needs to pursue an extramarital affair. Conveniently, Miranda comments that “somehow, without the wife there [the affair] didn’t seem so wrong” (Lahiri, “Sexy” 88). The physical distance between Dev and his wife, brought about by her attempt to preserve cultural ties to India, allows him to more easily embark on an extramarital affair with someone who in many ways can be read as her racial and cultural opposite. Therefore, Dev’s seeking out of Miranda, and her apparent alignment with American aesthetics and standards of beauty, emphasizes his desire to explore a more cross-cultural romantic or sexual engagement.

Importantly, both Mr. Kapasi and Dev in many ways play directly into the stereotypical binary opposition between the sexually available American women and the chaste Indian women. Gayatri Gopinath, in her book, *Impossible Desires*, explains how heteronormative ideologies act as a clear structuring framework for state and diasporic nationalisms wherein respectable sexual morality politics exclude all women who are not cultural anchors (10). While the women tied to both the home and the homeland, such as Mr. Kapasi’s and Dev’s wives, act as off-screen dutiful and chaste cultural anchors, the American or diasporic women abroad, like Miranda and Mrs. Das, are viewed as more promiscuous. Therefore, since both Mr. Kapasi and Dev are embarking on extramarital, and thus transgressive, sexual and romantic desires or actual relationships, it would stand to reason that they would choose those deemed more sexually open and morally ambiguous, namely Miranda and Mrs. Das.

Moreover, these cross-cultural attractions later serve as the basis for Mr. Kapasi's and Miranda's respective unrealistic fantasies of achieving a heightened cosmopolitan perspective through their pursuing of a romantic relationship with the diasporic subjects they encounter. Rajan and Sharma explain in their book that arising out of intersecting facets of globalization and diaspora are the new cosmopolitan subjects, whose positioning marks them as not precisely grounded in any one physical location or adherence to a particular culture, but instead able to occupy a wide range of subject positions and seamlessly transition between them (3). Though similar in many ways to hybridity and transculturalism, this theory of diasporic citizenship refers specifically to the elite and highly educated status of many South Asian diasporic subjects. As Karen Leonard writes in her essay, "South Asian Religions in the US: New Contexts and Configurations," for worldly, highly mobile, and well-educated South Asian migrants, their cosmopolitan status is closely tied to privilege (91). Thus, as I discussed in my introduction, since many of Lahiri's characters do seem to hold this privileged status, most migrants of the second wave of the South Asian diaspora could be aptly categorized as Rajan and Sharma's new cosmopolitans. It is clear that such a designation is seen as highly desirable, as new cosmopolitans are able to manipulate and negotiate their identities to better address their respective circumstances, at times relying on one side of the hyphen more heavily than the other as the situation demands. As such, characters such as Mr. Kapasi and Miranda, who on the surface appear very different but are similarly trapped in their fairly limited and nation-bound identities, unsurprisingly begin to long for and pursue this elusive perspective and perceived privilege. They each also delude themselves into thinking that such a complex form of cultural ambidexterity can be achieved through a mere cross-cultural sexual relationship or fantasy without ever having to physically uproot themselves from their respective locations.

In “Interpreter of Maladies,” Mr. Kapasi builds on his desire for Mrs. Das with the creation of an elaborate, and never acted upon, fantasy. As he writes down his address per Mrs. Das’s presumably innocuous request, he imagines, “she would write to him, asking about his days interpreting as the doctor’s office, and he would respond eloquently...In time she would reveal the disappointment of her marriage, and he his. In this way their friendship would grow, and flourish” (Lahiri, “Interpreter of Maladies” 55). Based solely on his limited interaction with Mrs. Das, Mr. Kapasi envisions a future in which the two form an intimate connection that survives the cultural barriers and physical distance between them after she returns home. At this idea, he “experienced a mild and pleasant shock” that “was similar to a feeling he used to experience long ago when, after months of translating with the aid of a dictionary, he would finally read a passage from a French novel, or an Italian sonnet, and understand the words, unencumbered by his own efforts” (Lahiri, “Interpreter of Maladies” 56). Rather than imagining himself engaging in a conventionally sexual or romantic encounter with Mrs. Das, Mr. Kapasi equates his ideal relationship to her with his previous translation efforts. Mr. Kapasi’s other profession is that of a translator, and he often laments his failure to fully capitalize on his inclination for languages. To Mr. Kapasi, the idea of forming a relationship with Mrs. Das, crossing cultural boundaries in the process, is similar to the twin processes of translation and understanding. He craves the unique insight that he believes the diasporic and urbane character of Mrs. Das can bring to his working-class and insular daily lived experiences in India. The figure of Mrs. Das in Mr. Kapasi’s fantasy is analogous to a new language he hopes to gain fluency in. For him, forging a physical connection with Mrs. Das would satisfy not only his erotic desire for her Westernized beauty, but also his yearning to achieve a more culturally well-rounded perspective.

Miranda's ultimately unfulfilled fantasies of a cosmopolitan education closely mirror Mr. Kapasi's. The narrator recounts, "Now, when she and Dev made love, Miranda closed her eyes and saw deserts and elephants, and marble pavilions floating on lakes beneath a full moon" (Lahiri, "Sexy" 96). Miranda, here, is not only deeply involved in the exoticization of her lover, Dev, but also choosing to fixate on the shallowest and most obvious Indian cultural markers. The scenery that her sexual experiences with Dev call to mind are based on an idealization of the Indian landscape that follows Orientalist traditions. Furthermore, the connection of the "lovmaking" to her stereotypical imagining of his cultural background demonstrates how her attraction to him is based primarily on his perceived exoticism, not unlike her immediate noting of his tanned skin and "flamingo pink shirt" upon their first encounter (Lahiri, "Sexy" 86). After another sexual experience with Dev, "[Miranda] got into bed, still ruffled from all their lovemaking, and studied the borders of Bengal" (Lahiri, "Sexy" 85). The act of studying Indian geography in a space demarcated by the physical evidence of "all their lovemaking" serves to emphasize how Miranda sees this union with Dev as not only a manifestation of her sexual desire for him, but also her longing to break with her limited, Midwestern perspective. Miranda's curiosity about Indian culture and her attempts to better understand it after beginning an affair with Dev illustrate her wish to use this cross-cultural romantic and sexual relationship to further her own cosmopolitan growth. However, much like her understanding of Indian culture at large, this conception of cosmopolitanism is similarly superficial and naïve.

Despite Mr. Kapasi's and Miranda's fervent wishes to the contrary and their sustained efforts to realize their goals of increased cosmopolitan knowledge and belonging, Lahiri ultimately denies them this fantasy. Specifically, these characters' longing for a heightened cosmopolitan perspective achieved through the establishment of cross-cultural relationships is

interrupted or left unfulfilled due to the at times jarring introduction of a new form of Indian beauty. Notably, these insertions of Indian beauty are highly sexualized and transnational, or able to defy the logic of national boundaries in some key ways. In her article, “Jhumpa Lahiri’s Feminist Cosmopolitics and the Transnational Beauty Assemblage,” Vanita Reddy uses myriad examples from popular culture, literature, and cinema to describe the affective force of Indian female beauty and its ability to “reassemble the semantic messages of exoticism, commodification, gendered nationalism, and transnational mobility” (29). Indian female beauty, especially in a form that is racially and nationally encoded, is described as an active agent. It has the ability to engage in and influence moments of cross-cultural interaction by inciting desire and attraction, promoting or denying identification, and ultimately, disallowing certain forms of belonging. Reddy explains that the powerfully destabilizing force of racialized, transnational Indian beauty and the diasporic subject’s resistance to being used are both undoubtedly examples of Lahiri’s feminist project of overturning problematic binaries and stereotypes.

In “Sexy,” Miranda is desperate to identify with the specific form of cosmopolitanism she believes the Indian Americans in her life to possess. She attempts to “try on” an Indian identity by eating Indian foods, visiting an Indian grocery store, and practicing physically transcribing the language she sees written on the menu at an Indian restaurant. Despite these efforts, she is unable to compete with the strong, yet phantasmal, force of transnational Indian beauty she encounters in the Indian grocery, namely the Bollywood actress, Madhuri Dixit. I use transnational to describe Dixit because of how her image, onscreen and in promotional materials, is able to permeate national boundaries and effortlessly traverse them. When Dev remarks that his wife is beautiful in the same way that Madhuri Dixit is, Miranda feels compelled to seek out an image of the actress, to understand the reference, and ultimately, search for some type of

identification within her. That is, she hopes to be able to channel the type of beauty that Dev's wife and Dixit have to better sustain her relationship with him.

As Miranda enters the Indian grocery store searching for an image of the famous Bollywood actress, she "looked up at the videos on the shelves behind the counter. She saw women wearing skirts that sat low on their hips and tops that tied like bandanas between their breasts...they were beautiful...with kohl-rimmed eyes and long black hair. She knew then that Madhuri Dixit was beautiful, too" (Lahiri, "Sexy" 99). Dixit, an icon of Bollywood cinema, in many ways epitomizes Indian beauty ideals for women. As Miranda scans through the images of heavily sexualized and racialized forms of Indian beauty, it is immediately evident that she, with her distinctly American brand of femininity and Midwestern upbringing, is not and could never be one of them. As the man at the grocery ultimately says to Miranda while assessing her body with his eyes, this food, and beyond that, this cultural identity is simply "too spicy for her" (Lahiri, "Sexy" 99). His statement, which prompts Miranda to leave the store, solidifies her lack of belonging within this space. Not only are the items in the store not meant for her or made with her in mind, but also they are explained as too extreme for her, as if she could not handle them. Her experience at the store makes abundantly clear that she does not fit within the culture she desires, instead denied any form of heightened identification with or belonging within this group. She is instead rendered even more alienated and insecure through her grasping for such a cultural identity. Miranda's encounter with Madhuri Dixit in the Indian grocery is what first disrupts her fantasy of cosmopolitan cultural fluency.

Miranda's experience and subsequent feelings of inadequacy and alienation are later exacerbated by the reiteration of the word "sexy," though this time by Rohin, a young Indian boy who she is charged with babysitting. As Rohin watches Miranda model her new cocktail dress at

his request, he boldly declares, “you’re sexy” (Lahiri, “Sexy” 107). Somewhat taken aback by this comment, Miranda asks Rohin to explain what he thinks the words mean. Lahiri writes:

He cupped his hands around his mouth, and then he whispered, ‘It means loving someone you don’t know.’ Miranda felt Rohin’s words under her skin, the same way she’d felt Dev’s. But instead of going hot she felt numb. It reminded her of the way she’d felt at the Indian grocery, that Madhuri Dixit, who Dev’s wife resembled, was beautiful. (“Sexy” 108)

Dev’s once flattering and exciting compliment has now been imbued with a far less comfortable meaning that alienates and disillusiones Miranda rather than enticing her. Following Rohin’s logic, Dev’s calling Miranda “sexy” is a marker not only of his romantic or sexual feelings for her, but also of the fact that he does not truly know her. If to know is to understand or to relate to, she is categorized by the ways she is separate, decidedly different and wholly “other.”

Miranda realizes that Dev has never had any intention of leaving his beautiful and desirable wife, and has instead simply been fetishizing her different, white body. In this way, Miranda’s categorization as sexy, like her feelings of estrangement in the grocery store, speaks to how her fantasy of identification, of belonging within this world is fundamentally unreachable—a failure that is catalyzed by her harsh confrontation with a vision of Indian beauty in the form of Madhuri Dixit.

Similarly, in “Interpreter of Maladies,” Mr. Kapasi’s encounter with Indian female beauty, this time in corporeal rather than phantasmal form, makes clear the inability of cross-cultural, heterosexual romance as a way to engage across difference and achieve a supposedly cosmopolitan aura. As Mr. Kapasi listens to Mrs. Das’s confession of her extramarital affair and learns that her son was fathered by another man besides her husband, his initial attraction to her

begins to falter. Lahiri writes, “He looked at her, at the red plaid skirt and strawberry T-shirt, a woman not yet thirty, who loved neither her husband nor her children...her confession depressed him, depressed him more when he thought of Mr. Das on top of the path” (“Interpreter of Maladies” 66). While Mrs. Das’s specific form of beauty initially draws Mr. Kapasi towards her, it is now forever tainted by her confession. He is now unable to view her outside the context of her affair and how she has betrayed her husband and family. Whereas before, Mr. Kapasi was engaged in exoticizing and whitewashing Mrs. Das to better fit the stereotype of the “loose” American women abroad, in the moments after her confession, he cannot see her as anything other than a failed iteration of the dutiful and chaste Indian wife and mother, shirking her responsibilities to her family and culture. It is only after Mr. Kapasi restores Mrs. Das’s “Indian-ness” to his conception of her that he begins to feel alienated rather than enticed by her beauty and sexuality.

Just as Miranda feels deeply ostracized by her inability to identify with Madhuri Dixit’s distinctly unattainable form of racialized and sexualized Indian beauty, after the revelation of Mrs. Das’s actual sexuality, as opposed to his imagining of it, Mr. Kapasi is suddenly incapable of holding on to his previous fantasies. It is clear that Mr. Kapasi had hoped to engage in the very same transgressive behaviors that he ultimately castigates Mrs. Das so harshly for. His judgment of her stems from the realization that he is not the one reaping the benefits of a relationship with her, but instead someone else has already taken his place. The restoration of Mrs. Das’s racialized and sexualized Indian beauty impels Mr. Kapasi’s failure to maintain his fantasy about her and eventually his amplified state of disenfranchisement. Ultimately, like the piece of paper with his address, the tenuous connection between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das “fluttered away in the wind,” to no one’s knowledge but his own (Lahiri, “Interpreter of

Maladies” 69). Like the figure of Madhuri Dixit in “Sexy,” the force of Mrs. Das’s particular brand of racialized and sexualized beauty, which embodies a similar form of transnationalism due to her diasporic identity and ability to travel across national boundaries with ease, interrupts and critiques, as I will explain below, the superficial cross-cultural identification process and potential for a more meaningful cosmopolitan perspective.

In both stories, Lahiri uses her protagonists’ encounters with a beauty deeply embedded in a transnational, racialized, and sexualized context to destabilize the notion that the diasporic subject is someone who can be possessed or channeled to further one’s own agenda. Miranda, a white America woman who has very little prior understanding of the larger world, is unable to mobilize the same type of racialized sexuality, glamorous and impossibly cosmopolitan, that Madhuri Dixit embodies. Seeing Dixit’s physically inaccessible form of beauty, Miranda comes to realize that she cannot further her relationship with Dev and achieve the cosmopolitan aura as she would like. Instead, the reappearing figure of Dixit in her life is one that resists ownership, firmly denying Miranda’s pleas for belonging and identification. Also, as Reddy comments, “the white American female subject’s desire to wear the gendered and racialized logics of Bollywood icon Madhuri Dixit’s sensual beauty makes intelligible an unc cosmopolitan, provincialized status within the US nation” (54). In addition to resisting ownership, the figure of Madhuri Dixit also disrupts the logic of a binary opposition between the cosmopolitan woman abroad and the firmly grounded, traditional woman in India. Compared to Dixit’s transnational and sexual beauty, Miranda’s own white, Midwestern beauty seems painfully insular. Thus, Dixit becomes an interesting counterpoint to Mr. Kapasi and Dev’s wives who primarily serve as static cultural anchors. She channels a highly mobile and sexual form of Indian beauty which challenges the view of the homeland as unchanging or stuck in the past and America as a fundamentally

dynamic. Similarly, Mr. Kapasi, an Indian man who, despite his intellectual pursuits of foreign language and culture, has never explored the world outside of his homeland, is unable to harness Mrs. Das's sexuality through a cross-cultural, extramarital affair and bring about his own personal evolution into even a surface-level cosmopolitanism. As Reddy comments, "the postcolonial male subject's desire for the female diasporic subject's sexual capital illuminates his exclusion from an emerging class of Indian consumer citizens" (54). Mr. Kapasi's attempts to overcome the alienation he feels by using Mrs. Das's "sexual capital" fail; instead of bridging the gap between himself and the elite, transnational Das family, he ultimately widens it and further excludes himself from this type of citizenship.

Both Mr. Kapasi and Miranda, far from being able to achieve identification and belonging within the cosmopolitan citizenship they attribute to Mrs. Das and Dev respectively, instead must remain within their nation-bound, narrow worlds. This failure to realize their cosmopolitan fantasies and resulting disillusionment is undeniably melancholic. As Bhabha writes in his piece, "The Vernacular Cosmopolitan," "It is the closeness or proximity of 'cultural' differences, not the vast gaps between nations and peoples, that is most critical and crisis-laden area of communication" (138). Here, the failure that Mr. Kapasi and Miranda experience is not due to the crushing burden of diaspora at large, but rather the quieter, though still traumatic, instances of mistranslation that occur between them and the diasporic subjects they try to pursue relationships with. Mr. Kapasi and Miranda's melancholia ultimately stems from their failed efforts at connection and the exacerbated alienation that results instead. Also, as Delphine Munos writes in her book, the melancholia these characters experience surfaces as a result of their identification with "nothingness to the point of 'soft-suicide'...but always to the point of personal stasis, or even personal catastrophe (195). These characters become entrapped

within a melancholic personal stasis not only due to their failures of connection, but also because their fervent attempts at identification are based upon “nothingness” or more specifically, the false promise of cosmopolitanism.

Both Mrs. Das and Dev, the supposedly cosmopolitan characters that Mr. Kapasi and Miranda try in vain to emulate, do not fully live up to this ideal in reality. In his essay, “Diaspora and Cosmopolitanism,” Vinay Dharwadker explains:

We can therefore say that the cosmopolitan subject is culturally ambidextrous, and switches codes between the distinct, co-existing cultures in which she is at home to commensurate degrees; her cosmopolitanism is analogous to multilingualism, and hence represents a culture of translation. In contrast, the hybrid or Creole subject inhabits a single culture of her own, which emerges in the intermingling of two prior cultures...and is no longer fully at home in either in its unmixed form...That is, hybridity or creolization does not necessarily result in the cultural ambidexterity that defines cosmopolitanism...whenever a diaspora is unable to inhabit its homeland and its hostland with commensurate facility, even its hybridization or creolization of those cultures cannot prevent it from becoming anticosmopolitan. (140)

If a fully cosmopolitan subject is one who is perfectly at home in both the homeland and hostland, then Mrs. Das is decidedly uncosmopolitan. After divulging the secret of her extramarital affair, Mrs. Das exclaims, “I told you because of your talents...Mr. Kapasi don’t you have anything to say? I thought that was your job...Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I’ve been in pain for eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy” (Lahiri, “Interpreter of Maladies” 65). Mrs. Das is not only, as I have mentioned earlier, ill-equipped for and not fully integrated into her surroundings in India, but

also has been suffering for years even in the United States— she fits perfectly neither within the homeland nor the hostland. Moreover, it is clear that the desire for an exchange of cultural perspectives is not one-sided in this story. That is, Mrs. Das, too, seeks to learn from Mr. Kapasi and romanticizes his cultural background and profession for her own reasons. Mr. Kapasi's profession as an interpreter at a doctor's office is simply to translate patients' symptoms to the physician in order to help them receive treatment. It offers him no special insight or perspective into Mrs. Das's marital problems and does not qualify him to give her any actionable feedback or advice. Yet, Mrs. Das's romanticization of his fairly commonplace occupation compels her to project healing abilities onto him. Specifically, she believes that because of his cultural differences from her and his location within the homeland, he must be able to share with her some sort of privileged or worldly perspective. Both her failure to fully translate between cultures and her pursuit of knowledge from Mr. Kapasi prove that Mrs. Das is not the ideal cosmopolitan she is believed to be.

While Dev seems a bit better versed than Mrs. Das in the art of cultural translation, even his efforts are not entirely without fault. It is clear that Dev does not feel fully at home in his host country because, as he admits to Miranda, he understands “what it's like to be lonely” and “it took him years to follow American accents in movies, in spite of the fact that he'd had an English-medium education” (Lahiri, “Sexy” 89, 94). Dev's has never been a seamless act of cultural translation, but rather one that he has worked to refine. Also, throughout their relationship, it becomes increasingly apparent that the type of sophisticated cosmopolitanism that he initially projects to lure Miranda is a mere performance. At the beginning of their relationship, the two “went to movies at the Nickelodeon and kissed the whole time. They ate pulled pork and cornbread in Davis square...They sipped sangria at a Spanish restaurant...They went to the MFA

and picked out a poster of water lilies for her bedroom” and eventually visit the Mapparium at the Christian Science center” (Lahiri, “Sexy” 90). All of the activities they indulge in are outside of Indian culture. The food and drinks they order are associated with American or European traditions, and at the Mapparium, they are literally standing at the center of images from all around the globe. Dev dresses and acts in such a way as to perhaps convince her of her cosmopolitanism. However, as time goes on, he begins to ease up on this performance, almost always wearing gym clothes and rarely leaving Miranda’s apartment (Lahiri, “Sexy” 93). As he becomes more comfortable with Miranda and secure in their relationship, he lets go of his cosmopolitan performance and begins to reveal his true self. Thus, it is abundantly clear that Dev, too, is not, in reality, the idealized new cosmopolitan he is imagined to be. Lahiri, here is critiquing the notion of the celebratory cosmopolitan by pointing out how Dev and Mrs. Das do not in actuality fit that model of diasporic success. Moreover, as Munos comments, Mr. Kapasi and Miranda’s striving to emulate and identify with something that is based upon a lie, that does not and never really did exist, eventually results in their melancholic failures.

Therefore, while scholars like Reddy might code this entire enterprise of unrealized fantasies as fundamentally positive, interested primarily in the ways that the diasporic characters’ subversions and disrupting insertions of Indian female beauty can be read as acts of agency, I would argue that each of the figures engaged in disrupting problematic scripts, namely Dev, Mrs. Das, and Madhuri Dixit, are decidedly not reaping the benefits of their defiant acts. In “Sexy,” Dev and Madhuri Dixit certainly make it difficult for Miranda to consume pleasantly racial and ethnic symbols of Indian culture without paying the price for them— as we see, Miranda ends the story more alienated and lonely than she is when it started. Even Miranda’s attraction to Dev and view of him as a sophisticated cosmopolitan is in itself a reversing of stereotypes. Dev is not

the bumbling and confused fish out of water diasporic Indians are sometimes portrayed to be, but rather an idealized figure of education, style, and cultural fluency. Just as the figure of Madhuri Dixit actively challenges the narrative of Indian women as chaste, firmly grounded, and static cultural anchors, Dev similarly refutes a gendered negative Indian stereotype. In “Interpreter of Maladies,” Mrs. Das seems altogether apathetic to Mr. Kapasi’s plight, literally letting her connection to him fly away with the wind. Yet all three of these initially idealized characters are mostly oblivious to these consequences of their actions, largely unaware of the effect they have on their nation-bound foils and not particularly better off based on their subversions— Mrs. Das and Dev are still stuck in their respective loveless marriages, and Madhuri Dixit remains off-screen as a mere reference rather than full-fledged character. Mrs. Das, Dev, and Madhuri Dixit, like Miranda and Mr. Kapasi, are not particularly heroic either. Therefore, while the attention Lahiri gives to the capacity of Indian female beauty and her diasporic character’s resistance to facilitate in transactional cross-cultural relationships each support her feminist project of problematizing conventional narratives of South Asian diaspora, she is nevertheless committed to preserving the distinctly melancholic narrative that permeates the rest of her work.

In “Interpreter of Maladies” and “Sexy,” the instances of quiet trauma mentioned in Chapter One extend past the confines of Indians abroad. The melancholic characters of these stories are not simply diasporic Indians in the United States trapped in a form of personal stasis, but also diasporic Indians who have returned to their homeland and had their failings exacerbated rather than assuaged, Indians and Americans who seem just as disillusioned as their hyphenated counterparts. These stories are ones of cultural miscommunications— the misinterpretations that occur between culturally distinct people and the mistranslations of those cultures themselves. These miscommunications, much like the miscarriages of Chapter One, are undoubtedly the

“maladies” that Lahiri makes reference to in the title of this collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, with Lahiri herself taking on the titular role of “interpreter,” explaining, translating, and giving meaning to the somewhat uninterpretable, and mostly invisible, disordered conditions of diasporic South Asians.

### Chapter Three: The Misinheritances of Culture

Lahiri's more recent collection of short fiction, *Unaccustomed Earth*, continues her project of portraying deeply ambivalent, melancholic characters of the second wave of the South Asian diaspora, this time focusing primarily on the younger generation and American-born diasporic subjects. In these stories, the protagonists go beyond simply inheriting the problems of their parents, instead facing uniquely challenging circumstances. As Delphine Munos echoes in her own work on transgenerational forms of the diasporic experience, melancholia is inherited and almost compounded by the second-generation as they grapple with the same infinite, phantasmal longing, and yet are even farther removed from being able to realize their desires. Here, the second-generation diasporic subject must reconcile not only their inherited loss of the abstracted and imagined ancestral homeland, but also their "own belatedness in relation to the first generation" (Munos xlv). Coming of age in homes and families fervently marked by a state of flux, the second-generation is ultimately defined by both its same fickle relationship to homeland and national belonging, and its disconnect with the diasporic community that came before— continually negotiating between autonomy and interdependence, individual and collective goals.

Lahiri's second-generation characters are largely governed by this same conflict. They attempt to exercise agency within their relatively constrained and heavily policed circumstances by subverting the various expectations and stereotypes placed on them by their respective societies and parents alike. In "Hell-Heaven" and "Nobody's Business," where the protagonists make the unusual choice of defying parental demands, against the conventional Indian code of filial obedience, Lahiri can be seen as radically overturning the model minority myth and with it any traces of unidimensional Asian American success. Nevertheless these rebellious acts cannot

be read as precisely triumphant moments of iconoclastic resistance. Instead, she demonstrates that even the younger generation, in many ways removed from the initial trauma of immigration and most actively engaged in resisting their social constraints, is implicated in the pathological condition of diasporic melancholia.

The story of “Hell-Heaven” details the life of a young Bengali man, Pranab Chakraborty, who leaves his wealthy family in Calcutta to pursue a graduate degree in Engineering at MIT. Told through the first-person narration of Usha, a Bengali American adolescent girl whose family develops a close relationship with Pranab, the story deals mainly with the unrequited and unexpressed romantic feelings that Usha’s mother, Aparna, holds for this new adoptive member of their family, and the consequences of this attraction. Pranab’s character evolution throughout the story is marked by his increasingly transgressive decision-making and subsequent subversion of parental expectations, to carry on his family’s legacy by attaining socioeconomic success while preserving his cultural identity. Pranab’s academic career can be seen as directly linked to these expectations for socioeconomic success and the promise of upward mobility. He uproots his comfortable life in India where he “never had to do so much as pour himself a glass of water” to seek an education, and eventually pursue a career that will in turn afford himself and his family a heightened level of socioeconomic privilege (Lahiri, “Hell-Heaven” 62). Like many other migrants of the second wave of the South Asian diaspora, he embarks on his westward journey to fulfill his duty to build upon his parents’ successes.

However, like Lahiri’s other first-generation diasporic characters who have been accustomed to a fair amount of privilege in their homeland before migrating, for instance Mrs. Sen, Pranab experiences his transition to Boston as a “cruel shock.” As such, he is immediately

drawn to Usha and Aparna and the air of familiarity they present when he first encounters them in a campus library. Usha, the narrator, explains:

My mother was wearing the red and white bangles unique to Bengali married women, and a common Tangali sari, and had a thick stem of vermilion powder in the center parting of her hair, and the full round face and large dark eyes that are so typical of Bengali women. He noticed two or three safety pins she wore fastened to the thin gold bangles that were behind the red and white ones...a practice he associated strictly with his mother and sisters and aunts in Calcutta. (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 61)

From Pranab's perspective, Usha's mother represents everything he has just left behind in his homeland and come to miss. Her facial features, hair, and clothing are not only emphatically marked as "so typical of Bengali women," but also remind him of "his mother and sisters and aunts in Calcutta." Usha comments, "He called my mother Boudi, which is how Bengalis are supposed to address an older brother's wife, instead of using her first name, Aparna" (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 60). Pranab's view of Aparna and his relationship with her is decidedly relegated to the realm of the familial, platonic, and culturally specific. Pranab's initial attraction to and later adoption of Usha's family as a surrogate for his own, can be read as his early attempts to preserve his cultural identity while pursuing socioeconomic mobility abroad. His early characterization is that of a dutiful son who, despite his physical separation from his homeland, attempts to remain faithful to the expectations of his parents.

Yet, this alignment of his behavior with his parents' expectations soon shifts after he meets Deborah, an American woman with whom he pursues a romantic relationship. Of Deborah, Usha comments, "She was very tall, taller than both my parents and nearly as tall as Pranab Kaku. She wore her long brass-colored hair center-parted, as my mother did, but it was

gathered into a low ponytail instead of a braid, or it spilled messily over her shoulders and down her back in a way that my mother considered indecent” (Lahiri, “Hell-Heaven” 68). Deborah is in many ways the antithesis of Pranab’s responsibility to his family and homeland, and thus invites Aparna’s critique. Though Aparna’s distaste for Deborah most likely stems from her unrequited romantic feelings for Pranab and subsequent jealousy of his feelings for another, her criticism clearly highlights all the ways in which Deborah is decidedly “other” than what they are as Bengalis. Deborah’s physical stature, features, and style are distinctly American and consequently judged as messy and “indecent” by Aparna and her Bengali friends. Unlike Miranda of the story, “Sexy,” Deborah is not engaged in the same type of blatant exoticization of Pranab and seems to have a much better understanding of and respect for his cultural background— she later confesses to Aparna that she has tried many times to convince him to stay in touch more with the other Bengali families. Moreover, the two are not engaged in any overt transgressive behavior, going on to get married soon thereafter. And yet despite these traits, Deborah is still viewed within the context of the sexually available and morally ambiguous American women, as outlined by Gayatri Gopinath, and perceived as entirely different from the type of women that might further Pranab’s potential. Therefore, Pranab’s relationship with her is seen by both his biological and adoptive families as not only a betrayal of his origin, but also a loss of his potential to carry on his cultural legacy through intracultural marriage and childrearing.

A similar act of disobedience is narrated in the story, “Nobody’s Business,” which follows Sang, a young Indian American woman living in Massachusetts, through the third-person limited narration of Paul, her roommate. From her first introduction, it is clear that Sang defies what is expected of her in myriad ways. For instance, she chooses to go by “Sang” rather than

“Sangeeta.” Sang explains that it is “actually part of [her] name” (Lahiri, “Nobody’s Business” 185). In a sense, this is true— her nickname is an abbreviated form of her given name.

Interestingly though, both monikers also have musical connotations, though they vary slightly in meaning in such a way that makes her nickname an imperfect English translation of her given name. This nickname and its slightly askew translated appearance are fitting with Sang’s estranged relationship to Bengali language and culture. Lahiri writes, “The word[s] sounded strange on [Sang’s] lips. She spoke Bengali infrequently— never to her sister, never to her suitors, only a word here and there to her parents” (“Nobody’s Business” 191). Her use of Bengali language, and correspondingly culture, is merely employed as a placating or obliging act for her parents’ benefit and not something she actively associates with in her daily life.

Throughout the story, Sang is constantly bombarded with a stream of Indian suitors hoping to pursue a relationship with her. She instantly makes clear, however, that “these men weren’t really interested in her. They were interested in a mythical creature created by an intricate chain of gossip, a web of wishful Indian-community thinking in which she was an aging, overlooked poster child for years of Bharatanatyam classes, perfect SATs” (Lahiri, “Nobody’s Business” 176). The suitors hoping for a chance to meet Sang are interested in her potential for both socioeconomic mobility, as seen through her “perfect SATs,” and cultural ties, such as her Bharatanatyam classes. A union with Sang in the form of marriage, and later, children, offers the promise of maintaining and passing on both these very desirable qualities to a later generation. Yet Sang is quick to turn away these suitors, asking her housemates to tell them she is unavailable, poking fun at them, and denying their requests to meet in person. Additionally, “she’d dropped out of Harvard after a semester and was working part time in a bookstore” (Lahiri, “Nobody’s Business” 174). Not only has Sang let her cultural allegiance slip,

but also she has forsaken her higher education and the heightened socioeconomic mobility it could bring about for her and her family. She is portrayed as simply uninterested in playing the role expected of her.

Instead, Sang chooses to pursue a serious relationship with Farouk, an Egyptian American, notably Muslim, man many years her senior. The two are immediately inseparable; Sang spends almost every night at his house and rarely occupies her own bedroom, though she is pictured earlier as having devoted much time and effort into personalizing it to her liking. Put simply, “When she wasn’t with Farouk, she did things for him” (Lahiri, “Nobody’s Business” 186). Though this statement might seem exaggerated because it is given through Paul’s perspective and therefore could be influenced by his unrequited feelings for her, it is nevertheless evident that Sang becomes wholeheartedly wrapped up in her relationship to Farouk. Paul observes as she runs errands for Farouk, cares for him, and obliges his every demand no matter how problematic. For him, she cooks, cleans, and carries out a variety of other domestic tasks that she previously could not be bothered to do for herself. Also, this commitment to Farouk soon becomes synonymous with her own identity and self-presentation. Paul remarks that he sees her with a “Harvard baseball cap on her head, hugging the grocery bag to her chest” (Lahiri, “Nobody’s Business” 186). Wearing the spirit wear for the university Farouk is affiliated with and clutching to her chest the food she is presumably going to use to feed him with, Sang takes on an almost maternally dependent role in his life. It is as if the domestic energies she might have spent promoting her cultural legacy through an intracultural marriage and childrearing are instead displaced onto Farouk.

In both cases, Sang and Pranab do not meet their potential to preserve and reproduce the socioeconomic success and cultural identity passed down to them by their parents. Instead, they

each express their respective romantic and sexual agencies on their own terms, choosing to marry or seriously date people outside of their own cultures and circumstances. However, while their deviations from these expectations could be read as acts of rebellion against one's parents, or else an inevitable assimilation into American culture, looking past her veneer of perpetuating hackneyed stereotypes, it is clear that Lahiri is using these characters for a far more radical project.

Susan Koshy comments in her article, "Neoliberal Family Matters," that in the wake of neoliberalism and globalization, it has become the role of Asian American families to reproduce and maintain high human capital. That is, as the economic, social, and political realms become increasingly intertwined, success is measured not only monetarily, but also by human capital, or the abilities, skills, and training needed to produce knowledge and eventually procure income. She writes, "The model minority has become an anxious figure of the prized human capital needed to navigate the insecurities and volatility of the global knowledge economy" (Koshy 346). The Asian American family, as related to the model minority myth, has long been viewed as productive, ideal, and above all, useful. Dating back to the 1966 *U.S. News and World Report*, they have been seen by the general public as having "established themselves as strong contributors to the health of the whole community" ("Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S." 9). This perspective of Asian Americans as useful has only grown with time and the expansion of a hypercompetitive form of capitalism wrought with "insecurities and volatility." Specifically, the kinship norms, familial structure, and parenting strategies of the Asian American family, as imagined and exacerbated by the model minority myth, render it as particularly inclined to and more successful at reproducing and maintaining high human capital. Koshy reads Lahiri's short fiction to specifically track the Asian American family through its

maintenance and reproduction of not only human capital, but also cultural capital, or the social assets that could potentially promote cultural continuity. Following Koshy's argument, it is clear that through her fiction, Lahiri intentionally, though at times subtly, radically upends the idea of Asian American families as perfect conduits of human capital and cultural identity, destroying the model minority myth with story after story of excessive melancholia.

As model minorities in a neoliberal economic and social order, Sang and Pranab are valued based on how they are able to reproduce and maintain human and cultural capital. Thus, each character's defiance of the expectations placed on them can be understood as explicit subversions of the model minority myth; they are decidedly not performing the idealized role that is expected of them. Rather than simply regurgitating the same tired tale of defiance against one's parents, Lahiri is actively engaged in the disruption of a narrative that seeks to recast Asian American and diasporic achievement as necessarily a part of an American knowledge economy or accumulation of human capital. That is, if Koshy writes that the model minority or Asian American diasporic subject is expected to play the role of "prized human capital needed to navigate the insecurities and volatility of the global knowledge economy," Lahiri's characters do not cater to that need.

However, Lahiri is not simply offering these second-generation stories as examples of triumphant defiance. Instead, her blatant rejection of the Asian American success story is most clearly evidenced through her recasting of even these moments of resistance as choices that inevitably result in failure. Koshy offers a potential explanation for these failures in her employment of a lens that she terms the "filial gothic," used to explore "[these] transgenerational effects of the cultural alienation and economic aspirations of the parents," and how the children of these Asian immigrant parents respond to or more accurately, are unable to respond to, the

competing pressures they face (358). That is, the cultural projects and ideals placed on the second-generation diasporic subject are so necessarily fraught that they cannot help but fail spectacularly, not unlike Lahiri's second-generation characters. Or taking this idea one step further, the South Asian diasporic subject is privileged enough to pursue an ideal, but never quite able to fully realize these goals due to the restrictedness of hegemonic power structures such as gender and race. Ultimately, Lahiri makes clear that there is no place for a grand narrative of diasporic success in her excessively melancholic project.

In "Nobody's Business," Sang faces devastatingly harsh consequences for her sexual and romantic rebellion. Her relationship with Farouk is found to be as emotionally taxing and toxic as it is time-consuming. When she confirms that Farouk has been having an affair with another woman, Sang's physical and mental wellbeing rapidly deteriorate. At the climax of her emotional unraveling, "Sang had got down on all fours and crawled into Farouk's coat closet, weeping uncontrollably, at one point hitting herself with a shoe" (Lahiri, "Nobody's Business" 217). The image of Sang crawling and weeping is infantilized, and beyond that, animalistic. If at first she is seen as the pinnacle of potential to carry on her family legacy through both human and cultural capital that she could pass down to an heir, she is now notably stripped of these desirable characteristics. Her "value" has significantly depreciated. Sang's straying from the path associated with her parents' expectations has disastrous consequences for both her worth and wellbeing. Though Sang fervently rejects being governed or controlled by the societal and parental expectations placed on her, even in her resistance, she ironically enters into a domestic union which further limits her agency, surpassing subtle abjection in favor of a complete breakdown of the self.

Yet, Sang and Pranab's subversions of their parental and societal expectations are each met with far different results. Despite Pranab's deviation from the expectations placed on him, he is left relatively unscathed. Pranab's decision to pursue a romantic relationship outside of his cultural background by the end of the story has "destroy[ed] two families," made him "turn his back on his family," broken hearts, and even contributed to Aparna's violent suicide attempt (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 81-3). As seen through these various relationships, he is the actor, never the acted upon. As Usha narrates, even though "Pranab Kaku's parents were horrified" and decide that if he "dared to marry Deborah [they] would no longer acknowledge him as a son....in the face of this refusal, Pranab Kaku shrugged, [saying] 'I don't care' (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 71-2). While he destroys two families—breaking hearts but never having his broken, motivating Aparna to attempt suicide— he himself is far from being destroyed, remaining blissfully ignorant of the grave and disturbing consequences of his actions. While all of the women who are in some way entangled with Pranab ultimately face severe consequences because of his actions, he himself does not confront the same fate, instead embarking on a new romantic relationship with another woman by the end of the story.

However, while Pranab does not totally disintegrate, as Sang does, he does not emerge as the triumphant protagonist of the story either. Instead, the story of "Hell-Heaven" centers on Usha's recounting of her childhood and memories of the role Pranab played in her family— of her own struggles against her parents and attempts at assimilation, her coming-of-age as a hyphenated American, and finally the complicated relationship she has with her mother. Her nostalgic recounting is fundamentally marked by moments of quiet trauma. Munos notes that Lahiri's work often "reveals that the maternal enigma of domestic fortitude, muffled resentment at their husbands, and melancholic 'absence-in-presence' pervades many a story in which

second-generation members of the Indian diaspora retrace, or simply allude to, their childhood” (xxxix). In many ways this is precisely what “Hell-Heaven” is about— the “maternal enigma” of Aparna’s “domestic fortitude,” her “muffled resentment at [her] husband,” the “absence-in-presence” of her homeland. And yet, rather than simply reflect the subdued melancholia that might arise from Usha and Aparna’s diasporic experiences, this story portrays something far more catastrophic and extreme, as seen most evidently through the shocking description of Aparna’s suicide attempt. Usha narrates:

She had gone through the house, gathering up all the safety pins that lurked in drawers and tins, and adding them to the few fastened on her bracelets. When she’d found enough, she pinned 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. Then she took a can of lighter fluid and a box of kitchen matches and stepped outside, into our chilly backyard. (Lahiri, “Hell-Heaven” 82-3)

Apart from the initial horror it immediately evokes in the reader, this scene’s impact also stems from the similarities it bears to the first time Aparna is introduced in story, when she is first seen through Pranab’s eyes. The same safety pins fastened to her bracelets and the distinctive sari that operate as comfortable cultural markers of gendered Bengali domesticity and which prompt him to first approach her have now become the very objects of her self-destruction. Aparna responds to Pranab’s final dismissal of her as a merely platonic familial figure and reminder of his homeland by pinning her sari, perhaps the greatest symbol of her traditional, chaste, Bengali femininity, to her body in such a way that it cannot be easily removed. In the moment of her attempted suicide, Aparna chooses to physically bind herself to and irrevocably embody Pranab’s vision of her as a static symbol of his homeland, essentially becoming the woman Pranab sees

her to be in her final moments. It is nearly impossible to view such a disturbing scene outside the context of Pranab's culpability. It seems that it is precisely upon his insertion into this family's narrative that Aparna's silently stewing abjection violently erupts. Thus, through Usha's narration, the reader identifies increasingly closer with her and her mother, and later, even Deborah, instantly agreeing that what Pranab has done is unquestioningly "a sad and terrible thing" (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 82). Like Dev from the story "Sexy," Pranab's relationship to the women in his life makes it nearly impossible for the reader to fully empathize with or root for him.

There are many possible explanations for the difference between the outcomes that Sang faces compared to those that Pranab does. What these reasons all have in common, though, is gender. Sang bears the burden of her duty far more acutely and deeply than Pranab does his. This disparity can perhaps be accounted for by gender-based differences in prioritization. Koshy explains, "If parental control over their sons' lives is primarily focused on monitoring professional achievement and is slacker in enforcing sexual discipline, the reverse is true for daughters...the epicenter of the generational conflict in the daughters' stories is their sexuality, which is assiduously policed" (360). In "Hell-Heaven," though Pranab has defied his parents' wishes through his pursuit of and marriage to an American woman, he still dutifully pursues his career and education at MIT and participates in the global knowledge economy as is expected of him. Thus, since Pranab rejects the part of his two-fold responsibility as an Indian man that is not as highly policed, the consequences are not as severe for him. On the other hand, if Sang's alignment to her cultural identity, through sexuality and romantic partnerships, is more closely monitored than her ability to maintain high human capital, then her denial of Indian suitors in favor of a man outside of her race, religion, and national culture is more readily and harshly

punished. Unsurprisingly, then, even in her rebellion Sang is inevitably forced into a very gendered and domestic form of oppression. Here, adherence to or deviation from parental and societal expectations is compounded by the diasporic subject's gender and the assumptions that come with it. In this way, while the repercussions of Pranab's acts of defiance are mostly displaced onto the female characters in his orbit, Sang, in many ways Pranab's female equivalent, suffers the consequences of her actions directly and is left deeply traumatized in the aftermath of her decisions.

In the stories, "Hell-Heaven" and "Nobody's Business," the protagonists push back against their rigid parental expectations and even harsher societal demands by instead making decisions based on their own respective agendas. Importantly, these defiant acts are always met with unthinkably devastating results, either directly or indirectly. The characters Lahiri presents are either exploitative or exploited, never seeming to be fully well-adjusted, much less actually happy. She can be seen as extending her thematics of melancholia to accommodate the multifaceted challenges of second-generation diasporic subjects. If at first Lahiri presents her mostly first-generation characters' floundering and personal stasis as a sort of quiet trauma catalyzed by diaspora, here, the misinheritances of her second-generation characters can be viewed as the eventual bubbling over of that very same insidiously spreading melancholia.

### Conclusions

This thesis critically examines acclaimed author Jhumpa Lahiri's short fiction with special attention to her use of melancholic narratives as a tool to unsettle both national and diasporic scripts of the Indian immigrant success story. Using two collections of short stories, namely *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, I argue that although Lahiri engages the South Asian diasporic subject's radical mode of citizenship and challenges the binary between nation and diaspora, especially as seen through instances of hybridized identity, resistance to cooptation, and defiance of societal expectations, the underlying project of her literary work lies in her saturating such stories with various forms of diasporic melancholia. That is, Lahiri uses melancholia to vehemently reject any one-size fits all model of immigrant identity, citizenship, or success. The question then remains: what does Lahiri accomplish in wholeheartedly committing to such a one-note drumbeat of excessive melancholia with story after story of miscarriage, miscommunication, and misinheritance?

Some would say Lahiri's narrow focus on primarily melancholic narratives does not accurately reflect the daily lived experiences of the entire multifaceted, heterogeneous group of diasporic South Asians. However, in her interviews and public appearances, Lahiri makes clear that she never chose to become a spokesperson for this group at large. She comments in one such interview for NPR, "I don't appreciate this sort of reading of my work but I also understand that it's natural, I suppose, that there's a sense in which my stories, my novels, are being held as, sort of, you know, almost sociological studies of the Indian immigrant community, which in my opinion, they're absolutely not" (qtd. in Chandorkar 207). Lahiri was forced to shoulder the burden of representation by an audience who insisted on reading her work sociologically,

ethnographically, or even autobiographically. Inevitably her writing becomes irrevocably cast as niche, as first and foremost South Asian or even simply, Indian. Lahiri explains:

I think there's a large population of readers out there who, when they see my book, see the jacket, see the design, see the motifs, see my name – assume certain things about me. They assume that I'm Indian. Or that I'm Indian in the way that they want to think of me as Indian, having been born and brought up there, and that I'm a foreigner in this country...But as I said, I have no control. I can only control the words I write. (Leyda, "An Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri")

How readers choose to read and categorize Lahiri's work is out of her control. Moreover, though she fervently denies having agreed to be the appointed representative of her immigrant group, she does undoubtedly make the most of her spotlight, offering a narrative for mass consumption that is very radical in some key ways.

Literary critics and scholars have accused Lahiri of participating in re-orientalism and only displaying a very palatable and "not too spicy" form of exoticism in her fiction that caters directly to mainstream and non-native audiences. Yet, as Leena Chandorkar argues, "Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction has a complexity that defies easy categorization...it is not as simple as it seems...there is a complexity involved that social commentators might blithely miss" (208). If Lahiri perpetuates Orientalism by positioning herself and her characters as "others" or else centers most of her literary attention on privileged migrants that are easier to relate to, it is in the service of her larger goal of portraying the far-reaching spidery tendrils of diasporic melancholia and wholly breaking with the immigrant success story.

This project has especially significant implications for our current sociopolitical moment. That is, as a designated, though involuntary, spokesperson of her immigrant group, Lahiri

unquestionably must feel the, at times visceral, temptation to paint a flattering portrait of her people—the people of a nation that seemingly only just got upgraded from a so-called “shithole country,” as 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States Donald Trump allegedly called several underrepresented, developing African and Afro-Caribbean nations in a recent meeting. The United States, despite its long history as a host country to multiple diasporas and waves of immigration, is nevertheless deeply implicated in practices of racialization and race-based discrimination, ethnocentrism, and anti-immigration paranoia that diasporic South Asian Americans are only able to deflect due to the perceived rise in their status as model minorities. Therefore, one’s seeking refuge in the long-established model minority myth as a distancing strategy from the types of increasingly visible forms of extreme racial prejudice would have been seen as a natural and understandable impulse.

And yet Lahiri gives in to no such temptation, steadfastly maintaining, “My responsibility isn’t to paint a flattering portrait, my responsibility is to paint a real portrait, a true portrait” (qtd. in Chandorkar 207). Though Lahiri’s claims of having painted a “true portrait” are certainly up for debate, ultimately, she has produced the literary work, and beyond that, the image of South Asian diasporic experience that she wanted to, that was most true to herself and her artistic mission. It might have been far easier and more comfortable to portray her South Asian diasporic characters as pillars of immigrant success, offering solace for those in a similar position, assuaging the anxieties of non-native audiences, and promoting a favorable image of this group more generally, but Lahiri does no such thing. Such an act seems pretty “spicy” to me, or at the very least, not quite as bland as some are wont to believe.

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