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The Short Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Professor Braverman

December 7, 2011

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts of the City

College of the City University of New York

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Thesis Research

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Part I

1. Introduction

The year 1999 saw the emergence of a peculiarly gifted short-story writer, Jhumpa Lahiri, whose debut collection Interpreter of Maladies would win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000, marking her out as a potentially major figure in contemporary American literature. Her name quickly and strongly became associated with the immigrant, and especially the Indian-American, experience in the United States, for in all the stories of her collection Indian Americans (or in two instances resident Indians) feature prominently. Her sophomore work, a novel (eventually made into a film) called The Namesake, and her second story collection, Unaccustomed Earth, are similar thematically to Interpreter of Maladies (but with, in the case of Unaccustomed Earth, some important differences, which will be explored later). Born in Britain, and brought to the US by Indian parents when she was three, Lahiri herself is technically an immigrant, although given the early age at which she arrived, it may be more accurate, in spirit, to describe her as a first-generation American. The link in readers' minds between Lahiri--her personal story, and her persona as a writer--and the Indian-American experience appears to be a powerful one: Articles about Lahiri and reviews of her work, whether in the mainstream press or in academic journals, invariably dwell on the Indian background of her characters and, more so, on *her* Indian background. Her publishers, first Houghton Mifflin and then Random House, have

abetted this tendency, commodifying her Indianness for marketing purposes, with vaguely Orientalist cover art and, to a lesser extent, cover copy. As a result, a sort of dreamy Eastern mystique surrounds Lahiri--ironically, in light of the down-to-earth nature of her storytelling and subject matter. Against this backdrop of rather knee-jerk, unstudied labeling, it may be germane to begin a serious treatment of Lahiri's work by pausing to consider if this categorization of Lahiri, as foremost a writer of the immigrant and Indian-American experiences, is entirely apt and fair.

The explicit subject of a majority of her stories is not immigration. In fact, on close inspection, there is just a single story of hers, "The Third and Final Continent," a very traditional immigrant narrative, that tackles the issue head-on. Her characters may be immigrants, their children, or other Americans in proximity to immigrants, but just in that one case is a protagonist literally in the process of immigrating. (A portion of her novel, The Namesake, does deal directly with immigration, but the bulk of the book is devoted to the experience of being the child of immigrants. Since the topic of this paper is Lahiri's stories, treatment of The Namesake, which has already received a fair amount of critical attention and which by virtue of its length requires separate discussion, will be limited to occasional references.) More often, the explicit themes of the stories are generic ones (which is not to say less interesting ones) having to do with couples and families--births, deaths, marriages, breakups, etc. Her stories are indeed populated primarily by Indian Americans--none of her stories is totally absent of them--but non-Indians do show up as more than minor players, and twice as protagonists. The label of *Indian American* is also problematized, as most careful readers of Lahiri quickly discern, by her more precise focus on Bengali Americans. *Bengali* does not negate *Indian*: West Bengal is, after all, an Indian state,

and non-Bengali Indian Americans do have some presence in her fiction. Still, the Indian-American category is unstable.

Neither *immigrant writer* nor *Indian-American writer* is an unproblematic description for Lahiri, yet neither in the end is superficial. This essay will demonstrate that both, but most particularly the former--*immigrant writer*--are deeply appropriate. Jhumpa Lahiri is every bit a writer of the immigrant experience--albeit with a certain slant and approach, which ultimately are what set her apart as a truly original contributor to the body of American immigrant fiction. Immigrant narratives are likely as old as American literature itself--indeed, arguably, were the first American literature, if the oral tradition of Native Americans is viewed as distinct--and perhaps for that reason, the genre they constitute is heavily weighted by a set of conventions. Pervading all of American culture, these narratives are not exclusive to the domain of literature. The immigrant's story is basic to Americans' sense of who they are and what this country is about, what makes America America and no place else. In its multitudinous versions, the immigrant's story is an inescapable element of American culture, but it regularly seems to snap back to a certain shape--to wit, the sequence of arrival, struggle and disillusionment, and final triumph. The American Dream achieved, with a few bumps along the way: This self-congratulatory trope has traditionally governed the American immigrant experience in the popular imagination. But Lahiri is unique, her stories almost never conforming to the dominant pattern, or its inverse (immigrant arrives, and America is nothing it promised to be). Her whole orientation to the topic is different. She addresses the immigrant experience by not addressing it. Or to state the matter in more radical terms: Her stories are not about what they are about. Her fiction has often an explicit subject and an implicit, or deep, subject. The surface-level conflict of a story (the explicit subject) can frequently be traced back to some more fundamental issue (the

deep subject). Notably, the deep subject does not necessarily mean the true subject or truer than the explicit; one is merely speaking of levels of meaning, none of which cancels out the other. While the explicit subject of Lahiri's stories tends to be the dynamics within families and couples, these surface-level conflicts have their roots in something else--the experience of immigrants and their children, but a specific aspect of it: assimilation.

Lahiri's great theme, at least in her work to date, is assimilation, however one may feel about that phenomenon (and it may provoke unease in some readers). The word *assimilation* is fraught, dripping with all it connotes, positive or negative depending on whose ears it hits. There is a special awkwardness to suggesting that a multicultural writer like Lahiri would take assimilation as her overriding theme. However, a critic cannot divine whether Lahiri consciously made this choice. The probability is high she did not, and a writer's conscious intentions are often irrelevant, anyway, to understanding what one actually finds on the page. Moreover, this essay makes no value judgment on the phenomenon of assimilation, and can do so because Lahiri herself passes no judgment on it, insofar as we can glean from the texts themselves. No single attitude toward assimilation is discernible. She writes about assimilation in its breadth, in each of its stages, in its full variety of manifestations and permutations; about tensions between assimilated and less assimilated immigrants; about immigrants' simultaneously desiring and resisting assimilation; about immigrants who feel they are not assimilated enough, those who worry that they have gone too far, and those who suspect that somehow they have assimilated improperly (and those who have but don't suspect it); about immigrants and immigrants' children who have the classic feeling of being caught between two worlds--and those who don't; about immigrants who have embraced what's worst, rather than what's best, in America; about immigrants who perceive something sinister in assimilation; and about immigrants who live the

American Dream. Some of Lahiri's readers might be skeptical. Doesn't she just write about standard matters, such as troubled marriages, rebellious kids, the delights and disappointments of parenthood, torrid affairs, deaths of loved ones, and so forth? These are her explicit subjects, pulsing just beneath which is always the question of assimilation--an unconventional, two-tiered, uniquely focused approach to depicting the immigrant experience. Therein lies Lahiri's genius.

2. The State of Lahiri Criticism

This paper aims to provide the first sustained critical treatment of Lahiri's short stories, the most comprehensive up to this point. There will be some omissions, for concision (the argument of this essay can be made without looking at every story) and since not all the stories are of equal quality or interest. The paper will proceed through a series of close readings, paying close attention to context at the same time. Beforehand, it is prudent to review the existing critical literature.

Some difficulty arises from the currently piecemeal and thin condition of Lahiri criticism, which thus defies any easy overall characterization. Given that her first book was published only twelve years before the writing of this essay, there has been a limited, if not insignificant, period of time for critical work on her to accrue; and what criticism has accrued does not follow any general current. The Namesake has received somewhat more critical attention than the stories, as novels almost always do; and the stories, to the degree they have been written about, have received uneven attention. Some, like "Mrs. Sen's," are favorites, while others, especially those from her 2008 collection, Unaccustomed Earth, seem nearly to have escaped critical notice (granted, timing may be a partial explanation). This paper, even as it tries to redress some of the imbalance, does overlook stories, in the interest of brevity but also because some are thematically highly atypical for her, exceptions to the rule, and a few are simply of a lower

caliber. Notably, however, quality does not, on the whole, appear to be the cause of the imbalance in Lahiri scholarship. Rather, particular issues have been disproportionately discussed--above all, food, i.e. the Indian or "ethnic" dishes her characters prepare, and their possible importance. Indeed, Lahiri's work is rife with luxuriant descriptions of food, Indian or otherwise. The food-centered critical approach perhaps reaches its culmination in Laura Anh Williams's "Foodways and Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies," where Williams convincingly argues that "food is the means for characters to assert agency and subjectivity in ways that function as an alternative to the dominant culture" (70).

Certain stories also lend themselves better to critics' preferred theoretical lenses. Williams, for instance, draws on feminist thought, as here: "Lahiri's female immigrant characters, in particular, work to complicate the comfortable association between "home" and food. . . . The women in these stories . . . all utilize foodways to construct their own unique racialized subjectivity and to engender agency" (70). So in Williams's case it is her combined interest in food and in female diasporic subjects that leads her to concentrate on "A Temporary Matter," "This Blessed House," and "Mrs. Sen's." Feminist lenses have been prominent in Lahiri criticism to date, like Bahareh Bahmanpour's "Female Subjects and Negotiating Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies," in which she analyzes "Mrs. Sen's" and "This Blessed House" (although she does look at two of the lesser-known stories, "Sexy" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar," and acknowledges that some stories have been critical favorites while others have been neglected). Bahmanpour engages with postcolonial discourse, too.

Postcolonial viewpoints have been popular in critical work on Lahiri--maybe used to best effect by Joel Kuortti in his analysis of "This Blessed House," where he suggests that an Indian-American couple's discovery of Christian artifacts in their home is a symbolic reversal of the

colonial process, in which European powers “discovered” already-occupied lands, appropriating cultures and resources according to their own interests. Another noteworthy article, “Lahiri’s ‘Interpreter of Maladies’” by Simon Lewis, argues that “Interpreter of Maladies” is a postcolonial update of E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India.

Other influential articles on Lahiri--including two of the strongest, Judith Caesar’s “American Spaces in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri” and Noelle Brada-Williams’s “Reading Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies as a Short Story Cycle”--do not fall neatly within identifiable theoretical schools. Caesar describes how the design of living spaces in Lahiri’s fiction embodies both relationships among characters and larger trends in American society, and how Lahiri’s use of architecture is both opposed to and in sync with traditions in American art and literature. Brada-Williams presents a compelling argument that Interpreter of Maladies ought to be read as a story cycle. While her assertion that the stories are specifically linked by “the dichotomy of care and neglect” (451) can at times feel forced, Brada-Williams does leave the reader convinced that at minimum these are not disparate, unconnected stories shoved together for publication in book form.

While Lahiri criticism as it exists today has its highlights (most of which are mentioned above), it lacks any overall shape. It need not have one, of course, and it is in an early, tentative phase, but a serious admirer of Lahiri cannot avoid the feeling that the critical literature somehow has not done Lahiri justice or understood her very profoundly. Critics cannot see, or have not seen, the forest for the trees. In particular, traditional critical methods like close reading have rarely been applied to her work, almost as though theory has distracted from careful examination of the texts. This paper will take a step towards remedying the situation, by proceeding through a series of close readings of a substantial selection of Lahiri’s stories--

arranged as Lahiri has them placed in her collections--attending carefully to context and working with the argument that her core theme is assimilation, that assimilation is the deep subject lurking beneath surface-level depictions of relationships and family life, and that in this Lahiri's singularity as a writer of the immigrant experience is to be found.

Part II: Interpreter of Maladies

1. "A Temporary Matter"

"A Temporary Matter," which opens Interpreter of Maladies, tells the story of a young Indian-American couple, Shoba and Shukumar, married and living in Boston. A storm has taken down a power line near their home, and for five days, while repairs are made, they lose electricity for one hour each evening. What they do during these hours turns out to be fateful.

Early on, the reader is given the impression that things have gone awry for this couple, that life is not going forward quite as it used to. Both seem to be letting themselves go. The narrator says of Shoba, on the first page: "She wore a navy blue poplin raincoat over gray sweatpants and white sneakers, looking, at thirty-three, like the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble" (1). A page later, Shukumar

ran his tongue over the tops of his teeth; he'd forgotten to brush them that morning. It wasn't the first time. He hadn't left the house all that day, or the day before. The more Shoba stayed out, the more she began putting in extra hours at work and taking on additional projects, the more he wanted to stay in, not even leaving to get the mail, or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley stop. (2)

One soon learns that, six months previous, Shoba delivered a stillborn infant, during which time Shukumar was away at an academic conference. With this revelation, the changes in their married life gain some context, more of which will be revealed as the story goes on.

While their power is out in the evening, they embark on a game, initiated by Shoba (with a certain aim in mind, it becomes clear later), in which they tell each other secrets in the dark-- secrets of a trivial sort, it is implied, yet every night Shoba's confessions in particular become increasingly wounding. Just before they start the game, though, there are some significant lines, which shed light on possibly deeper reasons for the apparent unraveling of their relationship:

“I remember during power failures at my grandmother's house [in India], we all had to say something,” Shoba continued. He could barely see her face, but from her tone he knew her eyes were narrowed, as if trying to focus on a distant object. It was a habit of hers. (12)

The reader finds out shortly that, as she was growing up in the US, Shoba and her family maintained strong ties with India and made regular visits, whereas Shukumar has spent little time there and knows it mainly through his academic research. It may be that, as she refers to a family home in India in this quotation, and uses her memory of power failures there as the basis for her game with Shukumar, the “distant object” “her eyes were narrowed” on is, symbolically, India (and this is not the only occasion she is described as narrowing her eyes). Thinking back to India and its customs may be “a habit of hers.” It is well known that, in India, marriages tend to happen at younger ages than in the US, and women tend to have children earlier. By conventional Indian standards, Shoba, a thirty-three-year-old, is--to put it crassly--past her prime, for marriage and for childbirth, both of which may have been delayed because of Shukumar's doctoral studies. She likely is not living up to the expectations of Indian relatives--

expectations that are still near to her own heart--by having children at thirty-three and, in a second "failure," having her first baby be a stillborn. She may, consciously or unconsciously, blame Shukumar and his slow-developing academic career for the predicament she feels she is in (it is perhaps important that an academic conference is what caused him to be absent for the delivery). Shukumar, who is more assimilated than she, appears to be unaware of the nuances their situation has for a less-assimilated Indian American like Shoba. Additionally, in a reversal of traditional gender roles, she is the primary breadwinner, an arrangement less common in India than here; and Shukumar, "a mediocre student" (4), does not compensate in academic brilliance. He is more assimilated, but without "American Dream" success to show for it. As other stories by Lahiri will help demonstrate, the expectations of great conventional success for first-generation Indian Americans are very high, and feelings of failure, in the first generation, and of disappointment, among immigrant parents, are widespread. In a further reversal of gender roles, he excels in a "feminine," domestic practice, cooking, which he has been doing for both of them, although cooking in India would ordinarily fall to female members of the household or female servants (the latter adding a class complication to his underperformance).

Shoba's final confession--that she has been making concrete plans to move out--which may be what the game was always meant to build toward ("This was what she'd been trying to tell him for the past four evenings. This was the point of her game" [21]), effectively ends their marriage. It seems an unnecessarily ceremonial, suspense-building, and therefore cruel, manner of splitting up. His cruelty is equal to hers, however. She had wanted the sex of their child to be a surprise, so never learned it after the stillbirth. But he had--and had seen and held the infant, a boy. He tells her this. The stillbirth explains, at least in part, the depression that has befallen them, yet it does not fully explain the malice they have shown, or why the stillbirth has pushed

them so far apart (after all, plenty of couples endure stillbirths). All throughout the story, there seems to be an elephant in the room, and it actually is not the trauma of having a child die. Something else has to be going on as well, the reader surmises. Here is where the explicit subject/deep subject pattern comes into play. Stillbirth is a calamity that can strike any couple, anywhere, anytime--the explicit subject is easily seen as universal--but the deep subject is needed to make the story more completely logical and understandable. The subtle differences in their relationships to Indian and American cultures--their respective positions on a continuum of assimilation--as explained in the preceding paragraph, go some way toward explaining why they have come to resent and feel alienated from each other as much as they do.

As a final note, it is worth acknowledging that the story does not present assimilation in way that allows the reader to judge it good or bad. That is not Lahiri's approach to the topic, as was said before. Is Shoba at fault for being insufficiently assimilated? Is Shukumar at fault for being insufficiently attuned to the norms of a culture that he has known largely within the confines of his parents' house in the United States? The reader feels intuitively that the answer to these questions is no; that would be nonsense. Is assimilation the root of the problem--i.e. he is too assimilated and does not get what she is going through--or is it the solution--i.e. she has retained unhelpful sentimental attachments to a more patriarchal culture, in which she does not live and would have a lower status? The question is unanswerable, and Lahiri would not have it otherwise. She appears interested in demonstrating all the possible ways in which assimilation can play out, rather than in exposing it as essentially positive or negative.

2. "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine"

The second story in Interpreter of Maladies concerns a Bengali-American family living in a small university town north of Boston, and Mr. Pirzada, a man who comes to their house

nightly for dinner for a period of a year. Mr. Pirzada is ethnically Bengali as well, but unlike the other characters (whose religion, probably Hindu but conceivably Christian, since it is mentioned that they celebrate Christmas in some form, is left unstated), he is Muslim. He is also from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), whereas the others are Indian. The story is told through the eyes of ten-year-old Lilia, whose family is residing permanently in the US. Mr. Pirzada, with a grant from the Pakistani government to study botany in New England for a year, is decidedly a visitor.

Pleasantly light in its plotting, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” is ostensibly the story of Lilia’s witnessing and gradually coming to understand Mr. Pirzada’s intense, uneasy attachment to his homeland, which is brought into view because, in 1971, when the story is set, East Pakistan was in the process of a tumultuous revolt against West Pakistani rule, with India, the Soviet Union, and the United States all taking sides, and violence and chaos ensuing. On top of this, it is a story about people from similar backgrounds coming together in a time of crisis. But it is equally a story whose underlying tension and deeper meaning have to do with assimilation. Lilia, her parents, and Mr. Pirzada are at different points along a continuum of assimilation. Lilia, having spent her entire life in the US apart from a single trip, has the strongest affinities with American culture and society. At the opposite end, Mr. Pirzada, the temporariness of whose presence is emphasized by the title, seems, mentally, almost not to be in America. Her parents, raised in India but making lives for themselves in the West, are somewhere in between, although they are less vividly depicted (because less important to the story) than Lilia or Mr. Pirzada. While Lilia’s mother and father support and show solidarity with Mr. Pirzada, who is living in terror over the unknown fate of his wife and daughters on the other side of the world, the story in its full sweep makes clear the subtle distinctions in

immigrants' attitudes, motives, and intentions that can separate them from one another over time.

Certain details highlight the little ways in which the ten-year-old Lilia, Bengali herself of course, perceives something foreign about Mr. Pirzada. Lilia initially assumes, due to language, appearance, and habits, that Mr. Pirzada is Indian, until her father corrects her, and then Lilia attends to his differences with special care: "Now that I had learned Mr. Pirzada was not an Indian, I began to study him with extra care, to try to figure out what made him different" (30). But what makes him different, on close inspection, is actually his distance from American norms, not Indian ones (and ironies in this vein recur throughout the story). She notices, for instance, that his coat is custom made, as would be expectable for upper-class South Asians, at least at the time, rather than brand name and mass produced in the American fashion. His patrician manners, too, strike her as unusual: "I was charmed by the presence of Mr. Pirzada's rotund elegance, and flattered by the faint theatricality of his attentions, yet unsettled by the superb ease of his gestures, which made me feel, for an instant, like a stranger in my own home" (29)--this in contrast to American directness and informality. The formality of Mr. Pirzada is quietly reflected in the title "When Mr. Pirzada Came to *Dine*" (emphasis added), where the relatively lofty *dine* (brought to English, unsurprisingly, from Latin via the French of the Normans) serves instead of earthier options, like "Came to *Eat*" (from Old English).

In perhaps the most memorable and powerfully telling detail in the whole story, Mr. Pirzada keeps two watches: one, a wristwatch, set to the local New England time; the other, a pocket watch, set eleven hours ahead, to the time in Dacca. As Lilia puts it:

Life, I realized, was being lived in Dacca first. I imagined Mr. Pirzada's daughters rising from sleep, tying ribbons in their hair, anticipating breakfast, preparing for school. Our

meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged. (31)

By contrast, Lilia is being constantly reminded of her own Americanness or, at least, of the American context in which she lives. When her father gently chides her for her limited awareness of non-American history and geography--a classic mark of a US-educated mind--her mother replies:

“Lilia has plenty to learn at school. . . . We live here now, she was born here.” She seemed genuinely proud of the fact, as if it were a reflection of my character. In her estimation, I knew, I was assured a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity. I would never have to eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from my rooftop, or hide neighbors in water tanks to prevent them from being shot, as she and my father had. “Imagine having to place her in a decent school. Imagine her having to read during power failures by the light of kerosene lamps. Imagine the pressures, the tutors, the constant exams.” She ran a hand through her hair, bobbed to a suitable length for her part-time job as a bank teller. “How can you possibly expect her to know about Partition? . . .”

“But what does she learn about the world? . . . What is she learning?”

We learned American history, of course, and American geography. That year, and every year it seemed, we began by studying the Revolutionary War. We were taken in school buses on field trips to visit Plymouth Rock, and to walk the Freedom Trail, and to climb to the top of the Bunker Hill Monument. We made dioramas out of colored construction paper depicting George Washington crossing the choppy waters of the Delaware River, and we made puppets of King George wearing white tights and a black

bow in his hair. During tests we were given blank maps of the thirteen colonies, and asked to fill in names, dates, capitals. I could do it with my eyes closed. (26-27)

When Lilia is in her school library, supposed to be researching the surrender at Yorktown, she finds herself distracted by a section labeled “Asia,” and then specifically drawn (because of her acquaintance with Mr. Pirzada) to a book titled Pakistan: A Land and Its People. Her teacher finds her and confronts her:

Mrs. Kenyon emerged, the aroma of her perfume filling up the tiny aisle, and lifted the book by its spine as it were a hair clinging to my sweater. She glanced at the cover, then at me.

“Is this book a part of your report, Lilia?”

“No, Mrs. Kenyon.”

“Then I see no reason to consult it,” she said, replacing it in the slim gap on the shelf. “Do you?” (33)

Here, information about a non-Western country is seen as a distraction and nearly distasteful. There is an easily identified irony in the fact that Lilia is researching an event in the American Revolution, but looking into a non-Western country that currently has a breakaway element and is at war with itself is interpreted as irrelevant by the teacher, reflective of an unhealthy curiosity.

Another calculated irony lies in the fact that, the same night Lilia is engaging with the fanciful horrors of Halloween, Mr. Pirzada grapples with the all-too-real horrors of war: “What they heard that evening . . . was that India and Pakistan were drawing closer and closer to war” (40). When Lilia gets home from trick-or-treating, “In the living room Mr. Pirzada, my father, and mother were sitting side by side on the sofa. The television was off, and Mr. Pirzada had his head in his hands” (40).

In a touching show of compassion and solidarity, the parents become great pillars of support for Mr. Pirzada, as is best exemplified in these lines of Lilia's: "Most of all I remember the three of them operating during that time as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear" (41).

Worried for Mr. Pirzada and his family, Lilia has undertaken a ritual meant to protect them. He brings candy for her each evening, and unbeknownst to him, she says a prayer for the Pirzadas before she goes to bed, letting the candy dissolve in her mouth as she does so. Then she does not brush her teeth, afraid she will wash the prayer away. After Mr. Pirzada has returned to Dacca, Lilia maintains her vigil using saved-up Halloween candy. When her family eventually receives a card from Mr. Pirzada, saying that all is well and thanking them for their hospitality, Lilia stops her nightly prayers. Mr. Pirzada is never to be heard from again. In the last line of the story, Lilia says she has thrown the candy away, in a gesture that feels to the reader at once inevitable and somehow brutal. Despite the family's wonderful show of support for and solidarity with Mr. Pirzada, their bonds with him are strictly contextual and temporary. Lahiri is apparently unsure how strong a tie a common ethnicity is, when differences of nationality, religion, and life plans are taken into account and viewed in the long term (the key distinction here, of course, is that one party is in the process of assimilating, and the other party has no intention to assimilate). This story has Lahiri's signature two-tiered thematic structure. Although it seems at a glance to be about people from the same cultural background coming together to care for one another, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is finally a story about families and individuals moving inexorably in two separate directions. Lilia is content enough in her Indian-American life, and even Mr. Pirzada turns out to be okay in Bangladesh; but they are worlds apart.

3. “Interpreter of Maladies”

“Interpreter of Maladies,” the collection’s title story, depicts an Indian-American family’s, the Dases’, return to India as tourists, but is told from the point of view of their Indian tour guide, Mr. Kapasi. It unfolds over the course of a single day when Mr. Kapasi takes them to visit the Konark Sun Temple and then, on a brief unplanned side trip, the Udayagiri and Khandagiri Caves. Both sites are in the state of Orissa, where the Dases are staying in the city of Puri. The Dases, like most of Lahiri’s characters, are Bengali Americans, with roots in neighboring West Bengal. Mr. Kapasi is half Gujarati, through his father; his mother’s ethnicity is never mentioned, but is perhaps Oriya, given that he lives in Orissa. What is interesting, however, is that the particularities of the Indian backdrop and of the characters’ Indian backgrounds are hazy in this story and require a bit of stitching together by the reader. Mr. Kapasi, while registering that they “looked Indian,” sees the Dases primarily as Americans; and the Dases for their part show but a shallow, perfunctory curiosity about their surroundings and the people there, as if in a typically American fashion, they see a hugely diverse country like India as a monolith: vaguely intriguing, but static and peripheral. From the perspective of the reader and Mr. Kapasi, the Indian setting throws the Americanness of the Dases into bold relief. “Interpreter of Maladies” paints a family portrait of Indian Americans at an extreme pole of assimilation. The Dases are revealed in the course of the story to be stereotypical “ugly Americans” (an expression with meanings literal and figurative), as one detail after another confirms, in brutal succession, from the first page to the last.

The perceived weakness of the American family structure, the flip side of American individualism, is highlighted in the opening paragraph, in which Mr. and Mrs. Das bicker over who should take their daughter (one of three consistently whiny, demanding kids) to the

restroom; Mrs. Das relents, not holding her daughter's hand as she goes. Furthermore, the narrator observes, as she gets out of the car, that her outfit leaves her legs "largely bare" (43)--exposed legs being an uncommon sight in India, on women and men. It is a detail the narrator notes twice, the second time as characteristic of "American and European ladies" (58). The detail is set in contrast to his wife, who "even when they made love . . . kept the panels of her blouse hooked together, the string of her petticoat knotted around her waist" (58). The exposed legs do have to be understood in the larger framework of the story, whose plot line hinges on Mr. Kapasi's short-lived crush on Mrs. Das, indicating that what is attractive about America is hard to disentangle from what is unattractive about it.

Mr. Kapasi notices that the family "dressed as foreigners did" (44) and that, when "Mr. Kapasi had pressed his palms together in greeting . . . Mr. Das squeezed hands like an American so that Mr. Kapasi felt it in his elbow" (44). Mr. Das is initially friendly, in a very American way, as the following sentence suggests his wife is, too, to a degree: "Mrs. Das, for her part, had flexed one side of her mouth, smiling dutifully at Mr. Kapasi, without displaying any interest in him" (44). She smiles, but this is superficial warmth: a familiar charge against American "friendliness." Paragraphs later, Mr. Das proudly asserts his Americanness: "'Mina and I were both born in America,' Mr. Das announced with an air of sudden confidence. 'Born and raised'" (45).

The narrator's description of Mrs. Das, as seen through Mr. Kapasi's eyes, leaves the reader with an odd image:

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 appliqué 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. Her hair, shorn only a little longer than her husband's, was parted far to one side. She was wearing large dark brown sunglasses with a pinkish tint to them, and carried a big straw bag, almost as big as her torso, shaped like a bowl, with a water bottle poking out of it. She walked slowly, carrying some puffed rice tossed with peanuts and chili peppers in a large packet made from newspapers. (46)

Although Mrs. Das's dress is not unusual for an American woman, Mr. Kapasi's gaze brings out here an incongruous, cartoonish quality in her appearance, one that is not exactly prepossessing. The short, checkered skirt, the T-shirt with a strawberry, the overly matched pinks and reds all combine to form a girlish whole, but Mrs. Das is not a girl. Her outfit, from an old-fashioned point of view, also mixes gender conventions, with a "blouse styled like a man's undershirt" and hair "shorn only a little longer than her husband's." There is, as well, a sense of elements being out of proportion: her "hands like paws;" her hair "parted far to one side;" her "large . . . sunglasses;" her "big straw bag, almost as big as her torso . . . with a water bottle poking out of it." And of course, as she munches mindlessly on her snack (and she does so throughout the story--never sharing, as the narrator states), she "was slightly plump in her figure:" American indeed.

A few lines later, when Mr. Kapasi tells her the trip will take about two and a half hours, "Mrs. Das gave an impatient sigh, as if she had been traveling her whole life without pause. She fanned herself with a folded Bombay film magazine written in English" (47). Besides her rude impatience, this line quietly brings up the issue of language. In theory, both the Dases and Mr. Kapasi have a knowledge of Bengali (it is unclear whether it is a first or second language for

Mr. Kapasi, but he knows it), yet their communication takes place in English, the language of the US and of India's British colonizers, although the interlocutors are Indian and have a common Indian language. Farther down on the same page, the reader gets this:

Before starting the ignition, Mr. Kapasi reached back to make sure the cranklike locks on the inside of each of the back doors were secured. As soon as the car began to move the little girl began to play with the lock on her side, clicking it with some effort forward and backward, but Mrs. Das said nothing to stop her. She sat a bit slouched at one end of the back seat, not offering her puffed rice to anyone. Ronny and Tina sat on either side of her, both snapping bright green gum. (47)

Annoying children (playing with the lock, smacking gum), lax parenting (not stopping a child's bothersome, unsafe behavior), gluttony (constant snacking, no sharing), slovenliness (slouching): Lahiri just does not want the reader to think well of these people.

Unflattering images of this sort, pointedly conforming to the "ugly American" stereotype, whether focusing on Mrs. Das or other members of the family, mount as the story progresses. They are so numerous that, if all were provided here, they would grow tiresome, but a few stand out, like this:

They were all like siblings, Mr. Kapasi thought as they passed a row of date trees. Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves. Mr. Das tapped on his lens cap, and his tour book, dragging his thumbnail occasionally across the pages so that they made a scraping sound. Mrs. Das continued to polish her nails. She still had not removed her sunglasses. Every now and then Tina renewed her plea that she wanted her nails

done, too, and so at one point Mrs. Das flicked a drop of polish on the little girl's finger before depositing the bottle back inside her straw bag.

"Isn't this an air-conditioned car?" she asked, still blowing on her hand. . . .

"Quit complaining," Mr. Das said. "It isn't so hot."

"I told you to get a car with air-conditioning," Mrs. Das continued. "Why do you do this, Raj, just to save a few stupid rupees. What are you saving us, fifty cents?"

Their accents sounded just like the ones Mr. Kapasi heard on American television programs. . . .

"Doesn't it get tiresome, Mr. Kapasi, showing people the same thing every day?"

Mr. Das asked, rolling down his own window all the way. "Hey, do you mind stopping the car. I just want to get a shot of this guy."

Mr. Kapasi pulled over to the side of the road as Mr. Das took a picture of a barefoot man, his head wrapped in a dirty turban, seated on top of a cart of grain sacks pulled by a pair of bullocks. Both the man and the bullocks were emaciated. (49)

First, the narrator, speaking from the perspective of Mr. Kapasi, notes the soft American parenting style of the Dases, connected with their immaturity and self-absorption. Then there is Mr. Das's annoying scraping sound, followed by Mrs. Das's vanity and unwillingness to humor her daughter. In "ugly American" style, Mrs. Das complains about the discomfort of her environment, without taking account of the context in which she finds herself. Her mention of "a few stupid rupees" is testament to her wealth and privilege and to her outsider status. She also does not consider that "a few stupid rupees" may not sound insignificant to Mr. Kapasi, who then notices the Americanness of their voices. Finally, Mr. Das demands that Mr. Kapasi pull over, so he can take a picture of an "emaciated" peasant, making a spectacle of the man's

poverty. Altogether, it is a damning passage, but above all it is one that drives home the thoroughgoing assimilation of the Dases, as well as the worst of the American tropes they embody.

The negative portrayal of the Dases and particularly Mrs. Das culminates dramatically in her later interactions with Mr. Kapasi. She finds his description of his other job, acting as an interpreter for a doctor in this linguistically diverse part of the world, “romantic” (alternate meanings of that word echoing in the background), and so Mr. Kapasi’s infatuation begins. Notably, her impression of his interpreting position marks her as a foreigner, because multilingualism in India is commonplace: an asset, but not a highly unusual one (as it tends to be in the US). It is, moreover, strange to describe a thankless, low-wage job as “romantic;” only somebody who does not have to do such a job could see it that way.

They chat as the day goes on, developing a kind of rapport, she offering to send him pictures when she returns to America, he deliberately prolonging the day trip by taking everyone to the caves (actually artificial caves that once served as monastic dwellings). She casually idealizes his profession as only a privileged foreigner could; he gets ahead of himself, imagining a lifelong correspondence between them, across continents. The hasty, false intimacy they form is reflective of Mrs. Das’s American social norms, which are taking precedence over his customs in this circumstance. In a moment when they are alone, she confesses to him that Raj is not in fact the father of one of the children, that she was unfaithful and was impregnated by a friend of Raj’s (a double betrayal), and that she has been living in “pain” for years. What really comes through, however, is her own extreme self-pity, in addition to a certain moral decay that some Indians may associate with the West. When Mr. Kapasi fails to respond with

what she considers sufficient sympathy--indeed, when he cuts to the heart of the issue, by asking, "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (66)--she walks away in silence.

The Dases and especially Mrs. Das seem to represent for Lahiri the worst possible outcomes of assimilation, a process they have completed. They fit with the most negative "ugly American" tropes. Of course, the reader does not see them *assimilating*, so assimilation is not the explicit subject but the deep subject--not what is happening but the reason for what is happening: Lahiri's signature two layers. The Dases are perhaps the opposite of a character like Lilia, from "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," who navigates expertly, gracefully, between Indian and American cultural worlds. They are different, too, from a character like Gogol in The Namesake, who with some difficulty finds a comfort zone for himself in cultural hybridity and eclecticism. Thus, Lahiri does not see assimilation as inevitable malformation--or inevitable at all, as the next story will show.

4. "Mrs. Sen's"

"Mrs. Sen's," as noted in a previous section, has been a favorite for critical discussion, perhaps because of the prominent role of food in the story. But the preoccupation with food may have obscured larger issues and hindered efforts to understand the story as a whole. Some of those larger issues will be clarified here--relatively briefly, since this story is already so widely written about.

It has to be said that "Mrs. Sen's" differs from the stories this paper has looked at so far, and from the main currents of Lahiri's body of work, in that it deals rather directly with assimilation or, maybe more accurately, nonassimilation. Thematically, the story, while not a total anomaly, is less clearly divided into two distinct levels of meaning, yet Lahiri's exploration of assimilation persists, and she is especially attentive to the fact that the title character has

moved specifically from a collectivist culture to an intensely individualistic one (an experience that is mirrored, in a surprising way, by the American child protagonist, Eliot). Mrs. Sen, a recently arrived Bengali immigrant, is the wife of a mathematics professor whose career has brought them to an unidentified seaside town in New England. It was not her choice to move to the US, and she shows little or no appreciation for the land in which she finds herself (this is said nonjudgmentally). Although she appears to recognize some of the potential benefits of assimilation, she does not seem to desire it in her heart of hearts, and the steps she takes toward assimilation are at most halfhearted, and finally fail. “Mrs. Sen’s” is the story of somebody who tests assimilation but ultimately does not assimilate. Of all Lahiri’s stories, it is also the one that most emphasizes the hardships of assimilation, its psychological toll on immigrants to the United States.

Eliot is the child of a single, working mother, who needs a babysitter to take care of him after the school day, before she can leave the office. In the past, babysitters have looked after him at his home. His mother finds Mrs. Sen through an advertisement posted outside the supermarket, but Mrs. Sen has to watch over Eliot at her home, because--as the last sentence of the first paragraph states, placement being an indicator of importance--“Mrs. Sen did not know how to drive” (111), a serious limitation for someone living in the United States, where except in a few major cities, driving is how the vast majority of people get around. She explains to Eliot’s mother:

“At home, you know, we have a driver.”

“You mean a chauffeur?”

Mrs. Sen glanced at Mr. Sen, who nodded.

Eliot's mother nodded, too, looking around the room. "And that's all . . . in India?"

"Yes," Mrs. Sen replied. The mention of the word seemed to release something in her. She neatened the border of her sari where it rose diagonally across her chest. She, too, looked around the room, as if she noticed in the lampshades, in the teapot, in the shadows frozen on the carpet, something the rest of them could not. "Everything is there." (113)

Throughout this story, driving, mundane act that it may be, is connected with Americanness. In India, there is no expectation that she drive. According to this formula, India is where she belongs. In this passage, the word *India* "seemed to release something in her," and it is then that she adjusts her sari--a distinctly South Asian garment. She sees in her American living space "something the rest of them could not"--something alien? perhaps even something sinister?

Unlike many characters in Lahiri's work, such as the mother and father in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" or Gogol's parents in *The Namesake*, Mrs. Sen does not cultivate a support network of fellow immigrants. The isolation she endures as an immigrant without a support system, her sense of her own profound aloneness, haunts her; and it is particularly acute given that she is in an individualistic society but accustomed to a collectivist one. One day, she asks Eliot whether anybody would come if she screamed. He answers, "'They might call you. . . . But they might complain that you were making too much noise'" (117). It is likely that one of her motives for babysitting is simply to break her own isolation. An equally salient reason may be to establish a kind of safe, controlled contact with the American world, as though to test the waters of America without jumping in.

As the story goes on, Mrs. Sen looks to be falling into a depression. She finds some solace, though, in being able to make Bengali foods, and particularly in fresh fish, a cornerstone of Bengali cuisine. The only problem is how to get ahold of fresh fish. First of all, the varieties of fish she is used to are not available, so she has to settle for different ones, but then the fish market is too far to walk to. She tries going back and forth by bus, but other riders complain about the odor of the fish--a rather severe affront for her, since particular foods, especially fish, are intimately tied up with her Bengali identity. Even as she still does not have a license, she tries to get to the fish store by driving on her own, after some lessons from Mr. Sen and a bit of independent practice. Getting that fish is crucial for her, because it is not just a matter of sustenance, but of identity and keeping her cultural moorings in a strange place. So she ventures out in the car with Eliot--and gets into an accident. It is the last time she or anyone babysits him. From that point on, he is a latchkey kid. The few scenes that the reader has witnessed of Eliot's life with his mother strike one as exceptionally bleak and lonely, a loneliness slightly alleviated by his afternoons with Mrs. Sen, but now he is more wholly confined to the world of his mother and their house and seems to have resigned himself, without at his age consciously recognizing it, to the harsher aspects of American individualism. The reader does not learn Mrs. Sen's fate, but the car crash feels like a lasting defeat. She either reconciles herself to the alienation of American life, to a permanent outsider status, or she leaves. But one senses that she will not be able to reach a compromise between Indian and American ways, that a hyphenated Indian-American identity will elude her if she seeks it at all. Lahiri's depiction of Mrs. Sen is largely sympathetic; she does not pass any discernible judgment on someone who is unwilling or unable to assimilate. What is clear, however, is that nonassimilation is the harder path. While assimilation may corrupt the Dases, their lives are not so difficult. Lilia appears even as a child

to be comfortable as an Indian American, as do her mother and father for the most part. Shoba, though, in “A Temporary Matter,” struggles with her remaining links to India. But Lahiri does not see assimilation as an absolute good either, since after all it can turn out people like Mrs. Das. “Mrs. Sen’s” does not exhibit as clearly as earlier stories the explicit subject/deep subject dichotomy. There is some thematic division. On the surface, it can be construed as a story about an American boy’s encounter with a strange foreigner and her ways. Then again, Eliot is watching the assimilation-related travails of this foreigner. At minimum, Mrs. Sen provides different angle from which to view the phenomenon of assimilation.

5. “This Blessed House”

This story revolves around a newly married Indian-American couple, Sanjeev and Twinkle, as they adjust to life together in the house that they have just bought in Connecticut, the “Blessed House” of the title. On a deeper level, it depicts the dynamics between Indian Americans who are at two different points on a continuum of assimilation, and the particulars of these dynamics raise questions about the phenomenon of assimilation itself. Although the exact timing and circumstances of each character’s entry into the United States are not spelled out, a few facts are clear: They both had at least their college educations in the US; she has been living in California until recently; he has lived in Massachusetts and Connecticut, but spent at least part of his childhood in India; her parents are living in California; his live in Calcutta. It is apparent, too, that she is deeply at ease with an eclectic, fluid Indian-American identity, with the balance weighted somewhat more to the American side, while he acts more as an Indian who happens to be living in the US. Like any newlyweds, they run into certain difficulties, due to differences in personality and habits, as they acclimate to life together. But the differences between them, on closer inspection, also have a definite cultural cast.

The plot of “This Blessed House” follows the couple’s discovery of Christian paraphernalia--for instance, a white porcelain effigy of Christ, a 3-D postcard of St. Francis, a wooden cross key chain, a plaster Virgin Mary for the lawn, etc.--hidden all over the house they have moved into. The dissimilitude of their reactions to the paraphernalia is telling. She finds the items funny, cute, and sometimes pretty, even interpreting them as good luck. He finds the same items distasteful, and her fondness for them irritating. When she comes across the first one, Sanjeev tells Twinkle to “get rid of that idiotic statue” (136) and reminds her, “We’re not Christian” (137). (Sanjeev and Twinkle are, in her words, “good little Hindus” [137].) This pattern persists: She likes the stuff and wants to keep it around as decoration; he considers it all repulsive, and wants it thrown away. Given historical associations of Christianity with the West, their reactions may say something about underlying cultural allegiances. A simple equation of Christianity with the West and specifically America, and Hinduism with India, does not hold up well under analysis. India and the US together are, arguably, the two most religiously diverse countries in the world. Both have religious majorities, but both have an array of religious minorities, present in substantial numbers. Both are officially secular. Moreover, Christianity actually has a far longer history on the subcontinent, by over a thousand years, than in North America. But the equation is a stubborn one, and Sanjeev especially seems to hold onto it (although even he once acknowledges that there are Christians in India). He perceives the Christian artifacts as foreign and suspect, repeatedly asserting, when presented with them, that he and Twinkle are *not* Christian, thereby emphasizing not just the unattractiveness of the objects but their alterity.

But his perception of their alterity, their otherness, is a confused one--for the reasons mentioned above, but others too. His aversion to the Christian paraphernalia likely has to do with

class. In North India, Christianity has lower-class and lower-caste associations (the opposite tending to be the case in parts of South India). In the US itself, this sort of aesthetically unsophisticated Christian paraphernalia is vaguely connected with the working class and the undereducated, and this may be why he is concerned about his colleagues seeing the objects at the couple's housewarming party. So, he has internalized and is operating on the class standards of both countries: He is more assimilated than he knows. Furthermore, whether the artifacts are "American" is a question whose answer varies depending on the generation examining them, a fact that neither he nor Twinkle recognizes. Twinkle speculates that the previous owners may have been "'born-agains'" (137), yet the kind of Christian kitsch they are stumbling on, lawn ornaments and such, preoccupied with the saints and the Virgin, is related, not to the born-again strain of American Protestantism, but to American Catholicism. These Christian items used to be, and to some extent still are, linked with the houses and lawns of predominantly Roman Catholic neighborhoods, made up of mostly Irish immigrants and their children and grandchildren, with sizable numbers of Italians, Poles, and other ancestries: all groups that until fairly recently were viewed as foreign. The perception of the objects as "American" is indicative of the youth of the perceiver. To Americans the age of Twinkle and Sanjeev's grandparents, such artifacts would signal the place of the owners at the fringes of American society. Today still, Christian fundamentalists in the US, like the "'Born-Agains'" Twinkle refers to, might consider such paraphernalia idolatrous, and Mainline Protestants might see it as inelegant. A fanciful reading of this story might go as far as to construe the items as symbolic "gifts" or "blessings" from one generation of immigrants to another. Sanjeev's misperception raises doubt about what is American and what is Indian, and where he and Twinkle fall on a continuum of assimilation.

The story represents assimilation, not as a plain two-directional affair, but as more like an ambling across and about a Venn diagram.

Other subtle signs call into question the cultural paradigm that Sanjeev, on a conscious level, espouses--the binary "Americans there, Indians here" paradigm that oversimplifies his context and himself. One such detail is that the tent in which they were married, in India, was strung "with Christmas tree lights" (143), a fact that is noted in the last sentence before a space break, a spot where, in Lahiri's work and that of other writers, important information frequently appears. As another example, his speech and Twinkle's are littered with references to "God," singular and capitalized. Of course, English-speakers of all religions are prone to exclaim "God" and even "Christ"--as in "Oh God!" or "For Christ's sake!"--to convey emotions ranging from dread to surprise to exasperation; but it is emblematic of how practices and assumptions from a dominant culture creep into the behavior and speech of minorities, a sort of invisible assimilation that goes on just beneath awareness.

In the end, it looks as if Twinkle's American-leaning eclecticism is triumphing over Sanjeev's muddled purism. The story concludes on an upbeat note, tonally, but with the implication that his cultural inclinations will be subordinate to his wife's in the long term. She and the guests at their housewarming find, while exploring in the attic, a silver bust of Christ, which Sanjeev has to confess "contained dignity, solemnity, beauty even" (157). After she has handed it to Sanjeev, and as she and the guests are walking into the living room, "Sanjeev pressed the massive silver face to his ribs . . . and followed her" (157)--the last line of the story, and suggestive. There is, to be clear, no suggestion whatsoever that she is toying with the idea of conversion to Christianity. She is simply comfortable incorporating Christian imagery, specifically American Catholic kitsch, into her cultural lexicon--that is to say, she is comfortable

with hybridity, with the hyphen. “This Blessed House,” at a cursory glance, might appear to be merely a lighthearted depiction of a young married couple working out the kinks in their new life together, accommodating themselves to each other’s quirks, and at one level it is. But on a deeper level it is a story about two Indian Americans negotiating their positions at the convergence of two cultures.

Part III: Unaccustomed Earth

1. “A Choice of Accommodations”

Amit and Megan, a married couple approaching middle age, have traveled from their home in New York, leaving their two daughters with her parents on Long Island, to the Berkshires, for the wedding of Pam Borden. Amit knows Pam from the boarding school where he went, where her father has long been headmaster, and where the wedding is set to take place. They became close when they later attended Columbia together. Some idea of what Pam, clearly a New England WASP, might represent for Amit, a Bengali American, can be inferred from the basic facts. But important details are fleshed out as the story, long compared to the ones in Lahiri’s previous collection, gradually unfolds. Given that Amit “had no nostalgia for the school” (86) and that, in his life today, “there was nothing to remind him of those years” (86), there is a question early on about what his motive for going to the wedding with his wife would be. He has now only a “loose connection with Pam” (86), seeing her “at best, once or twice a year, usually by accident” (100), so his friendship to her does not feel wholly dependable as an explanation. When his wife Megan makes a vaguely jealous reference to “women like Pam” (88), however, a certain possibility begins to seem likely, confirmed in a subsequent line, where the narrator divulges that Amit “had loved her [Pam]” (88), a love that was not reciprocated,

although they were at one point good friends. But it turns out he is not merely drawn by an old flame either. Passages in the remainder of the story reveal nuances in his attraction to Pam--to wit, that she represents for him an idealized American life he has failed to attain.

Images from early in "A Choice of Accommodations" are suggestive of how Amit is feeling about his life right now. In particular, Lahiri gives an exhaustive description of the hotel, dark, ugly, and utilitarian, where Amit and Megan are staying, and their room, demonstrating why "Amit was disappointed: the place was without character" (84). The hotel is contrasted with the school--"nicer than where I went to college," Megan says (94)--where they regret not staying as guests of the wedding. Continually, in this story, the world of Pam and boarding school is contrasted with his life as it actually is now. A sense of disappointment in, or frustration with, that latter life pervades the story, with many references to his and Megan's busy workaday schedules in New York City and to the stresses of parenting. They are "overdue for a vacation" (89). Amit has disappointed himself by dropping out of medical school, instead becoming an editor at a medical journal; this is after first giving up the dream of becoming a journalist, because of pressure from his parents. His and Megan's savings are "depleted" (89). It bothers him that his kids do not look like him. He is embarrassed that his wife, a doctor, works harder than he does, and is considered more successful. Amit says of his marriage with Megan, "It disappeared" (114), after the birth of their second child. At this point, he is expecting "only a continuation of the things he knew: Megan, his job, life in New York, the girls" (104).

Perhaps most significantly, their marriage has a social subtext that he seems not to be entirely comfortable with. His parents "both came from wealthy families, had both summered in hill stations and attended boarding schools in India themselves. The relative affluence of America never impressed them; in many ways they had lived more privileged lives in India"

(96). Megan, on the other hand, “was the youngest of five children, her father a policeman, her mother a kindergarten teacher” (95). She is older than Amit, having had to start college late, and support herself through it with part-time jobs--rather the opposite of his tony prep-school background. She is pretty, but not conventionally so: She is an “old-fashioned beauty” with “the face of someone he could imagine living in a previous era, a simpler time” (92). Lahiri writes:

Megan’s ordinary background had displeased his parents, as had the fact that she was five years older than he was. Her stark prettiness, her refusal to wear contact lenses, her height, had not charmed them. The fact that she was a doctor did not make up for it. If anything, it made their disappointment in Amit worse. (95)

In the eyes of his parents, Amit married down. Not only did he fail to marry a Bengali; he married the wrong sort of American. It is unlikely that Amit has totally shed the assumptions he was raised with. On the contrary, he seems to be haunted by them, as well as by his own feeling of having underperformed academically and professionally. It is as if, unconsciously, he has intuited what his parents likely feel: that the niche he has carved out for himself in America is not a desirable one, not what they envisioned for him, or he for himself. He has assimilated, but not along ideal lines. He sees his life as the crummy hotel, juxtaposed with the “embarrassingly large and well maintained” school where he met Pam, where “leaves were glossy and abundant” and “pieces of rounded abstract sculpture” decorate an “over the top” campus (94).

Pam is idealized almost to the degree that she and Megan feel like foils for each other. Amit used to spend Thanksgiving with the Bordens while he was in high school, after his parents had moved back to India, along with other boys who for whatever reason could not be with their families:

For Amit it was the highlight of each year. He and all the other boys were in love with Pam, who was . . . the only girl on campus, the only girl, it had felt back then, in the world. They would pray to be seated close to her at the table, and for weeks afterward they would talk about her, imagining her life at Northfield Mount Hermon, imagining what her breasts looked like, or the feel of her light brown poker-straight hair, wondering what it was like in the morning, messily trailing over her back. They wondered about the room upstairs, where Pam slept when she came home. They noticed if she ate white meat or dark, and they noticed the year she did not eat any turkey at all.

She seemed fully aware of their admiration, flattered but off-limits. She was that rare, unsettling thing, a teenage girl already aware of her power over men while at the same time uninterested in them. She was comfortable with the opposite sex in a way most girls were not, perhaps because she'd grown up in a house full of boys. The Bordens were forthright people, all of them, even the children, trained to act as friendly hosts for the students who washed up at their holiday table. Pam would talk to Amit and the others, asking each of them about their courses as if she were her mother's age and not a girl of fifteen. And then they would disappear from her consciousness until the following year.

(98)

What comes through in this passage and others is, not just the intense attraction that Pam held for these boys (although that comes through clearly enough), but her maturity and poise, her warmth and forthrightness. She seems the very image of good breeding; the Bordens, of Norman Rockwell wholesomeness. She is an American that Amit's parents might have tolerated.

The wedding, when he and Megan get to it, seems to set something off in him. He rapidly becomes drunk, makes a few ill-considered remarks to people he does not know well. But simultaneously the wedding appears to destabilize the way he has been thinking about Pam and about his life. When he finally sees Pam up close and speaks with her, he notices “crow’s-feet forming around her eyes” (105). It occurs to him that she is “thirty-seven now” and “marrying late” (104). Her dress looks to him like “a long bedsheet that she had wrapped around herself” (103). She is marrying a man in his forties, divorced with kids: “It was not what Amit would have predicted for Pam, such complications, Pam who could have had any man” (105).

Amit leaves prematurely, stumbling drunk back to the hotel, where he falls asleep with his suit on. He meant to return just to call Megan’s parents and check on the kids, and so he left Megan stranded at a wedding for one of his friends. Needless to say, she is not pleased with how the evening turned out. While the situation may seem to bode ill for their marriage, really it was an occasion for him to be shaken out of a moral and psychic stupor, realizing how unrealistic his perceptions of Pam were, and how unfair his perceptions of his own wife and their life together. Intending to go to the Bordens’ brunch the morning after the wedding, they discover that they have arrived too late, and instead wind up in one of the student dorm rooms where guests have been staying. This dorm room corresponds, in terms of the structure of the story, to the hotel room Lahiri described at the beginning, a room reflective of the attitude Amit has held toward his life with Megan, until just now. In the dorm room, he is in Pam’s realm, the world he associates with her, but it is not as he remembers. Changes have been made. “The effect was more sanitized, less charming, a lot like the inside of the Chadwick Inn [their hotel]” (124). In other words, Pam’s world *is* like his. He makes love to Megan on the bed in that room, and that is where the story ends. It is an interesting variation on Lahiri’s theme of assimilation,

which is more carefully veiled than ever. It is possible to read this story as having nothing to do with the immigrant experience. It could be argued that Amit's being Bengali is incidental to the story, not fundamental to its meaning. And it is true that, in this second collection, Lahiri's stories are generally longer, more complex, subtler; the characters are Bengali, but the issue of immigration has retreated even farther into the background. This reading of "A Choice of Accommodations" has made the case that Lahiri's core theme, assimilation, is unchanged, but she is looking at it in an ever more nuanced fashion. Amit has moved from the "Old World" values of his parents to "New World" values, according to which individualism, following one's heart, as Amit has done in his career and personal life, is admirable, as is pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps, in Megan's manner. In this America, the patrician lifestyle and outlook of the Bordens are something of a peculiar archaism, or perhaps even an illusion. The scheme Lahiri has set up, on close examination, affirms American mythology and suggests a rather conventional view of America. But it is not the only take on America that Jhumpa Lahiri's creative vision comprehends. In the remainder of Unaccustomed Earth, darker ones await.

2. "Only Goodness"

On its face, "Only Goodness" is a story about alcohol and alcoholism, and the effect of alcoholism on families. It is among the riskiest stories Lahiri has written, because it comes perilously close to being a parable about the power and danger of alcohol. But it does not, finally, lapse into that mode, saved by Lahiri's two-tiered thematic structure, by the existence of deeper meanings. There is even a certain pleasure in watching Lahiri walk this creative tightrope. Multiple reviewers hailed "Only Goodness" as the strongest story in Unaccustomed Earth--a big claim, for a uniformly strong collection, and one that reviewers did not always explain. "Nobody's Business" (not discussed here) could easily be lifted up as the most strange

and troubling, the most original in the collection, and certainly a departure for her. “Hema and Kaushik” (to be discussed next), which is either a novella or a series of three linked stories, may be the most formally innovative and challenging. Regardless, though, “Only Goodness” is compelling due to its demonstration of the immense, indeed burdensome, hopes that are often invested in first-generation Americans, and the long-term impact of those hopes on the children on whom they are placed. It is, as well, a story that raises questions about the final destination toward which assimilation leads: Are America and American culture really the endpoint, or can America serve more as a gateway to a wider world?

Sudha, a Bengali American, born in London but raised in New England (like Lahiri), is the person who introduces her little brother, Rahul, to alcohol, and who repeatedly helps him to get ahold of alcohol while he is underage. She says she feels as if she is “doing things she once hadn’t the wits or guts for” (129), when she was Rahul’s age. Sudha, for her part, “had waited until college to disobey her parents,” who “were prudish about alcohol to the point of seeming Puritanical, frowning upon members of their Bengali circle . . . who liked to sip whiskey at gatherings” (129). So, Sudha and her brother grow up with a prohibition on alcohol that is connected to their ethnicity.

Sudha has established a pattern of living vicariously through Rahul, “determined that her little brother should leave his mark as a child in America” (136). Sudha encourages him to have fun she did not have, but also to achieve in a way she feels she has not, because “he’d always been the smarter one” (130). She invests certain distinctly American hopes in him, as her parents do in a different fashion. As first-generation Bengali Americans, Sudha and Rahul have been under intense pressure to live up to the highest hopes their parents have for their American

children; there is an expectation that they be “contributing to the grand circle of accomplishments Bengali children were making across the country” (151):

For years they had been compared to other Bengali children, told about gold medals brought back from science fairs, colleges that offered full scholarships. Sometimes Sudha’s father would clip newspaper articles about unusually gifted adolescents--the boy who finished a PhD at twenty, the girl who went to Stanford at twelve--and tape them to the refrigerator. When Sudha was fourteen her father had written to Harvard Medical School, requested an application, and placed it on her desk. (130)

Lahiri is clearly emphasizing the pressure these kids are under and the fact that that pressure is linked to being the children of Bengali Americans. The parents’ hopes are particularly invested in Rahul, the only son. Lahiri writes, “After Rahul graduated from high school their parents celebrated, having in their opinion now successfully raised two children in America. Rahul was going to Cornell. . . . Their parents bragged about the school, more impressed by it than they’d been with Penn [Sudha’s university]. ‘Our job is done,’ her father declared” (129). Cornell is described as if it were the Puritans’ City upon a Hill: “The campus was on a hilltop surrounded by farms and lakes and waterfalls,” it is a “remote, majestic place” (130). And Sudha redoubles their hopes in Rahul; “she doted on him and adored him” (136), but also envies him, recognizing that he is the more conventionally attractive of the two of them (“She envied him for his beauty” [137]), and by her account more intelligent. The expectations placed on Rahul by his family are considerable.

Perhaps it is understandable, to the reader at least, that he would seek release with alcohol, that he would struggle in college, switch from a premedical track to film and English, and ultimately drop out, taking up what his parents consider menial work and bucking

everyone's expectations. As his meltdown is in progress, the reaction from his parents is less than sympathetic:

Her father did not hide his disapproval. . . . He did not approve of paying an astronomical tuition just so Rahul could watch French movies in a classroom. Her father had no patience for failure, for indulgences. He never let his children forget that there had been no one to help him as he helped them, so that no matter how well Sudha did, she felt that her good fortune had been handed to her, not earned. Both her parents came from humble backgrounds; both their grandmothers had given up the gold on their arms to put roofs over their families' heads and food on their plates. (141)

While the pressure on these kids is severe, it is also not hard to understand how parents from the Third World might see such pressure as a rather lucky problem to have, since it is pressure paired with support, support and opportunity. Lahiri does not dispense blame, at least in any simple way.

Rahul's descent into alcoholism and dysfunction parallels, ominously, fears that his and Sudha's parents, as immigrant parents, have about raising children in the West. It has already been shown that the parents run a strict household and view drink as a peculiarly Western vice. The mother says, "That's the problem with this country. . . . Too many freedoms, too much having fun. When we were young, life wasn't always about fun" (143). What is disconcerting is that their fears have been borne out. Lots of Lahiri's stories suggest that immigrant parents tend not to want their kids to accept American culture wholesale, but rather to assimilate in certain ways and not others. Assimilation carries risks. When it means moving from Indian culture into American culture, it does mean moving into a more permissive and free

environment, where one can either rise very high or fall very low: In an unnerving sense, anything really is possible in America.

As though in recognition of the way in which Rahul has fulfilled his parents' concerns about rearing kids in the New World, Sudha goes back to a more Old World country, the country where she was born and that colonized India: She goes to England. She goes to a place that is, symbolically--and maybe literally--more safe and secure, where life's possibilities might be fewer, but that means fewer possibilities *good and bad*. Even as her ostensible reason for going is to get a second master's degree, it is probable that she is also seeking the semblance of order, stability, and tradition England would seem to provide. There, she meets and marries an Englishman, Roger, a man her parents easily accept: "It helped that he'd been born in India, that he was English and not American, drinking tea, not coffee, and saying 'zed' not 'zee'" (152). Not incidentally, Roger represents the qualities and values she came to England for: "He took responsibility for things;" he "was never late, never forgot to call when he said he would;" and "Sudha recognized in him the same strain of competence she possessed" (147). Furthermore, "he was a person who understood what his limits were. At the same time he could be exacting. . . . Like Sudha he was moderate with alcohol" (147). Whereas Rahul stand for what is most threatening about the New World, Roger stands for the reassurances of the Old World. That she ends up in Britain, and ends up there for the above reasons, put into doubt the conception of assimilation as a plain movement from point A to point B, with the final destination of the United States. For Sudha, when all the jumps among countries are accounted for, the movement is more like from point A (India, her parents' country and where her ethnic origins are) to point B (Britain, where she was born and to which India retains strong ties, from colonial days) to point C (America) back to point B. These movements are not uncommon in Lahiri's work,

although in some parts of it, especially The Namesake, the US does feel rather like a final place of arrival; but in other writings, like “Only Goodness,” Lahiri appears to depict, not so much Indians or Americans, but a kind of global, highly educated, professional elite, roving the Anglosphere--and beyond--often for highly personal, even symbolic reasons. That is a lot of subtext for what might have been a trite story about drinking, and for an author who might have turned out pat immigrant tales.

3. “Hema and Kaushik”

“Hema and Kaushik” can be read as a series of three linked stories (“Once in a Lifetime,” “Year’s End,” and “Going Ashore”) or as a novella. Either way--and classifying the work in terms of form is not of primary interest here--the three units are interconnected enough that they do not lend themselves to discrete analyses without reference to one another. When read in sequence, the units yield an overall meaning that is lost if one insists that a story must be able to stand entirely on its own. The stories, if called that, stand passably well on their own, but they make more sense and mean more when looked at as a part of some whole; hence the decision to discuss them together. First, the conspicuous has to be addressed. What strikes the reader before anything else about the sequence is Lahiri’s choice of point of view. “Once in a Lifetime” is primarily in the second person, addressed by Hema to Kaushik, although the first person inevitably crops up. “Year’s End” is a variation on this pattern, narrated primarily in the first person by Kaushik, who occasionally addresses himself to Hema. “Going Ashore” is written in the third person, but looks alternately through Hema’s eyes and Kaushik’s. Lahiri’s reasons for alternating points of view are not obvious, but the reader finishes with a pleasing sense of having seen something from many different angles--which may itself have been Lahiri’s motive.

Hema's and Kaushik's families are part of the same Bengali-American circle in Massachusetts; and growing up, the two of them spend a great deal of time together, because their parents are close. Hema is even obliged to accept Kaushik's hand-me-downs. Being three years apart in age, and of different genders, they are not exactly friends, but familiar. Their families' bond is interrupted when Kaushik and his parents abruptly move back to India--to Bombay, not Calcutta, whence the families hail. Communication ceases; it is assumed that the two families will never see each other again, that Kaushik and his parents will not come back to America. But some time later it is announced that they are returning to Massachusetts--and will be staying with Hema's family. This jumping back and forth between continents "was regarded as a wavering, a weakness," raising all kinds of questions: "Had your father's position at Larsen & Toubro, too good to turn down at the time, fallen through? Was your mother no longer able to abide the mess and heat of India? Had they decided that the schools weren't good enough for you there?" (227). The strength of Hema's mother and father's disapproval is surprising:

"They should have known it's impossible to go back," they said to their friends, condemning your parents for having failed at both ends. We had stuck it out as immigrants while you had fled; had we been the ones to go back to India, my parents seemed to suggest, we would have stuck it out there as well. (227-228)

Their attitude seems to be that, when one has left India, one should plan on sticking it out. Once one has gone through the difficult period of adjustment, it is actually harder--"impossible," as her parents say--to adjust in reverse. If the US is truly unbearable, one goes back, but then that is final. This attitude is generation-specific. The last story, "Only Goodness," shows that assimilation is not a simple linear process, at least for the first generation raised in the US, who may for various reasons feel a yearning for the past, a hunger for what was lost. In other words,

the process can and does loop back on itself. And indeed, in the “Hema and Kaushik” sequence, this is very much what happens. Immigrants’ children are drawn to many corners of the globe; the US does not serve as an end in itself, nor does any other country.

A variety of interesting developments take place while the two families are living together. Besides Hema’s crush on Kaushik--which turns out to matter a great deal later in the sequence--subtle class differences creep out between the two families, differences that were more easily overlooked when they were not living together, but that become conspicuous now. Of separate social stations in Calcutta, they initially found that all that mattered, when they met in the US, was a common culture, language, and ethnicity. But upon their second encounter in the United States, it becomes increasingly uncertain whether those shared roots really are enough to sustain ties among people over the long term. Hema’s mother and father are made uneasy by Kaushik’s mother’s extravagant shopping habits, her increasing Westernization (her wardrobe has changed; she smokes; she drinks; she is relying more heavily on the English language; etc.), the leisure travel she has engaged in, and especially her extreme pickiness in searching for a new home in the States, a process that takes a month or so. As Hema puts it, “Somewhere, in that cramped house, a line was drawn between our two families” (245), and with time, after Kaushik and his parents have moved out, the friendship does dwindle.

One snowy day, Kaushik reveals to Hema the real reason he and his family are back in America: His mother is dying of cancer. They returned to give her privacy and “two years of pleasure” (251). It is at this point that the first third of the sequence, “Once in a Lifetime,” closes, and “Year’s End” begins. But at the start of “Year’s End,” Kaushik’s mother is already dead, and his father has remarried--quickly, although the timing is not crystal clear--the latter amplifying Kaushik’s pain over the former. The United States has become, for him, a place where people go

to die and where hurt multiplies hurt, a fact that shapes his future relationship to the country.

Although he does, in a way, become very assimilated, it is not a linear process with America as its end point. Kaushik becomes a wanderer, both within the US and, especially, without.

In “Going Ashore,” Hema is an adult and in Rome, ostensibly doing research--she has become a classicist--but mainly enjoying her last season of freedom before entering the arranged marriage she has consented to, after a years-long affair with a married man who would not leave his wife. It is significant that her field is classics. What that choice reflects, among other things, is a deep concern with the past, and it is understandable that she would have such a concern, given the rupture with the past that her parents’ emigration occasioned. Granted, the past of ancient Rome is quite distinct from the past of her parents’ Calcutta, but what is important is the longing for connection with *a* past and what that could symbolize. Lahiri encourages the reader to make this link, commenting that, “Certain elements of Rome reminded her of Calcutta. . . . Like Calcutta, which she’d visited throughout childhood, Rome was a city she knew on the one hand intimately and on the other hand not at all--a place that fully absorbed her and also kept her at bay” (299). Hema feels that “the knowledge she’d slowly accumulated, the ancient words and declensions and syntax that dwelled in her brain, felt sacred, enabling her to bring a dead world to life” (299). Aptly, her current focus is the Etruscans, “that mysterious civilization prior to Rome” (300). She is clearly interested in recovering what came *before*.

In Rome, she runs into Kaushik, incidentally, despite years of no contact. Kaushik has been traveling the world as a photojournalist, having spent a particularly great amount of time in Latin America and the Middle East, though little in either the US or India. Technically, he lives in Rome, but he is rarely in one place for long: “For years he had drifted across the globe without making meaningful ties” (306). Unlike Hema, he, as a photojournalist, is intensely engaged with

the here and now, with whatever he must direct his lens toward. He has little interaction with his family. He is alienated from his past, would seem to actively avoid it. However, when his father and stepmother do briefly visit him in Rome, he develops an odd, minor problem with his sight: a little speck in his vision that just will not go away. It would “accompany him wherever he went, quietly tormenting him. . . . It was not possible to remove it or make it stop” (308). It was “something that betrayed him and also refused to abandon him.” That this vision problem arises on the rare occasion that he sees his family--and has no further role in the story, except when he has been thinking back to his childhood--suggests that it is connected in some way with his past. Symbolically, it is his past, the past he just cannot rid of, try as he might.

Whereas Hema accepts the claims of the past upon her, as embodied in her research and her arranged marriage to an Indian, Kaushik rejects those claims, but his rejection shows signs of softening; on some level, he appears to long for what he has rejected. He and Hema embark on a short-lived but sincere love affair. Each represents for the other a vital link to the past. The narrator practically says as much. For Hema’s part: “Their parents had liked one another only for the sake of their origins, for the sake of a time and place to which they’d lost access. Hema had never been drawn to a person for that reason, *until now*” (315, emphasis added). For his: “She was the only person he’d met in his adult life who had any understanding of his past, the only woman he wanted to remain connected to” (326). Yet in a way he continues to reject the past. He makes her an unfair offer, inviting her to move to Hong Kong with him, where he already plans to go. She is engaged to be married. He is asking her to break off her marriage, but he is not asking her to marry him. As Hema observes, “It was not a fair trade” (323). He sabotages whatever possibilities existed between him and Hema. She leaves for India, and he goes to a beach resort in Thailand, “a place where he knew no one” (325), before Hong Kong. But it

occurs to him that “somewhere across the water, beyond the Andaman Sea, was the Bay of Bengal, and Calcutta, where Hema was” (325). He is in Asia, South Asia. While he is out on a boat, he is killed in the tsunami of 2004, sometimes called the South Asian Tsunami, a disaster that affected many countries in the region, including India. The speck in his vision is mentioned right before the tsunami strikes. If one follows Lahiri’s metaphors, it is almost as though she is suggesting, should one reject the claims the past has on one, the earth will swallow one up.

The process these two people have gone through in the course of the “Hema and Kaushik” sequence is not a simple linear one: Indian culture to American culture, and there one stays. For Hema and Kaushik, the US becomes a window onto a wider world, though for different reasons. Hema is compelled to embrace the past, including her heritage; Kaushik is compelled to escape his. Notably, on the surface, this sequence, like so much of Lahiri’s work, is about love and death. But examined more closely, it is about something else as well.

Part IV: Conclusion--A Defense of Jhumpa Lahiri

This paper began by taking a fresh look at whether the immigrant experience and the Indian-American experience are really the most apt paradigms for understanding the fiction--specifically, the short stories--of Jhumpa Lahiri. It has been argued that these classifications are more than superficial but that they require some qualification and closer analysis. Lahiri, except in one instance (“The Third and Final Continent”), does not write traditional immigrant tales. The subjects Lahiri addresses most directly are universal ones, having to do with love and the family. It typically is on a much deeper, subtler level that she grapples with the particular concerns of immigrants, and when she does, it is a specific aspect of the immigrant experience that interests her: assimilation. Assimilation is Lahiri’s great theme. But her approach to the topic

is unconventional. A distinction must be made between the explicit subject of a story, and its deep subject. While a story of Lahiri's may take the breakdown of a relationship, or the death of a loved one, as its explicit subject, the issue of assimilation is always present as the deep subject.

One possible objection to this argument is that it is too deterministic, that it is simplistic to reduce characters and their circumstances to this one issue. But is this an objection to the argument per se, or is it a fundamental discomfort with Lahiri's project? This essay acknowledged up front that it may make some readers uneasy to see assimilation as Lahiri's primary theme, because readers likely have strong feelings about the phenomenon of assimilation. It is worth remembering that fiction is always a selective reproduction of reality, with various features embellished and others ignored or minimized. Moreover, Lahiri's treatment of the theme is flexible and multidimensional; assimilation is not a simple thing that characters are reduced to, but a wildly complex phenomenon, as she shows it. And the thematic structure of her stories is two-tiered: Assimilation is never the only factor, her explicit subjects varying considerably.

Another potential criticism of Lahiri is that she only writes about Bengalis. This criticism is easy to refute--first, because it is not true (plenty of her characters are not Bengali or even Indian; some are actually white, including a few protagonists), but also because virtually every writer on the planet has a tendency to focus more often than not on people of her or his own ethnicity. Would anyone criticize John Cheever for writing mostly about WASPs? Or Isaac Bashevis Singer for writing mostly about Ashkenazi Jews? Or James Baldwin for writing mostly about African Americans? At this point in history, the answer is that few would fault these authors for an ethnocentrism that everyone, writer or not, is guilty of. Over time, readers learn to see the universal in the particular. It is a matter of familiarity. John Cheever, Isaac Singer, and

James Baldwin all belong to groups whose experience currently seems to hold some universal relevance for Western readers. The fact is that Westerners have not yet become comfortable with the idea of an American writer whose characters are primarily Bengali. This too shall pass.

One of the more insistent criticisms of Lahiri is that all her characters are upper middle class or upper class; have college or advanced degrees, often from Ivy-league universities; and work in the professions. This writer, a graduate student, has heard this criticism from fellow students in multiple classes. But it is a complaint that finds its way into print as well. One reviewer, Hirsh Sawhney, writing for The Guardian, has gone as far as to call this “her insurmountable weakness.” Sawhney’s skepticism of Lahiri is not unique; he is mentioned because of the pointedness of that skepticism. He continues:

The portrait of the US conjured up by this book is insular and antiquated and doesn’t differ very much from the country evoked by Lahiri’s crotchety New England predecessors. She fails to challenge the inadequacies of this elite America . . . and, as a result, Unaccustomed Earth isn’t a truly provocative or innovative American book.

What is odd about the class critique of Lahiri is that white writers are rarely subjected to the same test. Most white American writers depict the middle class; a minority depicts the working class or upper class. Few write about multiple classes in equal depth, and rarely are complaints aired about this fact. Immigrant writers are put under a unique pressure to represent vast demographics. It is not a reasonable expectation. If a writer were to attempt to represent the average immigrant to the US, he or she would end up representing no one at all; the characters would be devices, not believable individuals. If a writer attempted to depict the full variety of the American immigrant experience, it would mean undertaking the impossible, because the immigrant experience is varied indeed. It may be time to think more in terms of immigrant

experiences rather than *the* immigrant experience, and for readers and critics to adjust their expectations accordingly.

The above quotation from Sawhney also places Lahiri in line with “crotchety New England predecessors.” Sawhney believes that “Lahiri, a Bengali-American who’s been lauded as a teller of immigrant tales, is at core an old-guard New England writer.” It is true that her work bears no special resemblance to other Bengali-American writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni or Bharati Mukherjee--or even to other notable immigrant writers, like Abraham Cahan. In interviews, the people she regularly lists as influences are of a rather traditional bent, white and Protestant, writers whose fiction is solidly a part of the canon or on the verge of being so and who do not deal with the immigrant experience. Many of her stories are set in New England, where she grew up. In short, Sawhney might have a point. It is difficult, however, to see Lahiri as a disciple of any single writer, or as a clearly marked member of a school or movement, and it is for that reason that this essay has not dwelled on comparisons of Lahiri with other writers.

It is hoped that this paper has proven Sawhney’s last objection--Lahiri is not “truly provocative or innovative”--false. The subtlety that Lahiri brings to the immigrant experience, the obliqueness of her technique, is singular; and it is by this technique that she reveals assimilation in all of its permutations. It remains to be seen whether the theme of assimilation will characterize the whole arc of her career, or whether it represents a phase in what will ultimately be a more heterogeneous oeuvre. It is evident, nonetheless, that Lahiri has earned a permanent place in the body of American immigrant fiction.

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