

Transcending the Politics of “Where
You’re From”: Postcolonial Nationality
and Cosmopolitanism in Jhumpa Lahiri’s
Interpreter of Maladies

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“Where are you from?”

“I’m not *from* anywhere.”

“Well, where were you born?”

“I was born in the United States, but I have no memories of it because my family left when I was two.”

“So where did you grow up?”

“All over the world: South Africa, Kenya, Brazil, Mexico. And as an adult I’ve lived in the United States, Singapore, and Trinidad, but mostly Britain.”

“But you’re still American, aren’t you?”

“Yes and no. I have British and U.S. citizenship, but I have never felt that either of those identities fits me.”

“So how *do* you define your identity?”

“Not in terms of nationality.”

How many times have I had variations of that conversation? And it usually leaves the other person frustrated, unable to categorize me, or certain that I am being stubborn and difficult, making heavy weather of what should be easy small talk. To people who are alarmed or baffled by this refusal of national identity, I can only say: get used to it. Globalization is happening, whether we like it or not, and consequently there will be more and more people who do not define themselves in terms of nationality. Many people see globalization as a sinister phenomenon; they equate it with homogenization, Americanization, and loss of indigenous identity. Others see it as a potential force for good in the world: they believe it encourages people to look beyond artificial

divisions of nationality, ethnicity, religion, and other forms of cultural identity, to envision a world community that is inclusive without being homogenous. Ideally, in this globalized world, close connections between people of diverse origins will reduce mutual misunderstanding, hostility, and conflict. For good or ill, there might even be more people like myself who cannot comprehend tribalism because we do not have a tribe and who do not have an “us and them” attitude because we are not sure who is “us” and who is “them.” Some people describe this condition as cultural rootlessness; others identify it as cosmopolitanism, or cultural identity rooted in individual experience rather than geographical location. Far from producing homogenization, this venture beyond nationally-demarcated borders produces more flexible and varied forms of cultural identity. Cosmopolitan people like myself are not homogenized or Americanized; the cultural identity of each cosmopolitan person is unique, eclectic, and certainly not “American” – whatever that may be.

Cosmopolitanism has traditionally been considered a condition available only to the elite, but in the contemporary world of increased migration, mass travel, and communications technology, this is certainly no longer the case. Many migrants and refugees become cosmopolitan without becoming elite, and even people who have never travelled live in a world in which cultural and linguistic diversity is omnipresent. As Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen observe, “the capacity to communicate with others and to understand their cultures is available, at least potentially, to many” (5). This observation implies that cosmopolitanism is an attitude rather than a lifestyle. It is possible to have a culturally open disposition and to imagine the world as one community while remaining rooted in one’s homeland; conversely, it is also possible to retain a limiting sense of national and cultural affiliation while travelling and even living all over the world. As Rachel Trousdale notes in her discussion of transnational fiction, people with a cosmopolitan orientation conceive of their communities “based not on the location of their roots but on a shared willingness to reach beyond them” (194).

The conception of cosmopolitanism as an exclusive province of the elite is outdated, but the criticisms of what Timothy Brennan has dubbed “cosmo-theory” are worth considering. Brennan argues that

“cosmopolitanism is the way in which a kind of American patriotism is today being expressed” (682). He sees globalization not only as the economic domination of the U.S. but also as a homogenizing imposition of American cultural forms all over the world, gradually replacing (implicitly pure) forms of indigenous cultural expression. It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage with debates about American economic domination, except to note that assumptions about the U.S.’ continuing position as the world’s only economic “superpower” have been challenged by recent and ongoing developments in the global economy. Brennan’s argument about the “homogenizing” effects of cultural globalization underestimates the vast diversity of cultural forms all over the world and overlooks their dynamic and evolving nature. As Paul Jay reminds us, “every culture is always shaped by other cultures, and agency has more to do with the intelligent and imaginative negotiation of cross-cultural contact than with avoiding such contact” (3). Moreover, the cultural effects of globalization are increasingly reciprocal, with mass migration producing significant cultural changes in host nations. As Vertovec implies in his work on “super-diversity,” migrants cannot be conveniently grouped into clear-cut “diasporas” because the realities of cultural dynamics are much more complex than those envisioned in simplistic models of “multiculturalism,” which wrongly attribute homogeneity and cultural stasis to groups of people from particular parts of the world.

We cannot, of course, ignore the very real power imbalances between individuals, between groups, and indeed, between nations. Postcolonial theory has been extremely useful in analysing the effects of such power imbalances on cultural expression, but the limitations of the term “postcolonial” are familiar to scholars from a range of academic disciplines. As Tabish Khair argues, designating a work postcolonial “privileg[es] the European experience that postcolonial writing ostensibly sets out to critique” (16). Because of power structures based on class and gender inequities within so-called postcolonial locations, social conflict should not be reduced to a colonial/postcolonial paradigm, nor should the larger processes of globalization. Indeed, Jay persuasively argues that although globalization has accelerated spectacularly within the past few decades, “it is a mistake to approach globalization itself as a contemporary phe-

nomenon” (2). Instead, he views it as a long historical process beginning “at least in the sixteenth century and covering a time span that includes the long histories of imperialism, colonization, decolonization, and postcolonialism” (3). From this perspective, there is no essential incompatibility between (narrower) postcolonial and (broader) cosmopolitan approaches to literary texts because colonialism and postcolonialism are integral to the history of globalization.

I contend that a cosmopolitan approach to literary texts can incorporate postcolonial perspectives within a broader and more flexible analytical framework, and I intend to demonstrate this in my discussion of Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). I see Lahiri’s fiction as an example of a new type of literature that is better described as cosmopolitan than postcolonial because it moves beyond oppositional, emancipatory, or centre-periphery narrative themes. Although postcolonial understandings of “diaspora” and “hybridity” assume the existence of a centre-margin binary, this binary is rapidly breaking down in an increasingly mobile and interconnected world. My essay discusses the specific ways in which Lahiri’s stories deconstruct simplistic binaries of power, geographical origin, geographical location, and cultural identity, and argues that globalization is generating an ongoing transition from postcoloniality to cosmopolitanism.

Various definitions of cosmopolitanism have been proposed by various critics, all of which suggest that, whereas globalization is an ongoing *phenomenon*, cosmopolitanism is an *attitude* cultivated partly in response to the reality of globalization. In *The Cosmopolitan Vision*, Ulrich Beck calls on communities to unlearn their nationalist modes of self-identification and instead begin contributing to global culture, equipped with “[their] own language and cultural symbols” (21). The ethical nature of cosmopolitanism is also affirmed by Jon Binnie, Julian Holloway, Steve Millington, and Craig Young, who suggest that, ideally, cosmopolitanism integrates “a philosophy of world citizenship which simultaneously transcends the boundaries of the nation-state and descends to the scale of individual rights and responsibilities” (13). Binnie et al’s emphasis on individual rights and responsibilities within a global framework encourages individuals to transcend narrow loyalties and sympathetically

incorporate people from other parts of the world into a vision of shared humanity without an erasure of cultural identity. It is not even necessary to be an ostensibly rootless person like myself in order to imagine the world as one community. Indeed, as Berthold Schoene argues in *The Cosmopolitan Novel*, acknowledging the existence of communities beyond the constraints of territory can actually strengthen and renew our sense of rootedness by “requiring us to define who we are, or strive to be, within an ever-broadening spectrum of contexts. . . . To call oneself cosmopolitan involves not so much excising one’s local affiliations . . . [as] stepping out of narrow, self-incarcerating traditions of belonging” (13, 21).

Cosmopolitan writing differs from postcolonial writing in that it attempts to move beyond (increasingly outdated) assumptions about imperial dynamics in the contemporary world. Schoene notes that a cosmopolitan novel imagines the world, whereas a postcolonial novel is “focused strictly on (re-)imagining the nation” (130). In order to imagine the world as one community, cosmopolitan writing must not only deconstruct the binaries of east/west, centre/periphery, and self/other (all of which postcolonial writing does), but also move *beyond* postcolonial concepts such as “hybridity” and “diaspora,” which assume that identity has a geographical basis. In short, what is required is a transcendence of the politics of where people are “from,” not least because a growing number of people are simply not “from” a particular geographical location. People like myself who have dual citizenship, who grew up on three continents, and who have lived as adults on a fourth or even fifth continent do not have a “homeland,” do not fit into any particular “diaspora,” and do not identify with any particular form of “hybridity.” In other words, postcolonial theory proves inadequate when describing the lived experience of the growing number of people for whom traditional identity politics simply do not apply.

A U.S. citizen of South Asian origin, Lahiri writes fiction that imagines cultural identities that lie beyond the postcolonial paradigm. Although it is possible to identify Lahiri by citizenship and ancestral origin, these categories are questioned and problematized in her writing. A number of short stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* deconstruct

simplistic binaries of power based on geographical origin, geographical location, and cultural identity, thus challenging the very categories on which postcolonial theory is constructed. However, rather than portraying a simple reversal of power – the paradigm of upward mobility – her stories present a more complicated picture of the ongoing effects of globalization and thus expose the limits of contemporary postcolonial theory. They also provide a powerful critique of the pernicious effects of nationalistic sentiment in both the former colonies and the “west.”

Several stories in Lahiri’s collection destabilize centre-margin oppositions. In the story “Sexy,” for example, Miranda—a white woman—can be seen as a rustic native from Michigan, while Dev—an Indian man—is figured as a sophisticated cosmopolitan, superior in wealth and knowledge, who has seen more of the world and is more at home in Boston than the white American from the Midwest. Who is the colonizer, and who is the colonized? Who is the migrant? Who occupies the centre, and who occupies the margin? Similarly, “This Blessed House,” focuses on Twinkle, a South Asian American woman whose attitude toward the gaudy Christian trinkets she finds in her new home recalls the attitude of westerners who collect Asian or African images and artefacts because they find them exotic and amusing. She gathers together the kitsch Christian paraphernalia and displays it on her mantelpiece for entertainment value and demonstrates a similarly condescending view of the believers who had attached religious sentiments to the objects, so that the story works its reversal of colonial hierarchy: “Obviously,” she says, “they were important to the people who used to live here” (Lahiri 138). Encountering a “larger-than-life-sized watercolour poster of Christ, weeping translucent tears the size of peanut shells and sporting a crown of thorns, rolled up behind a radiator in the guest bedroom,” she says “Oh, we must, we simply must put it up. It’s too spectacular” (139). From their more sophisticated position vis-à-vis the former owners of the house, Twinkle and her new husband Sanjeev display contrasting attitudes toward objects signifying an alien faith and culture. Sanjeev initially resists them and then reluctantly resigns himself to living with them for Twinkle’s sake, while Twinkle (much like a colonial collector of so-called primitive artefacts) appropriates and reinterprets them.

Other stories in the collection do more than challenge conventional binaries; they attempt to erase them altogether. Child observers in stories like “Mrs. Sen’s” and “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” fail to understand national and cultural divisions, thus encouraging the reader to radically rethink them. “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” is set during the 1971 war from which Bangladesh emerged an independent nation; in the text, the world is seen through the eyes of the ten-year-old narrator Lilia, daughter of Indian immigrants to the U.S. The story begins with a brief contextual explanation that assumes the (predominantly western) readers might have no knowledge of these important events: “Mr. Pirzada . . . came from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, but then a part of Pakistan. That year [1971] Pakistan was engaged in a civil war. The eastern frontier, where Dacca was located, was fighting for autonomy from the ruling regime in the west” (23). Lilia refers to Mr. Pirzada as “the Indian man” (25), whereupon her father corrects her, saying:

“Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian. . . . Not since Partition. Our country was divided. 1947. . . . Hindus here, Muslims there. Dacca no longer belongs to us.” He told me that during Partition Hindus and Muslims had set fire to each other’s homes. For many, the idea of eating in each other’s company was still unthinkable. (25)

But no matter how thoroughly the difference between Indians and Pakistanis is explained to her, Lilia remains confused; in her eyes, Mr. Pirzada seems to have much in common with her parents:

It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after a meal as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. Nevertheless my father insisted that I understand the difference, and he led me to a map of the world taped to the wall over his desk. He seemed concerned that Mr. Pirzada might

take offense if I accidentally referred to him as an Indian, though I could not really imagine Mr. Pirzada being offended by much of anything. (25–26)

Having not yet learned to think of people in terms of cultural or geographical categories, Lilia responds to Mr. Pirzada in a simple and spontaneous way. She likes him because he is kind to her, and she empathizes with his concern for the safety of his family in Dacca. Not understanding the implications of his identity as Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Muslim, she responds to him empathetically as one human being to another and instinctively understands the interdependency of human lives in a globalized world.

Lilia's father's insistence on Mr. Pirzada's Pakistani identity is, of course, moot; over the course of the narrative, East Pakistan becomes Bangladesh, highlighting the constructed nature of national identities. The story also emphasizes the violence that normally pervades the birth of new nations. The violence of Partition is made explicit, as is the violence surrounding the emergence of Bangladesh: "In March, Dacca had been invaded, torched, and shelled by the Pakistani army. Teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped. By the end of the summer, three hundred thousand people were said to have died" (23). The body count of innocent people during the migrations that accompanied Partition was much higher than that of the 1971 war; both conflicts vividly demonstrate the destructive aspects of nationalist sentiment. In particular, the story's references to the shooting of teachers and gang rapes by soldiers, as well as Mr. Pirzada's anxiety about the safety of his wife and seven daughters in Dacca, underscore the threat of gendered violence.

Implicitly calling attention to the masculinist nature of nationalist conflict, Lilia's father's discourse on it is directly contrasts with her mother's domestic activities: "We returned to the kitchen, where my mother was draining a pot of boiled rice into a colander" (26). When her father spoils his appetite by munching cashew nuts before dinner, her mother asks, "How can you possibly expect her to know about Partition? Put those nuts away" (27). The juxtaposition of these two simple statements is, I think, significant, particularly in the context of her mother's gen-

dered activity of fostering intercultural harmony by creating nourishing meals to share between people from opposite sides of “the divide.” The word “nuts” has two slang meanings that may be relevant. The first denotes irrationality or even insanity, and the second denotes testicles – an explicitly gendered reference, which in this context suggests excessive testosterone and, implicitly, male aggression. Thus the statement, “How can you possibly expect her to know about Partition? Put those nuts away” can be interpreted as a pun that links male aggression, irrationality, nationalist struggles, war, and victimization of innocent women and children. “Nuts,” indeed.

The story also suggests that there is nothing new about the violence associated with the emergence of nations. Americans celebrate the War of Independence, which gave birth to the United States, and Lilia is made to learn about the Revolutionary War in tedious detail every year at school: “We learned American history, of course, and American geography. That year, and every year, it seemed, we began by studying the Revolutionary War” (27). Her implicit criticism of America’s excessive self-focus continues: “No one at school talked about the war followed so faithfully in my living room. We continued to study the American Revolution, and learned about the injustices of taxation without representation, and memorized passages from the Declaration of Independence” (32–33). When Lilia is sent to the school library to research an aspect of the American Revolutionary War for a report, she is gently reprimanded when the teacher finds her looking at a book on Pakistan (33). The moment demonstrates the self-absorbed nature of nationalism itself: the conventional narrative of one’s own nation becomes of paramount importance in the minds of its patriots, even when contemporary events elsewhere in the world ought to be of some concern. “An Indian official,” readers are told, “announced that unless the world helped to relieve the burden of East Pakistani refugees, India would have to go to war against Pakistan” (36). This, of course, is precisely what happened:

Troops from both sides lined the border, and Dacca was insisting on nothing short of independence. The war was to be waged on East Pakistani soil. The United States was siding with West Pakistan, the Soviet Union with India and what was soon

to be Bangladesh. War was declared officially on December 4, and twelve days later, the Pakistani army, weakened by having to fight three thousand miles from their source of supplies, surrendered in Dacca. (40)

Although the text presents the absurd spectacle of other nations officially taking sides in the conflict, what Lilia remembers most about her parents and Mr. Pirzada is “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, a single fear” (41). This vision is an eloquent argument in favour of a cosmopolitan perspective that imagines the world as one community and people as individuals rather than members of particular nations or other categories of identity.

An implicit critique of nationalism continues in “The Third and Final Continent,” in which the Indian narrator attends university in Britain before moving to the U.S. for employment. Before leaving London, he buys *The Student Guide to North America*: ““The pace of life in North America is different from Britain [sic] as you will discover,” the guidebook informed me. “Everybody feels he must get to the top. Don’t expect an English cup of tea”” (174). In addition to the grammatical error in the first sentence and the assumption in the second sentence that “everybody” is a “he,” the statements contained in the guidebook make sweeping generalizations about hundreds of millions of people, apparently in an effort to draw (artificial) distinctions between “the English” and “the North Americans,” yet the guidebook fails to confront the enormous heterogeneity and diversity of the U.S. and ignores Canada altogether. A further irony in the phrase “an English cup of tea” is that tea is not indigenous to Britain; it is grown in India and other former British colonies. Therefore the guide’s sneering, smugly nationalistic statements are inaccurate on a number of levels.

The narrator’s migration to America takes place in July 1969, shortly after the first men landed on the moon. The American passengers on the plane interpret the moon landing as a triumph for America—a national achievement rather than a human achievement, even though the science and technology which made it possible were developed over centuries by many people from a number of nations. In Boston, the narrator’s

elderly landlady, Mrs. Croft, is at her most shrill and most peremptory when expressing nationalistic sentiments; she announces stridently that “There is an American flag on the moon!” (179). Eccentric and bossy, Mrs. Croft insists that the narrator shout “Splendid!” in response to this daily announcement, which she continues to make well after the flag is taken down. However, the turning point of the story is the moment she is able to transcend her patriotic fervour and express respect and appreciation for someone from a very different cultural background. The narrator has recently had an arranged marriage, and his new bride, whom he does not really know and does not yet love, arrives from India several weeks after he has settled in Boston. When he takes Mala to meet Mrs. Croft, he notices her response to Mrs. Croft’s eccentric ways: “Mala laughed then. Her voice was full of kindness, her eyes bright with amusement. I had never heard her laugh before” (195). For the first time, he empathizes with his shy, traditional bride:

Mrs. Croft . . . was still scrutinizing Mala from top to toe with what seemed to be placid disdain. I wondered if Mrs. Croft had ever seen a woman in a sari, with a dot painted on her forehead and bracelets stacked on her wrists. I wondered what she would object to. I wondered if she could see the red dye still vivid on Mala’s feet, all but obscured by the bottom edge of her sari. At last Mrs. Croft declared, with the equal measure of disbelief and delight I knew well:

“She is a perfect lady!”

Now it was I who laughed. I did so quietly, and Mrs. Croft did not hear me. But Mala had heard, and, for the first time, we looked at each other and smiled. I like to think of that moment in Mrs. Croft’s parlor as the moment when the distance between Mala and me began to lessen. (195–96)

Crucially, the two women’s mutual willingness to look beyond striking cultural differences and respond warmly to each other is also the beginning of genuine warmth between the protagonist and his bride, who are of the same cultural background but have, until this point, been strangers to each other.

Other stories in the collection deconstruct cultural binaries in various ways. Many of the characters are Americans of South Asian origin, and not all of them feel significant cultural ties to their homelands. In “A Temporary Matter,” for instance, Shukumar had been “bored” at a recital of Bengali poets in Boston because “he was unable to decipher the literary diction, and couldn’t join the rest of the audience as they sighed and nodded solemnly after certain phrases” (13). By contrast, a fellow student in his Oriental Civilization course at university, “an American guy, a maniac,” knew Urdu and Sanskrit, which Shukumar did not (17). Similarly, in the eponymous “Interpreter of Maladies,” the Das family—on holiday in India from New Jersey—appear to feel no cultural or emotional connection to their ancestral homeland. Mr. Das plays the role of the voyeuristic tourist, complete with guidebook and camera, and asks the driver to stop the car so that he can photograph “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). While Mr. Das apparently finds poverty to be picturesque, Mrs. Das takes no interest in India.

These examples of diasporic characters who are disconnected from India seem to support Pranav Jani’s contention that Lahiri’s stories are “dedicated to exploring the loss involved in transnational migration” (243). However, each story also shows the alienating effects of human disconnection on a more general level. “A Temporary Matter,” for example, portrays a classic situation of a marriage breakdown following a tragedy—in this case, the stillbirth of a child. Shoba and Shukumar, far away from their relatives in India and other parts of America who might provide them with emotional support, have only each other to rely on. Each is too wrapped up in solitary grief to be able to offer adequate comfort to the other, so almost inevitably they fail one another and gradually drift apart. Viewed from that perspective, the situation would seem to endorse the close kinship ties of traditional Indian families. However, any tendency to idealize the warmth of human relationships in India is countered by other stories in the collection. For example, the lonely life of Mr. Kapasi in “Interpreter of Maladies,” the ostracism of Boori Ma in “A Real Durwan,” and the neglect of Bibi Haldar by her

family in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” suggest that people’s needs are not always met in India, either.

In each story, the failure to connect is a general malady that manifests itself simultaneously on interpersonal and intercultural levels. The famous phrase “only connect” is taken from E.M. Forster’s novel *Howard’s End*, and although it is not explicitly alluded to in the *Interpreter of Maladies*, I use it because it seems applicable to each story and also because, as Simon Lewis notes, the title story is, in some ways, a rewriting of Forster’s 1924 novel *A Passage to India*: “The plots of both texts hinge on a misconceived tourist excursion – to the Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India*, to the monastic cells at Udayagiri and Khandagiri in ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ – during which a male Indian guide and a female visitor misinterpret each other’s verbal and nonverbal signals” (219). After discussing the similarities and differences between the two texts, Lewis argues that “Ultimately, although Lahiri’s story reiterates Forster’s pessimism concerning human relations, it denies that the malady that comes between people has its origin in race or geographic location” (221). Lewis suggests that the underlying theme for both Forster and Lahiri is that “no one can bridge the communicative gaps that inevitably separate human beings” (221).

My own view of the theme of human connection in Lahiri’s stories is not so absolute. Firstly, a number of characters in the collection do connect empathetically with others: Lilia, her parents, and Mr. Pirzada in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”; Laxmi and her cousin in “Sexy”; Eliot and Mrs. Sen in “Mrs. Sen’s”; Bibi’s sympathetic neighbours who look after her in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”; and, eventually, the narrator and his young wife in “The Third and Final Continent.” Secondly, the stories also suggest that the willingness and ability to connect on an intercultural level is inseparable from the willingness and ability to connect on an interpersonal level. The radical implication of this suggestion is that attachment to fixed notions of one’s own cultural identity is actually a barrier to interpersonal connection, particularly with those regarded as “other.” In the worst cases, this attachment can lead to violence and war, as demonstrated in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine.” More often in Lahiri’s stories, the failure of sympathy

or imagination towards people regarded as “other” is the same character flaw that expresses itself in solipsism and self-absorption. Examples abound. In “Interpreter of Maladies,” Mrs. Das is too self-absorbed to be interested in her husband, her children, or India. Similarly, in “Sexy,” Miranda’s shocking ignorance about the world outside the U.S. renders her unable to imagine anything outside of her immediate experience. Her self-centredness manifests in her inability or unwillingness to put herself in another person’s position, a gap demonstrated most clearly when she conducts an affair with a married man without ever considering the damage to his family, despite hearing about the painful consequences of another man’s infidelity: “It was a wife’s worst nightmare. After nine years of marriage, Laxmi told Miranda, her cousin’s husband had fallen in love with another woman. . . . Laxmi’s cousin had taken to her bed. . . . ‘I feel worst for the boy [Rohin],’ Laxmi added. ‘He’s been at home for days. My cousin says she can’t even take him to school’” (Lahiri 83–84). When Miranda baby-sits for Rohin, he tells her about his mother’s reaction to being abandoned by his father: “My mother has puffiness. She says it’s a cold, but really she cries, sometimes for hours. Sometimes straight through dinner. Sometimes she cries so hard her eyes puff up like bullfrogs” (104). At the end of the story, Miranda’s half-hearted decision to let go of her relationship with Dev arises not out of empathy for his wife but because of her sudden realization that Dev does not love her; he just finds her sexy. This truth is inadvertently revealed to her through Rohin’s embarrassed whisper that sexy means “loving someone you don’t know” (107). The seven-year-old boy is shown to have a better grasp of world geography than Miranda, as well as more insight into human relationships, albeit from a child’s point of view. He makes connections that she cannot or will not make and is already more cosmopolitan than the solipsistic Miranda. Having initially thought that Bengali “was a religion” (84), Miranda does, during the course of her affair, develop a superficial interest in India. Even this curiosity, however, is driven by her curiosity about the physical appearance of Dev’s wife—who, he tells her, “resembled an actress in Bombay named Madhuri Dixit” (98)—and her need to assess her rival for his affections. The sole purpose of Miranda’s foray into an Indian shop is to

locate a video of a film featuring the actress whose name she has written down as “Mottery Dixit” (98–99).

An exclusive focus on one’s own needs and desires at the expense of a wider cosmopolitan or even interpersonal vision is not limited to the “western” characters in the stories. Moreover, sharing a cultural heritage does not guarantee sympathetic connection. Boori Ma’s treatment at the hands of the callous apartment residents in “A Real Durwan” is just one example, though their lack of empathy for her may be partly explained by class divisions.¹ Similarly, although there are ostensibly no class, religious, caste, or other cultural divisions between Twinkle and Sanjeev in “This Blessed House,” they fail to connect with each other on an imaginative level. Twinkle’s carelessness is a failure to imagine Sanjeev’s need for domestic cleanliness and order. Sanjeev fails to appreciate Twinkle’s whimsical and spontaneous nature, instead seeing it as disruptive and inconsiderate. Moreover, as “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” demonstrates, even family ties do not always give rise to sympathetic engagement. Bibi Haldar, an epileptic woman, receives much better treatment from her neighbours than her family.

Although many of Lahiri’s stories present a bleak picture of human relationships, the collection also contains situations of sympathetic connection, many of which involve children who have not yet learned to separate the world into “us” and “them.” As we have seen, the ten-year-old Lilia in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” does not understand the implications of Mr. Pirzada’s identity as Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Muslim, and instead engages with him empathetically. Likewise, the eleven-year-old Eliot in “Mrs. Sen’s” forms a genuine friendship with Mrs. Sen and accepts her as she is. Their relationship is free of the judgments American adults might make of an immigrant who cannot learn to drive, lives in the past, stubbornly clings to “alien” modes of dress and behaviour, and is helplessly dependent on her husband and far-away relatives. Finally, seven-year-old Rohin in “Sexy” engages easily and naturally with the rather stiff and self-conscious Miranda. The children, who do not understand cultural divisions, demonstrate the benefits of an unprejudiced approach to people whom adults tend to regard as “other.”

“Art’s greatest benefit to men,” wrote George Eliot in 1856, “is to widen their sympathies” (54). As revealed in a letter she wrote to Harriet Beecher Stowe, her vision of “sympathy” extended beyond the Eurocentric world typically portrayed in nineteenth-century realist fiction and into the realm of the intercultural: “There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow men who must differ from them in customs and beliefs” (qtd. in Haight 301). A number of contemporary scholars have also emphasized the role of literature in extending the sympathies and imaginations of readers beyond the limits of self and beyond the limits of narrow tribalist perspectives. For Kwame Anthony Appiah, “fiction is an exercise in communication from which we learn to respond to the worldview of others” (qtd. in Trousdale 9). Schoene argues:

From a cosmopolitan perspective the real challenge of any viable world politics is to abolish for good this imperialist dynamic of psycho-geographical self-determination and instead begin to think of ourselves . . . [as a] community of world citizens. . . . It is the role of art and literature to provide the cosmopolitan imagination needed to facilitate this fundamental shift in the way we conceive of ourselves in relation to one another. (182–83)

Postcolonial critics of cosmopolitanism might argue that it ignores the very real global power imbalances resulting from the colonial encounter and from ongoing neo-imperialist processes. However, the fictional narratives of Lahiri and other writers with a cosmopolitan perspective suggest that such a categorical worldview oversimplifies the nature of human relationships, reducing it to the politics of “where you’re from.” Without ignoring inequalities of power, Lahiri attends to the specificities of individual experience and to the complexities of interpersonal interaction within a global framework and encourages a vision of human beings as individuals rather than members of nations or other exclusionary communities. Such a vision implies an ethical imperative for individuals to think beyond the boundaries of self, community, and nation in their interactions with others.

Note

- 1 In “A Real Durwan,” Boori Ma is a poor woman who looks after an apartment building in Calcutta. After many years of service, she is turned out onto the streets because some of the residents suspect her of stealing and others simply do not want her around any more.

Works Cited

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CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENTS

African Americans, 'Race' and Diaspora

13-15 June 2013

University Paul-Valéry, Montpellier 3, France

Deadline for proposals: 15 November 2012

Specifically dedicated to the interlocking issues of "race" and the Black Diaspora, this event is the third in the "Diasporas, Cultures of Mobilities, 'Race'" Conference series, organized by the research center EMMA (University Paul-Valéry, Montpellier 3, France) in partnership with CAAR, CRILOHI (Université de la Réunion), MIGRINTER (Université de Poitiers), Department of Continuing Education (Oxford University, UK), Wake Forest University (NC, USA)

<http://www.wfu.edu/romancelanguages/Diasporas%20and%20Race/archive.html>

The 4th International Conference on Multicultural Discourses

October 23-26, 2013

Hangzhou, China

Deadline for abstract submission: 31 December 2012

AIMS OF THE CONFERENCE

- 1) To bring together scholars, researchers, and practitioners from around the globe to contribute to a stimulating and rewarding exchange of ideas and techniques regarding discourse studies;
- 2) To enhance cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and research innovation in discourse studies;
- 3) To facilitate the formation of collaborative research networks among conference participants.