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Trans-nationality and Motherhood Concerns in JhumpaLahiri's Fiction

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Although JhumpaLahiri's *The Namesake* is the story of Gogol Ganguli, the American-born son of Bengali immigrants, it begins and ends with his mother Ashima. The novel opens with Ashima's uncertainty about living in the U.S. and particularly about the challenges concomitant with motherhood in a foreign land. It ends with her decisive departure from the domestic, suburban life to which she has assimilated, in her own way, over the course of three decades. Throughout the text, Ashima embodies some of the most pressing challenges facing the postcolonial female subject in diaspora: in a nation whose values and customs are alien to her, she must preserve the Bengali traditions that tenuously link her to her homeland while simultaneously ensuring a successful future for her American-born children. Although she preserves Bengali culture in many aspects of her domestic life, Ashima's Americanized children and the demands of suburban American life force her to adapt in unexpected ways. Unlike Jasmine, however, Ashima does not adopt an American identity, even if to change it; and unlike Sara Edgehill, she does not reject motherhood. Instead, the uncertain young woman we encounter in the novel's opening pages attempting unsuccessfully to recreate a favorite Indian snack in her Massachusetts kitchen is transformed through her role as an immigrant mother and wife into a transnational figure. Ashima steadily forges an identity that negotiates between the demands of both cultures and lives up to the meaning of her name, "she who is limitless, without borders" (*Namesake* 26).

This evocation of borders is particularly interesting given the way Ashima's transnationality is constructed, in "borderlands." Anzaldúa's important paradigm offers the psychic space from which Ashima

can negotiate between the various claims that her gender, culture, and national affiliation make on her identity. Borderland spaces facilitate the construction of identities that are self-determined; as Anzaldúa writes in the "Towards a New Consciousness" chapter of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the individual is allowed to assess the identifications to which they have access and discard or alter them as she sees fit. Identity is a matter of choice, not geography or inheritance. Like Bhabha, who suggests that any discussion of identity should be approached from the interstices between categories such as nation, race, class, and gender to avoid the "fixity and fetishism of identities," Anzaldúa also argues that borderland identities are fluid and dynamic (Bhabha *Location* 9). Moreover, Singh and Schmidt note that borders are "neither the site of assimilation nor the marking of an alien other," but instead "a realm of exile, mobility, and survival strategies, and the emergence of alternative and multiple identities, mixing old and new" (13). While culture can be mobile, like immigrants themselves, it does not have to prevent them from participating in mainstream America to the extent that they choose and appropriating the aspects of American culture that are useful to them. As these definitions suggest, borderlands – or in Bhabha's language, interstices – allow the immigrant to determine a space for herself in the U.S. that is limited by neither physical nor cultural boundaries or dictated by any particular national identity.

In *The Namesake*, Ashima's sunhomeliness – her ability to negotiate the world in her home and ultimately be at home in the world – conflates the domestic space with her transnationality and her ability to navigate between cultures. She achieves this transnationality by translating the traditional gender roles she has inherited

from her Bengali culture. In fact, many of the Indian and Indian-American women in Lahiri's fiction tries to live up to – with varying degrees of success – what ParthaChatterjee would describe as the “new woman” in *The Nation and Its Fragments* 57.

The division between *ghar*– the home, an inherently spiritual and female space – and *bāhir*– the outside world, which is inherently male and dominated by material pursuits – determines not only the division of labor in terms of how the middle-class Indian home is run, but more importantly, it positions women as the guardians and propagators of Indian culture. In this manner, Indian nationalism elevates the condition of the middle class woman to a goddess-like status, and it came to be understood that “as long as India took care to retain the spiritual distinctiveness of its culture, it could make all the compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt itself to the requirements of a modern material world without losing its identity” (Chatterjee 120). The home becomes the site “where the battle would be waged for national independence” because while “[i]n the world, imitation of and adaptation to Western norms was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to annihilation of one's very identity;” gender roles are thus imbued with an essential status that is not easily cast off in the process of immigration. In fact, as my argument suggests, in Lahiri's fiction, the process of settling in the United States reinforces the pervasiveness of these roles (Chatterjee 121).

Indeed, before turning to *The Namesake*, it is useful to address the ways in which *Interpreter of Maladies* – Lahiri's debut short story collection, which has received significant popular and critical attention since its 1999 publication – frames the cross-cultural conditions. Its nine stories focus mostly on the lives and relationships of first and second generation Indian immigrants living in New England, although a few stories take place in India, and they are all concerned with interpersonal connections and the various forces that act upon the human ability to forge ties across cultures and continents, and even within families. 58 It is noteworthy that at least one of *Interpreter's* protagonists fails to translate the role of Chatterjean “new woman” in the U.S. In the following section, I will

discuss that story and three others, examining the ways Lahiri explores issues of gender, motherhood, and cultural identity through characters I read as precursors to *The Namesake's* Ashima Ganguli.

The Maternal Precursors in *Interpreter of Maladies*

One only has to look at the titles of the reviews of *Interpreter* that appeared in major American publications to note the theme of loss and isolation that critics highlight in the stories: *Newsweek's* “The Maladies of Belonging,” *The New York Times's* “Liking American, but Longing for India” and “Subcontinental Drift” are just a few. The themes of cultural tradition and loss throughout the short stories, concluding that Lahiri is a part of the generation of Indian-Americans for whom displacement and loss of one's cultural self still exerts a powerful pull on the imagination.

Indeed, Lahiri has frequently reflected publicly on this aspect of her own upbringing, for in nearly all of her work – fiction and otherwise – she writes about the challenges facing the children of Indian immigrants in the United States. Born in England, Lahiri moved to the United States with her Bengali parents at the age of two. Although raised almost entirely in the U.S., interviews and personal essays indicate that even as a child growing up in New England she was aware of the cultural tug-of-war at work in her life. In an essay that appeared in a 2006 edition of *Newsweek*, aptly titled “My Two Lives,” Lahiri writes, “When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen”(43).

In her own family, this redirection manifests itself in her parents' success in raising a daughter who – despite an admittedly complicated relationship with her cultural identity – credits her parents with instilling in her a connection to their homeland: “[w]hile I am American by virtue of the fact that I was raised in this country, I am Indian thanks to the efforts of two individuals. I feel Indian not because of the time I've spent in India or because of my genetic composition but rather because of my parents' steadfast presence in my life” (“My Two Lives” 43). But her cultural

identity exhibits the self-conscious negotiations seen in many of her first and second-generation characters. Consider what Lahiri says in recent *New York Times* article on "India's Post-Rushdie Generation":

My connection with India is fundamental...But at the same time it is very slippery and confusing. It has been a cause of bewilderment and sometimes strife and frustration within me. It's a messy thing. But it's been a blessing for me and my writing. I would like to see myself as an American writer. When I was raised I was told not to think of myself as an American. It was very important to my mother to raise her children as Indian, thinking and doing things in an Indian way, whatever that means. Even now it is hard for me to say I am an American." (qtd. in Rothstein B1)

Even though Lahiri came to the U.S. at a much younger age than Mukherjee and spent almost all of her life here, what contributes to Lahiri's hesitation is having been raised Indian in America. This fact helps explain the role of the family/home in Lahiri's exploration of gendered unhomeliness, as Lahiri understands firsthand how the immigrant home becomes the interstice, the transnational space where identity is negotiated. Moreover, she implies that in this role of facilitation – in regards to both a connection to Indian culture and the opportunities afforded by life in the United States – the struggles of immigrant parents are justified by the success of their children. "The immigrant's journey, no matter how ultimately rewarding, is founded on departure and deprivation," Lahiri writes, "but it secures for the subsequent generation a sense of arrival and advantage" ("My Two Lives" 43). This second-generation sensibility informs the manner in which Lahiri explores the immigrant experience in her fiction.

Jennifer Bess and Brada-Williams take note of this sense of departure, longing, and ultimate arrival in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Bess asserts that "icons of alienation and loneliness" fill the collection, "expos[ing] the liminal situation

unique to the first- and second-generation immigrant characters" and "embody[ing] the author's timely lament over the failure of global living to bridge the gaps between cultures and between individuals" (125). She suggests that navigating between the universal and the unique poses a threat to Lahiri's characters, who are at the mercy of "the homogenizing forces of globalization, the chaos of mechanized living, and the silence of loneliness [that] threaten cultural identity instead of fostering a sense of community" (125). However, like Brada-Williams, who reads *Interpreter* as a short story cycle – and who reads the final story in the collection as one that "balanc[es] dialogue through a careful mirroring of their basic plots," thereby reversing the loss and pain of the first with the " 'ordinary' heroism" of the last – Bess also finds that the cycle ends with a gesture towards "a glimpse of unity that the other characters have not experienced" (Williams 453, Bess 127). Indeed, as I will show below, many of the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* feature characters whose situations are plagued by unachieved potential, failed communication, and cultural and psychic displacement. However, I would argue that even when the characters seem unable to negotiate between cultures, the stories themselves inhabit the interstices between cultures. Moreover, they gesture towards the sense of opportunity afforded by these very conditions, taken up not only in Mala in the final story of the collection, but developed even more explicitly in *The Namesake*.

"A Temporary Matter": An Unrealized Motherhood

Interpreter's opening story, "A Temporary Matter," explores a failing marriage in the Indian American diaspora, the gulf between the characters having been caused by the stillbirth of the couple's baby boy. The story is mediated through a third-person narrator that often privileges the male character's perspective as he struggles to connect with his wife, but ultimately it is personal tragedy rather than cultural misunderstanding that comes between the young couple in their Boston apartment. Unlike Mina Das and Mrs. Sen, Shobahad seemingly successfully navigated between Indian and American expectations by marrying a man she loved and managing an

Indian and American household while still pursuing a satisfying career outside the home. However, her inability to achieve the ultimate female success – motherhood – reveals how tenuous the cultural balance she had ostensibly achieved truly was, and reinforces the role that marriage and motherhood play in Lahiri's own navigation of cultural identities in her diasporic characters.

The occasion of power outages, which occur for an hour every night for a week so that repairmen can work on a downed line, provide the occasion for the distanced couple to reconnect by telling one another secrets in the dark. Night by night they revisit past indiscretions, revealing their individual vulnerabilities and forced to acknowledge how distant they have in fact become. The raw frankness with which they can express themselves in the darkness illuminates, for the reader, the series of painful events that led them to this situation. The weeklong ritual also reveals the manner in which their gender roles have been reversed by the unexpected loss of their first baby six months earlier.

Our first encounter with post-pregnancy Shoba reveals that she has stopped paying the careful attention to her appearance that one expects from a young woman her age, and more importantly, that she is aware of – but not overly concerned about – this neglect. The narrator observes that she looks, “at thirty-three, like the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble” (“A Temporary Matter” 2). The narrator's unforgiving eye notices cosmetic imperfections: her lipstick is “visible only on the outer reaches of her mouth, and her eyeliner had left charcoal patches beneath her lower lashes” (2). These markers of imperfect femininity foreshadow her alienation from the feminine roles she had once relished. Moreover, we become aware of the fact that she has undergone some fundamental change, one which has allowed her to redefine herself against her own personal expectations of the type of woman she should be. In fact, gender role reversal is evident from the story's opening paragraphs: Shoba's return home from her job at a busy downtown office with a leather satchel full of files is soon followed by the revelation that husband Shukumar stays home. Our first image of Shukumar is within a

traditionally female space, putting the lid on a pot of lamb and chopping onions in the kitchen. As the narrative progresses, the readers learn more about the Shoba that Shukumar married, the confident young woman who argued down prices when shopping for food at the public market, and who used to “throw together meals that appeared to have taken half a day to prepare from things she had frozen and bottled, not cheap things in tins but peppers she had marinated herself with rosemary, and chutneys that she cooked on Sundays, stirring boiling pots of tomatoes and prunes” (Lahiri “A Temporary Matter” 7). She successfully navigates East and West, tradition and technology, in her ability to use and prepare fresh ingredients in bulk for use in Indian dishes and then freeze and store them for later use. These skills allow her to prepare elaborate dishes *and* accommodate her work schedule, which presumably would not have otherwise permitted her to spend hours cooking each night. Shoba represents a second generation American revision of Chatterjee's ‘new woman’: she had achieved the success of both Indian matriarch and working American woman simultaneously and was able to transition between these ostensibly disparate roles seamlessly.

The Shoba we encounter in the story, however, no longer cares for her home the way that she used to, leaving cooking and housework to Shukumar and immersing herself in her work:

She used to put her coat on a hanger, her sneakers in the closet, and she paid bills as soon as they came. But now she treated the house as if it were a hotel. The fact that the yellow chintz armchair in the living room clashed with the blue-and-maroon Turkish carpet no longer bothered her. On the enclosed porch at the back of the house, a crisp white bag still sat on the wicker chaise, filled with lace she had once planned to turn into curtains. (6)

It is as though the stillbirth of her child, caused by a weakened placenta, changed her sense of what it means to be an Indian-American woman and the roles required of her as such; her physical inability to sustain motherhood

results in a newfound antipathy towards navigating cultures in the ways that she used to, when she still imagined herself as both a working American woman and Indian matriarch. It seems easier for her to deal with the loss of her infant by denying the part of her that, "with hips that her obstetrician assured her were made for childbearing," had always been inherent to her; the childless matriarch lacks a reason to remain bound that culturally determined role (Lahiri 7). This detail about Shoba's hips recalls the scene in *Jasmine* in which an infertile professor at the obstetrician's office notes that Jasmine has "nice [wide] hips," as if that means that nature "meant" for her to have babies (Mukherjee 34). Both authors pointedly acknowledge the perception of "third world" women as inherently more fertile than Western women, as if they are somehow closer to "nature" (code for instinctually reproductive, like animals). But because Shoba's doctor's comment implies that she is biologically predisposed to procreate, her loss is internalized as a personal failure, as if she somehow short-circuited her body's ability to achieve what it was "meant" to do. Therefore, Shoba rejects the gender roles she previously relished altogether. Instead of taking part in the household, Shoba opts for the more traditionally masculine tendency to focus on work, spending hours with her files and her pencils, poring over the details of her editing work and ignoring the domestic space around her.

Shoba ultimately leaves Shukumar, opting to move out of their home and into an apartment closer to her job. In so doing, she opts out of the balancing act she had embodied in the years she spent married to Shukumar, planning for their lives as parents and living out both ideals: that of the Indian matriarch and of working American woman. Unlike Mina Das or Mrs. Sen, Shoba is comfortable navigating between the two ideals until she loses her child. This detail speaks to the manner in which gender roles determine Lahiri's first and second generation immigrant characters' ability to navigate between their Indian and American identities, and to the role of motherhood in particular in establishing an "unhomely" home in the United States. However, Lahiri is also acknowledging that for the second generation, these gender roles must be doubly translated.

As in the case of Mina Das in the collection's title story, motherhood alone is not sufficient in bridging cultures.

Gender and cultural identity in *The Namesake*: "Motherhood in a foreign land"

The Namesake's Ashima Ganguli is compelled to engage with mainstream, middle-class America because of her children; simultaneously, her desire that they remain Bengali at their core compels her to preserve many cultural traditions at home. When we first encounter Ashima, she is experiencing both the physical discomfort of her first pregnancy and the psychological discomfort that accompanies alienation and culture shock. She discerns a difference between the two: "For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land" (Lahiri *Namesake* 6). The distinction she makes is worth noting because it posits her physical discomfort as a natural experience, one for which she feels inherently prepared. However, the distress she feels as a result of her foreignness, which predates her pregnancy, seems insurmountable. Ashima cannot imagine raising a child so far from her homeland, away from her family and friends; the very idea is alien to her despite its being the reality of her circumstances. Yet after Gogol is born, Ashima conflates pregnancy and her otherness, realizing that:

Being a foreigner... is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (50)

This realization draws a parallel not only between the sense of physical discomfort and

emotional anxiety that accompanies pregnancy and the similar feelings that plague the immigrant, but more importantly, it also parallels the duties of motherhood with the demands inherent in each of these subject positions and recalls the burden placed on the Indian New Woman by the nationalist project in postcolonial India. In addition, this metaphor further demonstrates the manner in which Lahiri's fiction recognizes and explores the centrality of gender roles in ethnic American identity by feminizing the condition of the "foreigner," illustrating once again that Chatterjee's analysis of nationalist-inspired gender roles can and should be translated in the Indian-American immigrant context.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri chooses to be specific about Ashima's Bengali identity, and it is important to distinguish that from her designation as Indian immigrant. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, however, with the exception of Mala, Lahiri identifies her characters as "Indians" and only hints at their Bengali origins. But in the novel she makes a choice to note the Ganguli family's Bengali origins. Unlike Mukherjee, who is also Bengali, Lahiri not only writes from the Bengali perspective, but in *The Namesake* she is also reflexive about it. Moreover, situating the narrative in relation to this more local context has historical and political implications given the centrality of Bengal to Indian Independence and Partition. But doing so also suggests that in some ways, Ashima was predisposed to transnationality before coming to the United States. Although Bengali participation in their first years in the U.S., Ashoke, Ashima's husband, dresses like a westerner and goes to the university where he is earning a graduate degree and working as a T.A. She, on the other hand, wears saris and carries out the duties of a good Bengali wife, preparing familiar dishes, and maintaining an orderly household. Although some might read her behavior as carrying out a burden of sorts, it also indicates a sense of potential and cultural agency unavailable to her male counterpart, who is compelled to assimilate in order to succeed in his American academic endeavors. Ashima's ability to retain particular traditions can be read as a privilege afforded to her by the birth of her son, unlike Shoba, for whom the stillbirth of her son marks the end of her ability to perform

the cross-cultural navigation at which she had previously been successful. For Shoba, who excitedly prepared for the arrival of her baby with the anticipation that he would bring nothing but happiness, her tragic labor produces quite the opposite effect. For Ashima, on the other hand, the anticipation of being in a mother in America is fraught with anxiety and fear, but the event itself marks the beginning of her ownership of her identity in America. It is in the first weeks of motherhood that she begins to the

Previously invisible on these very streets due to her foreignness, Ashima is humanized by the addition of Gogol; furthermore, she is emboldened by this new sense of acceptance. While her husband is occupied with his dissertation and teaching at MIT, she develops a routine around her new role, taking Gogol out shopping or out for walks around Harvard Yard and the MIT campus daily. Unlike Mina Das's isolation during her early days of motherhood and Mrs. Sen's alienation from the American world outside her apartment, Ashima engages with her American surroundings. Although she continues to sing Gogol to sleep with Bengali songs, she also discovers a yarn store and learns to knit in preparation of the coming winter. Motherhood thus offers Ashima the occasion to assimilate in ways that she chooses, allowing her to preserve Indian traditions while moving in and out of the American mainstream at will.

One of the most significant ways that Ashima preserves her family's cultural identity throughout the novel is by hosting elaborate parties for the Bengali friends that she and Ashoke accumulate in New England. These gatherings – the first of which is hosted when Gogol turns six months old in honor of his *annaprasan*, a ceremony that celebrates an infant's consumption of solid food – grow larger each year as this circle of friends grows. When newly arrived wives from India, whose husbands "are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers," come to Ashima feeling "homesick and bewildered...for recipes and advice," she tells them where to go to buy the best fresh fish and which American ingredients serve best as substitutes for items that are impossible to find at the supermarket, like using Cream of Wheat to make halwa (38). As with Mrs. Sen and

Mala, this gendered knowledge, represented in all three narratives by the substitution of ingredients, is symbolic of Ashima's ability to move between cultures. When Ashima and Ashoke visit with these friends, "[t]hey drink tea with sugar and evaporated milk and eat shrimp cutlets fried in saucepans. They sit in circles on the floor, singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore, passing a thick yellow clothbound book of lyrics among them as Dilip Nandi plays the harmonium" (38). Hosting these more recently arrived Indian immigrants makes Ashima feel more secure in her place in the U.S. and simultaneously affords her the opportunity to reinforce her cultural identity. Their friends come to act as a surrogate family and a microcosm of the India that was left behind, and Ashima takes great pride in hosting these feasts over the course of her life as Indian-American matriarch. At the supermarket, Gogol and his sister are allowed to fill the shopping cart with American foods like tuna, mayonnaise, and bologna even though Ashima and Ashoke do not consume these items (65). Similarly, Gogol has two birthday parties: one with his American friends with pizza and cake, and the other one a Bengali celebration with curries and other Indian dishes prepared by Ashima (72). Each of these concessions is a careful choice, a delicately negotiated balance that allows Ashima to fulfill her obligations to both old homeland and new, which affords her the agency to define herself without regard to borders or fixed cultural obligations. Motherhood gives Ashima the opportunity to take advantage of the opportunity that Shoba is denied, that Mina Das does not recognize, and that Mrs. Sen is unwilling to take.

By the time she reaches the age of forty-eight, Ashima has lived in the U.S. far longer than she had lived in India before emigrating, yet she remains in so many ways a traditional Bengali mother and wife. She has never given up wearing a sari, and when her husband leaves for Ohio to conduct research on a prestigious fellowship she lives alone for the very first time. Her husband must return home once a month to pay the bills and fill the car with gas, two tasks she has never mastered; and yet the fact that she remained behind rather than traveling to Ohio with him amazes both of her children, who are shocked at their mother's display of such American-like independence.

She does so because despite having retained so many of her Indian traditions, she has also adapted to her suburban American life in a few significant ways; she holds a part-time job at the local library and spends time with American women she has grown to consider friends. In fact, when friends recommend that she return to India to spend time with her brother after Ashoke unexpectedly passes away in Ohio, "for the first time in her life, Ashima has no desire to escape to Calcutta... She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he died" (183). Ashima's conception of what constitutes *homeland* has been altered to take into account the role the United States has played in shaping her family's identity, and by definition, her own. She might say, as Anzaldúa does, that home is not a particular geographic location, but that after so many years living between cultures, she carries it on her back (43). This manner of identifying herself demonstrates that as a result of being an immigrant wife and mother for so many years, Ashima's identity is fluid and negotiable.

After careful deliberation, the widowed Ashima decides to divide her time between the United States, where she will stay with her children, and Calcutta, where she will stay with other family members. Lahiri writes, "True to the meaning of her name, [Ashima] will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (275-276). This rootless and nomadic existence is approached not as something alienating or empty, but instead as an opportunity to enjoy both the life she left behind long ago and the one she strived to create over the course of over thirty years.

Indeed, to treat a character like Ashima fairly, she cannot be read as an oppressed "third world woman," but as an individual whose local context, including class status, affords her the privilege of both physical and cultural mobility. Although Lahiri acknowledges the sense of loss and alienation that women like Ashima, Mrs. Sen, Mina Das, Mala, Shoba, and others might experience as first and second-generation immigrant Americans, she never insinuates that they are victims of their complicated postcolonial histories. Her fiction suggests, however, that the postcolonial nation's attitude towards women has lasting consequences on

the perception of women's roles, even on women who immigrate to the U.S. Through these gender roles, Ashima is empowered with a transnational status that allows her to partake at will of both American and her Bengali Indian cultures, without idealizing either one or glossing over the negotiations that she has to make.

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