Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction in the Context of the American Short Story

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Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction in the Context of the American Short Story

(Književnost i kultura; amerikanistika)

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Introduction

The main goal of this master's thesis will be to situate and describe the specific position that Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction occupies within the context and canon of the American short story. In order to accomplish that this thesis will first outline a brief diachronic overview of the changes that occurred within the form of the American short story. The most important period of the short story for this thesis will be the proliferation of short fiction that occurred at the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty first century. It was during this period that Lahiri published her first short story collection. This thesis will also connect the evolution of the literary form with an overview of how critical understanding of the American canon has changed over time. Some of the authors whose texts will be used in the diachronic overview will be Danforth Ross, Leo Marx and Susan Lohafer. After outlining the contemporary context of the American short story this thesis will maintain that Lahiri's fiction occupies a liminal position in the interstice between ethnic studies and cosmopolitanism. It will also maintain that Lahiri's short stories can be firmly placed within a lineage of American short story writing.

This thesis will also show the characteristics of American ethnic literatures, specifically ethnic fiction. Special focus will be given to ethnic short story cycles in the theoretical understanding of Rocío G. Davis. Her analysis of American ethnic short story cycles will be used to highlight general tendencies of ethnic fiction and offer a better understanding of Lahiri's short stories. Using theories and ideas by Susan Koshy, Christiane Schlote and the authors Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma, this thesis will offer a dialectic approach to the fields of ethnic studies and cosmopolitanism.

Lahiri's fiction will then be explained using a psychoanalytic literary approach with emphasis on the elements of ethnic fiction and cosmopolitanism which are both present in her

texts. The psychoanalytical approach will be founded on the readings of Jelena Šesnić and Angelo Monaco. Furthermore, the importance of the idea of a model minority will be explained in the context of Lahiri's short stories. In the end, the analytical tools which have been outlined and explained will be used in analyzing Lahiri's two short story collections – *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Davis's ideas on ethnic short story cycles will be identified in the analysis of the first collection along with an analysis of food metaphors which constitute an important motif in the collection. Šesnić's and Monaco's psychoanalytic analyses of general tendencies within Lahiri's fiction will be implemented in analyzing *Unaccustomed Earth* where special focus will be given to second generation immigrants and intergenerational trauma.

In conclusion, Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction is the central subject of this thesis because her complex and subtle writing focuses on characters and themes dealing with displacement, immigration and the consequences of living in a highly-mobile globalized world. Lahiri's texts deal with alienation inherent in a transnational diasporic position while her characters are frequently forced to navigate obstacles arising from a complex intersection of gender, ethnicity, class and race. She focuses on the South Asian American diaspora in her collections of short stories. The specificities of that particular diasporic position allow for multiple different cosmopolitan readings, ranging from minority cosmopolitanism to new cosmopolitanism. To paraphrase Susan Koshy, Jhumpa Lahiri's writing manages to show the worldliness of ethnic fiction while simultaneously uncovering the particularity of a global perspective. Her short stories thus blur the line between ethnic fiction within American literature and global literature.

An Overview of the American Short Story

The form of the short story has been present in literature from its earliest expressions but "writers were just beginning to theorize about the possibilities of the short story at the start of the nineteenth century" (Ross 5). It is no coincidence that the form of the short story starts to be considered more seriously for the first time during the Romantic period. Romanticism is characterized by its opposition to the rigid hierarchy of literary forms and genres. Prose writing started to gain significance in the 19th century only to eventually dominate the literary field in the 20th and 21st century.

Danforth Ross' study *The American Short Story*, written in 1961, offers not only an overview of the form and its most influential proponents but also an analytical framework which has been changed drastically in the ensuing years. The following concept is presented at the very onset of the text: "Whatever its universal qualities, the good literature of every nation expresses the national character" (5). Ross proposes that the goal of early American writers was to express an American "character" while staying true to their European roots. The result of this endeavor is most clear in the form of the short story (5). The term and idea of a national character is a theoretical concept taken from essentialist approaches to literature predating postmodernist approaches. A diachronic overview within such a theoretical framework constitutes and implies a singular US canon with a linear path of progression. The term "canon" will be understood in this thesis according to the definition provided by Vladimir Biti, who states that a literary canon is a group of texts which (usually) an academic institution deems to be of significant importance for a particular cultural community (170).

Ross' critical perspective, like any other theory, does certain things well while at the same time possessing certain flaws. Ross sets out to articulate his diachronic overview from a theoretical and ideological perspective rooted in particular essentialist understandings of

history and culture. This allows him to construct a stable and coherent literary canon of the American short story which adequately represents a consensual view of American culture and society. Subsequent postmodern critical approaches will have a problem constructing a unified and coherent American literary canon. Postmodern critical approaches from the 1970s have shown that American society and culture is far more complex and paradoxical than Ross' holistic perspective suggests.

The linear progression of the American short story, exemplified by Ross' text, starts with Washington Irving as "the first important American short story writer" (5). Edgar Allan Poe is highlighted as a precursor to the modern short story because of his favoring of action over character and for bringing "for the first time tension, long a characteristic of poetry, to the story" (8). Nathaniel Hawthorne, although more didactic than Poe in Ross' opinion, was "the first American short story writer to concern himself seriously with theme" (11). Ross rounds up the 19th century progression of the form by pointing towards the influence of the Western frontier on the American short story. The stories influenced by the frontier were called "tall tales" and they were characterized by an expression of "the spirit of the West, the zest and the defensive assertiveness, and they were told in the vernacular, the language of the audience" (16). Mark Twain's stories are described as exemplary of "the tradition of the frontier tall tale in both subject matter and language" (17).

Some of the core authors of the 20th century American short story for Ross and for the canon that Ross epitomizes are Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, F. S. Fitzgerald and William Faulkner. The 20th century is seemingly marked by a propensity for experimentation with technique (41). Ross ends his diachronic approach to the American short story with an insight into his own contemporary period and the Beat Generation. The Beat Generation writers rebel against, according to Ross, a "'square' America full of 'other-directed' people seeking to accommodate themselves to the technological process" (43). The Beat Generation

is a precursor to and influence on the dissident movements of the 1960s. This period will not only change, or at least attempt to change, US policy and society in general but it will also bring about a substantial paradigmatic shift within the field of American studies.

Leo Marx describes the 1960s as "a large and (briefly) effective dissident Movement [which] suddenly emerged in response to a shocking sequence of disruptive events". This period proved to "radically and irrevocably transform the American studies project". According to Marx, the disillusionment that followed after the Sixties contributed to the "Great Divide" that happened in the 1970s in the field of American studies. American studies before the paradigm shift was "an essentially holistic, affirmative, nationalistic project primarily aimed at identifying and documenting the distinctive features of the culture and society chiefly created by white European settlers in the territory now constituting the United States". Danforth Ross' canon of texts and insights into the American short story can thus firmly be situated in the period Marx calls "Before the Divide".

The new generation of American studies scholars, named by Marx as "AD [After the Divide] Americanists", use postmodern critical theories to expose crucial blind spots of their predecessors:

> With the help of the analytic tools provided by these refined critical theories—structuralist and poststructuralist—a cohort of AD scholars demonstrated that for decades their BD [Before the Divide] precursors had managed to ignore – in keeping with their nationalistic, patriarchal, racialist, hegemonic "master narrative"—the sharp differences of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexual preference that divided Americans into distinct groups. (Marx)

The new generation of Americanists restructured the US literary canon by opening it "to hitherto ignored or excluded cohorts of writers – women, Native Americans, African

Americans, immigrant ethnics, gays and lesbians, et al" (Marx). The scholars of Ross' period tended to view the history, society and culture of the US as a seamless whole while postmodern critics and scholars tend to view it, even today, as extremely fragmented.

The new understanding of the form and history of the short story is expounded upon by Julie Brown, who states that "the American short story's history is more than a linear progression from Irving to Hawthorne to Poe to Mark Twain" (17). Brown's text showcases a postmodern understanding of US society and culture. Using Leo Marx's terminology, this text and anthology can be situated "After the Divide". Brown's text does not just fragment the history of the American short story but it also connects it with the history of various groups of Americans who embody different ethnicities (17). The reason behind connecting these two "genealogies", as Brown calls it, the genealogy of the literary form and the genealogy of the various American groups, is to open the literary canon to previously ignored and excluded groups (17).

Although postmodern perspectives offer a more complex and nuanced view of American literature and society, they also have their inherent flaws and limitations. Postmodern perspectives can offer interesting theoretical observations when focused on a specific part in the new multifaceted understanding of American literature, such as a focus on Indian American or South Asian American literature. However, postmodern perspectives seem to fail in constructing a coherent whole consisting of all the identified distinct particularities. These critical approaches fragment the field of American literature into distinct ethnic and racial groups but are unable to unify them into a stable literary canon. The failed attempts to construct a larger whole based on particularities has led to either further fragmentation or the complete dismissal of the idea of a canon. Certain postmodern critics have thus adopted a too relativistic approach to the idea of a literary canon underestimating its important role in cultural formation.

Susan Lohafer offers a more detailed view of the evolution and characteristics of the American short story in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first century. In the context of American studies, Lohafer's text can be viewed as an attempt to bridge the gap between the canon present in Ross' overview with the revision of the canon and postmodern ideas present in Brown's anthology. Lohafer does not espouse Ross' idea of the American short story as a showcase of a national character but she does agree on the influence of certain authors on the short story.

Lohafer identifies Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson and James Joyce as the biggest influences on the Anglophone short story in the period following the end of World War II. She credits them with reinventing the short story "as a modernist art form: spare and concrete, yet riddled with meaning" (68). Her essay also pinpoints J. D. Salinger's and Shirley Jackson's short stories, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and "The Lottery" respectively, as harbingers of the form's future development in the US. The text argues that the history of the American short story after 1945 "can be imagined as the legacy of Salinger and Jackson" (80). One of the reasons why these two stories were so important was because they helped move the genre from trivial and popular into "a more ambitious orbit where it would remain – with important exceptions – a satellite of the novel" (69).

Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" was published in 1948 in *The New Yorker* magazine. The story continues to be regarded "as a seminal document in the history of the American short story in the second half of the twentieth century" (Lohafer 69). Shirley Jackson's story was published that same year also in *The New Yorker*. According to Lohafer, this signaled "the future role of *The New Yorker* as the premier venue for the genre" (69). Lohafer never explicitly discusses the role of literary institutions in her text. However, she frequently uses *The New Yorker* magazine as a metonymic stand-in for a vertical, traditionally understood literary institution which delineates between low-brow and high-brow literature,

between what is canon and what is not. The metonymic representation of a literary establishment is necessary for this particular diachronic overview in order to highlight the historic moment when the form of the short story outgrows its trivial, formulaic origins. It is thus no coincidence that Lohafer situates the origin and precursors of contemporary US short stories in *New Yorker* publications. The implicit understanding of a vertical literary institution complete with cultural gatekeepers is another commonality shared with Ross' analytical framework. Postmodern critical approaches eschew strict delineations between trivial and high-brow in favor of a more leveled field. These approaches also frequently question the underlying reasoning in institutional decisions and their construction of literary canons.

Although Salinger's and Jackson's stories were published at the same time, in the same magazine and both feature violent endings (Salinger's protagonist commits suicide, while Jackson's story deals with ritual human sacrifice), Lohafer states that they represent opposing paradigms of short story writing. Salinger's short story functions as "an imprint of personality, an unspooling of impressions and reactions that are their own validation, inseparable from the focal character" (70). Jackson's writing on the other hand possesses a "hard-edged narrative [that] projects a confidence in the artist's power to wrest meaning from chaos, to shape and exhibit a paradigm of truth" (70). Jackson's side of the binary opposition is also characterized by "profound simplicity" and "gnomic design" (70). Lohafer's central stylistic dichotomy can be abstracted into an expressive, lyrical, character-driven story on one side and, on the other side, the story with a terse, subtle, deceitfully simple, sometimes mysterious narrative which offers a plethora of interpretations.

The elements of this dichotomy could also be rephrased as the expressive and gnomic pole if they were to be viewed from a more abstract theoretical standpoint. For the purpose of contextualizing Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction, I believe this dichotomy can be used, in broad terms, as a coordinate system to approximate her stylistic tendencies. It could also be used to

establish a tentative continuum between her fiction and the fractured US literary canon. The analysis of Lahiri's fiction will attempt to show that her short stories tend to gravitate more towards the gnomic, subtle style of American short story writing.

Lohafer ends her diachronic overview of the American short story with "the undeniable proliferation of short fiction in the 1990s and twenty-first century: stories from minority and/or marginalized communities, post-Updike studies of marriage in suburbia and small towns …, and new interest in hybrid forms and interdisciplinary source material" (78). Lahiri publishes her first book, a collection of short stories titled *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), during this time. The end of the twentieth century is characterized by an expansion of the US literary canon. In the aftermath of that expansion Lohafer identifies Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri as representatives of Indian American short fiction (79). The expansion of the canon and the new inclusiveness have emphasized "the long (often oral) history and global presence of short fiction" (79). Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction occupies an interesting position in the context of the American short story because it fulfills Lohafer's criteria of being accepted by the literary establishment while simultaneously most of her short fiction is almost exclusively understood through the lens of ethnic literatures. Lahiri's canonization by the literary establishment only seems to further her fiction's liminal position.

American Ethnic Literatures and a Short Story Cycle

A specific approach to ethnic literatures in the US arose within the field of ethnic studies. In her text "Minority Cosmopolitanism" Susan Koshy states that "the political claim that founded ethnic studies was a demand for the recognition of minority cultures in the nation" (592). The consequence of this "founding rationale" of ethnic studies is "a lingering ambivalence in the field toward denationalizing literary figures and trends" (592). A tenet of ethnic studies is the way it approaches identity. The category of identity in ethnic studies is constituted antagonistically and in opposition to cosmopolitan tendencies "to recast identities in transnational frames" (592). The erasure of identity is problematic within the field of ethnic studies because of the belief that a cosmopolitan framework cannot effectively constitute antiracist projects within the US context (592). The category of identity, specifically minority or ethnic identity, is thus one of the defining features of ethnic literature.

Rocio Davis, in her essay on ethnic short story cycles, states that the specificity of the minority identity, as understood within ethnic literatures, is in its complicated liminality: "The complicated process of selfhood and the inescapable doubleness of the between-world subject is the covert theme in much of this ethnic fiction, as the writers question what it is that determines both identity and community, signaling how geographical, ethnic, political, and cultural makeup and differences serve as signifying aspects to this complex self" (3). Davis continues to assert that the genre of the short story cycle is "particularly suited to the task of articulating and elaborating [ethnic fiction's] distinctiveness" (ibid.). Thus the dominant literary form of ethnic fiction is the short story cycle. Jhumpa Lahiri's collections of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* seemingly corroborate the popularity of the form among writers of ethnic fiction. Lahiri's collections are part of the boom of short fiction which happened in the US in the 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty first century. Ethnic fiction rose to greater prominence at the same time and, following Davis's

conclusions, directly contributed to the proliferation of the short story form. The structure of the short story cycle and the characteristics of the genre seem to parallel the characteristics, themes and tendencies generally present in ethnic fiction.

Forrest Ingram defines a short story cycle as, "… a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit … [so] that the reader's successive experience in various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts" (qtd. in Davis, 4). According to that definition, short story cycles are capable of presenting a larger story without "destroying the specificities of each individual story" (4). Structurally, the short story cycle is torn between the centrifugal forces of its individual syntagmatic elements and the centripetal forces of its overarching paradigmatic axis.

The short story cycle is not only structurally in a liminal position but the genre itself is a hybrid "occupying an odd, indeterminate place within the field of narrative, resembling the novel in its totality, yet composed of distinct stories evoking different characters and problems" (7). Davis emphasizes that the short story cycle "hovers between the novel and the short story" (ibid.). Lohafer and Davis both use the novel in order to better understand the short story or the short story cycle. Lohafer believes the American short story gained its literary legitimacy by approaching the complexity of the novel at the end of the 1940s (69). Although the form evolved past its formulaic "O. Henryism" at the beginning of the 20th century, for Lohafer it still mostly remains a satellite in the orbit of the novel. In contrast, Davis does not use the novel to grant legitimacy to the short story cycle or to establish a hierarchical relationship between the two. She rather emphasizes the hybridity of the short story cycle which possesses both the complexity of the novel and the fragmentation of the short story.

Ethnic fiction deals with liminal experiences or, in Davis's terms, with "between-world circumstances" (7). The liminality of the short story cycle lends itself perfectly for the exploration of the liminality of ethnicity. The ethnic short story cycle may even be considered "the formal materialization of the trope of doubleness as the between-world condition is presented via a form that itself vacillates between genres" (ibid.). The relationship between ethnic fiction and the hybrid genre of the short story cycle reveal hybridity as "an important characteristic of all ethnic literary texts" (ibid.). Doubleness as a defining characteristic of ethnic fiction stems from the reality of ethnic writers who simultaneously occupy an insider and outsider view of their communities. Lahiri's short stories are a prime example of these two competing focalizing points because her stories mostly deal with the liminal experience of diasporic citizens balancing between two worlds.

Ethnic fiction also concerns itself with "how binary categories of cultural classification have worked in the production of knowledge and counter-knowledge within the framework of literary and cultural studies" (Davis 7). The reconfiguration of seemingly naturalized binary categories allows ethnic writers to change and construct "alternative identities and communities" (ibid.). Some of the central issues and themes of ethnic literature are "oppositionality, marginality, boundaries, displacement, and authenticity: a process rather than a structure requiring constant variation and review" (7-8). It can be concluded that ethnic fiction puts more importance on the fluidity of identity rather than on identity as a fixed category.

Ethnic identity in particular is characterized by various influences that both mold and fragment the ethnic self until it finally finds "completion and coherence in the totality, in uniting within itself the diversity it experiences" (Davis 8). One of the main ideas of Davis's essay is that the process of constituting an ethnic identity is mirrored in the structure of the short story cycle which requires from the reader to discover "a new kind of unity in disunity"

(ibid.). Identity is also an important thematic element in ethnic short story cycles. In the end, it can be concluded that the genre has two main thematic constituents: “the presentation of identity and community as separate entities and the notion of an identity within a community” (ibid.).

U.S. Ethnic Studies and Cosmopolitanism

This chapter will attempt to highlight the contributions and theoretical problems of U.S. ethnic studies and cosmopolitanism in analyzing "cross-cultural interactions and mobile subjects" (Koshy 592). Christiane Schlote's insights on transnationalism in literary texts by South Asian American women writers will offer a cosmopolitan perspective which is traditionally incompatible with ethnic studies, while theoretical insights by Susan Koshy and the authors Rajan and Sharma will attempt to combine the opposing perspectives of ethnic studies and cosmopolitanism.

One of the first theoretical differences between ethnic studies and cosmopolitanism is their approach to the literary canon. Ethnic studies have a relativistic approach towards the literary canon. A potential theoretical problem with such an approach, if followed to its extremes, is the underestimating of the complexities of constituting a canon and disregarding its crucial cultural role (Biti 170). These problems may stem from the uncritical adhering to the belief that every aspect of the canon is the product of the hegemonic influence of certain groups (Biti 171). Ethnic studies attempt to construct a modified US canon although in doing so raise certain theoretical questions. The crux of the theoretical problem is perhaps best illustrated in Lee's attempt to situate different American literary genealogies (Latino/a, Asian American, Indian American, African American, etc.), genealogies which are diverse in themselves, "within the "national" American canon" (114).

Lee attempts to unify these diverse texts by advocating a multiethnic perspective. From that point of view, American literature as a whole is "best thought of as a spectrum of lineages rather than a single tradition, and is thereby at once more coexistent, hybrid and inflected by race and ethnicity (to say nothing of class or gender) than it has been customary to acknowledge" (114-115). The multiethnic canon necessitates a contextual perspective

(115). A context of multiethnicity enables classification of particular literary genealogies "in a far more encompassing multicultural literary sightline without, at the same time, losing sight of cultural specificity whatever the overlaps in processes of identity-formation and Americanization" (115). These specific literary genealogies give their own "distinctive particularization of self, family, different transitions of identity, migrancy, immigration and the push and pull of generational assimilation" (117). Despite the emphasis on the cultural specificity of each literary genealogy, Lee has described certain broader terms, universalities, which connect these differing texts and allow for the construction of a canon. The presence of these universalities imply a relationship between ethnic studies and the studies of cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism is an interdisciplinary field of academic disciplines which share a particular perspective or approach when discussing cross-cultural interactions and mobile subjects. Christiane Schlote, for example, advocates a cosmopolitan perspective in American Studies that emphasizes the notion of transnationalism. Schlote defines transnationalism as a process in which immigrants make and maintain social relations that connect their societies of origin and settlement which, in turn, results in them leading political, economic and social dual lives through the creation of dense cross-border networks (392). In the context of literary studies cosmopolitanism is an approach focused on the universal qualities located in the text. Ethnic studies and studies of cosmopolitanism are often regarded as "historically divergent projects" that define themselves antagonistically towards each other (Koshy 592).

Scholars of ethnic studies are wary of "cosmopolitanism's desire to recast identities in transnational frames" (ibid.) while cosmopolitan scholars like Schlote argue for "work centered around specific social or political themes instead of the traditional community model" (403). The goal of examining specific topics across the multiethnic American context is to achieve comparative interrogations of themes such as "transnationalism, gendered

migration, or interethnic relationships in texts by American writers of various cultural and national backgrounds, which, in turn, might eventually lead to the renunciation of specific so-called Ethnic Studies in favor of an intra- and internationally comparative perspective" (ibid.). Both ethnic studies and cosmopolitan perspectives possess specific theoretical blind spots which certain authors have attempted to solve through a dialectical approach. The result of this approach might be a more comprehensive view on the subject of literary texts dealing with themes of cross-cultural encounters and diasporic citizens.

The main objection towards ethnic studies and cosmopolitanism is that each is in their own right too reductive: "An unexamined logic of small and large governs our use of these terms. The frequent conflation of the minority with the subnational and the cosmopolitan with the global misconceives the complexity of both. It denies worldliness to the former and particularity to the latter" (Koshy 593). Koshy further states that texts within ethnic canons which espouse a more cosmopolitan perspective have often been overlooked. She, like Lee, also highlights the problem within ethnic studies of constructing a literary canon based on difference (ibid.).

The continued development of ethnic literatures has led to its internationalization and, in turn, to the production of "a heterogeneous range of texts, which challenge the established boundaries of ethnic and world literature" (Koshy 593). These texts are often rarely classified as world literature because of their focus on minorities while simultaneously differing from canonical ethnic narratives because of their depiction of transnational movements and identification (593). Lahiri's fiction in particular often gives a cosmopolitan perspective to themes constituting ethnic narratives of the South Asian American diaspora making her an interesting case for critical analysis and theoretical models, as my initial argument contends.

South Asian American Studies are characterized by diasporic and cosmopolitan perspectives far more than any other ethnic community in the US. Schlote states that "South

Asian diasporic writers in general draw from their subcontinental, multicultural, and multilingual heritage" which allows them to not only adapt but to also deliberately reshape both elements of their liminal position (394). Transnational and cosmopolitan elements in South Asian American literary texts are even more visible in the case of South Asian American women writers.

Contemporary migration studies exhibit two phenomena which contribute to the conditions described in South Asian American literary production. The first phenomenon is that the "South Asian diaspora is often taken as exemplary of contemporary forms of economic and cultural globalization and transnationalism" (391). The second phenomenon is the fact that from the mid-1980s female migrants were no longer viewed as purely dependent migrating wives but more as autonomous agents (391). For Schlote, South Asian American women writers "reflect South Asia's proverbial diversity in terms of religions, languages, and cultures while sharing the experience of direct or indirect migration, life in the U.S. as members of visibly different citizen groups and postcoloniality" (394).

The case of South Asian women writers demonstrates that "negotiations of identity politics, consumerism, and urban space by South Asian women in the US and beyond" always depends on more than one affiliation (gender, class, race, religion, etc.) (389). Lahiri and other South Asian women writers showcase a literary shift from preoccupations with diasporic communities towards "class formations and socio-political and cultural practices in post-independence regimes" (396). Shifting localities, "themes of poverty and class, violent political conflicts, and women's position in the U.S. and South Asia" are all trademarks of the transnational and cosmopolitan perspective engendered in the literary texts of Lahiri and other South Asian women writers (ibid.). Literary texts by these writers emphasize the need to "address competing affiliations and categories as overlapping and intersecting" (402). Schlote's advocation for a more intersectional and context-specific analysis of various

affiliations can be understood as a critique of ethnic studies which tend to reduce its interpretations to categories of ethnicity or race.

Ethnic studies' reduction of the text to its ethnic particularities is mirrored in cosmopolitan readings by "the marginalization of race, ethnicity, and non-Western cultures in discussions of cosmopolitanism" (Koshy 594). The main objection of many authors towards cosmopolitanism is that it is not in fact truly cosmopolitan. Non-Western literatures occupy only a limited portion of research. Cosmopolitanism and Eurocentrism seem to form an inextricable bind which makes it difficult to apply a cosmopolitan theoretical framework to ethnic literatures.

Schlote identifies another problematic aspect of cosmopolitan perspectives. She highlights an inherent classist tendency within transnational and cosmopolitan perspectives which make them unobtainable for the majority of labor migrants, working class subjects or members of the underclass. The crux of the problem lies in the fact that a prerequisite for a transnational perspective is seemingly an advantageous economic position (Schlote 397). Thus, cosmopolitanism is usually not accessible to the subjects it analyzes. Migrating subjects that leave their home because of war or poverty unfortunately cannot leap across nations and national borders as easily as the professional class of affluent migrants (395). The second problem of cosmopolitanism is its frequent use in certain academic circles to propagate an uncritical celebration of hybridity (398). Processes of hybrid identification are problematic, according to Schlote, because they overlook the materialistic realities of "the urban poor in Western and non-Western societies" (398).

Koshy and the authors Rajan and Sharma attempt to dislodge Eurocentrism from cosmopolitan perspectives by injecting certain ideas from ethnic studies into cosmopolitanism. Koshy has coined the term minority cosmopolitanism and uses it to refer to: "…translocal affiliations that are grounded in the experience of minority subjects and are

marked by a critical awareness of the constraints of primary attachments such as family, race, religion and nation and by an ethical or imaginative receptivity, orientation, or aspiration to an interconnected or shared world" (594).The term is constituted through a paradoxical relation to cross-cultural contact which simultaneously allows for an insight into the turbulence of intercultural encounters while being open to its transformative possibilities (594).

Koshy's term usefully combines ethnic studies and cosmopolitanism by highlighting three key points:

> … (1) that minority narratives often carry non-Western modes of cosmopolitanism that offer alternative visions of cross-cultural exchange and transnational affiliation, (2) that the relation definition of the minority against the majority contains an implicit comparative cultural perspective that lends itself to cosmopolitan articulations, and (3) that a vertical hierarchy of scales that relegates the minority to the subnational misses the dynamic, "scale-jumping" properties of the minority in globality. (594)

The result of Koshy's combining of ethnic studies and cosmopolitanism is a more nuanced, complex understanding of the term minority. For Koshy, the minority is characterized by both its centripetal and centrifugal energies: "… its centripetal capacity to intensify affiliations of race, ethnicity, and culture and its centrifugal capacity to extend these affinities outward into inventive affiliations" (594).

One of the ways both Koshy and Rajan and Sharma attempt to dislodge the Eurocentric cosmopolitan perspective is by abstracting the term diaspora from its more concrete meanings in ethnic studies into a more fluid term marked by transnationalism and translocality. In American Studies and literary studies, the term diaspora tends to be used as a "term that runs against the grain of any fixed notion of belonging" (Edwards 84). The fluid understanding of diaspora constitutes the paradigm in which cultural identities are not fixed or

stable notions but rather are viewed as "unstable points of identification or suture" (ibid.). Diaspora has been redefined as a "politics of process or practice" (ibid.). Koshy articulates this sentiment when she defines diasporic citizenship not as an identity "but as a condition under globalization that affects the long-settled and the migrant in multiple locations" (594).

Diaspora is of even more importance in Rajan and Sharma's attempt to rearticulate cosmopolitanism through their idea of new cosmopolitanism. New cosmopolitanism tries to accommodate the changes which diaspora underwent through globalization. Traditional theories which dealt with the phenomenon of diaspora have understood it as "stable, fixed populations" (Rajan and Sharma 2). People who make up a diaspora may have relocated for various different reason but they all share the same stable spatial relationship towards their homeland (they are at a physical distance from it). Although this is still true, new cosmopolitanism identifies new globalized subjects, "… who blur the edges of home and abroad by continuously moving physically, culturally, and socially, and by selectively using globalized forms of travel, communication, languages, and technology to position themselves in motion between at least two homes" (3). Rajan and Sharma vastly expand the definition of diaspora by rejecting the notion that a diasporic subject should be grounded "in a nation-state or in a class (intellectual or working class)" (2).

Instead, diaspora is now understood as occupying a range of fluid positions which can be "trans-class, trans-local with competing value systems" (Rajan and Sharma 2). New cosmopolitanism thus eschews both ethnic nationalism and the assimilative logic of older iterations of cosmopolitanism. It occupies "in-between spaces of identity, culture, and communication" while concerning itself specifically with practices "linked to migration and globalization" (3). A fluid idea of diaspora functions in Rajan and Sharma's model as the central mechanism which modernizes the cosmopolitan perspective and shows another way of connecting ethnic studies with studies of cosmopolitanism. A cosmopolitan perspective

combined with a focus on the structure and themes of minority narratives is necessary to fully understand Lahiri's fiction and its place in the American literary context.

Social and Psychological Features of Lahiri's Short Fiction

This chapter will attempt to give a deeper understanding of Lahiri's poetics by showing how sociological facts about the South Asian diaspora in America impact the psychology of immigrant subjects. The main focus of this section will be a psychoanalytical analysis of the pathology that arises after the traumatic experience of emigration and assimilation into a host society. This pathology will be explained through a Freudian-inflected perspective inherent in Šesnić's idea of uncanny domesticity while Monaco's insights into suburban neurosis and (racial) melancholia will offer a Lacanian-based perspective. The theoretical insights of these two authors will be applied to Lahiri's short story "Mrs. Sen's". The role of defamiliarization in this story will especially be highlighted as a potential product of either uncanny domesticity or suburban neurosis.

Lahiri's fiction deals almost exclusively with South Asian immigrant characters, their children and the dynamics and traumas within diasporic families. Her writing "steadily and skillfully registers the rifts, crises and estrangement resulting from the act of immigration, and extending into intergenerational conflicts and misunderstandings" (Šesnić 95). All of Lahiri's Indian American characters belong, in one way or another, to the immigrant wave that ensued after the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act was implemented in the USA.

The new immigration policy abolished the previous quota system in favor of immigrants who possessed certain technical skills or were professionals in their fields (Monaco 159). The result of the policy change was a brain drain of professionals from South Asia. All of Lahiri's characters who belong to the first generation of South Asian immigrants are specialized professionals (university professors, engineers, scientists, doctors, etc.) coming from middle-class Indian backgrounds to America in search of material and financial success. Asian Americans successfully adapted to the post-1965 opportunities and are thus frequently

described as embodying "the neoliberal success of model minority migrants" (ibid.). The idea of Indian Americans as a model minority constitutes an important context necessary for a better understanding of Lahiri's writing.

The term model minority is often ascribed to the Asian American community because of their phenomenal rise and seemingly unequivocal embracement of middle-class American values (Šesnić 97). Monaco claims that Asian Americans emulate white Americans in order to try and "fill in the gap between their migrant status and the desire to adjust to the host society by embracing the fluid movements of accumulation and self-realization that define capitalist orthodoxy" (160). A more serious examination of the term reveals its negative racial implications. Šesnić in her text offers a brief historical contextualization of the term and concludes that the label of model minority was used to "adjudicate social and civic worth among different minority groups in 20th century America" (97).

Although integration is the preferred way of understanding how individuals from different groups get incorporated into host societies, Monaco believes that "'assimilation' offers a better way of understanding how Lahiri's characters embody a condition of mimicry of certain American values" (161). Monaco understands assimilation as implying imitation and a referent which immigrants can imitate. The failure to assimilate and the neuroses that result from that failure constitute for Monaco a key element in all of Lahiri's fiction (161). His theoretical approach is focused on the way Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories construct an "aesthetics of signifying neurosis" (ibid.). Šesnić identifies a similar element in Lahiri's writing when she describes a mechanism of repression caused by immigration:

> In other words, what Lahiri's texts juggle with is a meticulous imagining of South Asian accession to US – American citizenship by their clever and deft appropriation of the native ideal of middle-class domesticity. This is what her first generation immigrants had

> to "forget" (having accomplished that task) while their offspring, the second generation, struggles with recurrences of the scenes of trauma for the generation of their parents. (98)

The term domesticity is important in Šesnić's theoretical approach to Lahiri's writing. She coins the term "uncanny domesticity" in order to more effectively describe the specificities of Lahiri's fiction. Šesnić gives a definition of domesticity as "the trappings of the middle-class, American way centered around the family, emotional sustenance derived from it, and the site of home (both in the sense of haven and property)" (95). This type of domesticity in Lahiri's fiction is approached from a psychoanalytical standpoint which is signified by Freud's term of the uncanny.

The uncanny is often understood as something which was once familiar to one's psyche but has since become alien due to repression. The uncanny causes a sense of fear or anxiety because it is the repressed material returning to the conscious level. Šesnić explicitly states how "a sense of anxiety, displacement and (incipient) estrangement" originating from home permeate Lahiri's poetic vision (95). Two elements of Freud's uncanny are especially emphasized in this theoretical text. The first is the term's applicability to both individual and collective psychologies. The second element is Freud's cultural usage of the uncanny. Šesnić uses a broad model of Freud's idea in order to foreground her argument that "US society is undergoing huge changes that often defy clear conceptualization" because of "current and deepening processes of globalization" (104). She applies Freud's psychological phenomenon to elements of American culture which elicit an uncanny effect in Lahiri's fiction:

> In other words, these texts taking place in ordinary, domestic and familiar surroundings, and in unmarked cultural spaces, often register the intrusion of a strange, unfamiliar and alien element made so due to the effect of inexplicable and uncontainable recurrence, which, by virtue of its repetition, suggests something already known or familiar but subject to repression or deliberate forgetting. (96)

Lahiri's plots usually center on Indian American characters successfully emulating the American middle-class ideal until something intrudes into the text and ruptures the mimicry (ibid.). Šesnić uses the collective understanding of the uncanny to identify the intruding element as "a symptom of a larger, cultural and social malaise attending some of the most cherished of America's self-images, which centers on that of a self-sufficient, upwardly mobile, balanced national family" (96). The uncanny effect simultaneously discloses the repressed traumatic experiences inherent in adapting to the US ideal of domesticity and it discloses the flaws implicit in the ideal of a neoliberal national family. In essence, Americanization and the label of model minority come at the cost of repressing traumatic events constituting the process. Lahiri's fiction seems to localize the uncanny outbursts "in typical domestic settings and in a family circle" (97). Koshy emphasizes that the cost of assimilation into a model minority role is not evenly distributed across generational and gender lines (qtd. in Šesnić 97).

Lahiri's female immigrant characters are often shown as being the most affected by the repression inherent in Americanization and immigration. Female characters who are first generation immigrants enter into arranged marriages and follow their husbands to the US. Their context is inflected by both their subjugated status as an Other in a new country and as a woman in a patriarchal society. Monaco states that "suburban isolation came to affect the mental health of South Asian women" who immigrated to the US with their husbands (163).

The new diaspora settled into suburban homes which Lahiri's female characters experienced as prisons: "the lack of transportation available and the inability to drive generate a sense of alienation in the bored existences of the immigrant women of suburbia" (163). The confinements of the suburbs are best epitomized in the character of Mrs. Sen from the story "Mrs. Sen's" in the collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. Mrs. Sen is the wife of a university professor. They live in a campus apartment and she babysits an eleven-year-old American boy

named Eliot. She is relegated to housework and completely dependent on her husband to introduce her to America. The focalizer of the story is Eliot who shares in her loneliness and offers the only form of companionship. Eliot acts "as an observer and a translator of the Indian woman's cultural conundrum but, since he lacks the rigidity of maturity, his perception of the differences is more fluid and nuanced" (Monaco 165). Mrs. Sen's lack of a driver's license represents a metonymy for the character's inability to integrate and the alienation resulting from that failure. Monaco defines metonymy in Lacanian terms as representing "the impossibility of achieving unity between signifier and signified because it displaces meaning" (162).

A driver's license symbolizes for Mrs. Sen a successful end to her reluctant assimilation into American culture:

> "Mr. Sen says that once I receive my license, everything will improve. What do you think, Eliot? Will things improve?"
>
> "You could go places," Eliot suggested. "You could go anywhere."
>
> "Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?" (*Interpreter of Maladies*, 119)

Eliot watches Mrs. Sen drive and sees her as a nervous, easily distracted driver. He compares her driving with the driving of his American mother. His mother's driving is effortless and natural in such a way that Eliot does not even notice it. Mrs. Sen's profound fear of merging her car onto the main road produces in Eliot, and subsequently in the reader, an effect of defamiliarization:

> It seemed so simple when he sat beside his mother, gliding in the evenings back to the beach house. Then the road was just a road, the other cars merely part of the scenery. But when he sat with Mrs. Sen, under an autumn sun that glowed without warmth

through the trees, he saw how that same stream of cars made her knuckles pale, her wrists tremble, and her English falter.

"Everyone, this people, too much in their world." (*Interpreter*, 121)

Defamiliarization functions within this particular short story as a point of rupture signifying the inability of the dominant society's ideology to articulate the Other. Mrs. Sen expresses her fear of driving as a fear of other people on the road who are "too much in their world". The feeling of alienation in another culture and country underlines her fear. She is disconnected from the community and the people around her. Mrs. Sen's small crash at the end of the story represents her failure to assimilate because of her inability to repress her nostalgia for home. Defamiliarization in "Mrs. Sen's" can also be understood as a symptom of Šesnić's uncanny domesticity or Monaco's suburban neurosis.

The term suburban neurosis was previously used in the 1930s and 1940s to describe a depressive state afflicting English housewives. The causes of suburban neurosis were isolation, lack of kinship and spare time in which the loneliness of suburban neighborhoods was felt more deeply. Monaco uses the description of suburbia implicit in the term and connects it with "the migrant's experience of domestic alienation" in order to open "new lines for studying Lahiri's poetics of neurosis" (163). In his theoretical approach suburban neurosis has been redefined to mean a symptom of the assimilation of the new Indian diaspora into the American competitive society (161-162). Monaco uses Rosson's definition of neurosis as "a way of defending oneself from the pressures of intersubjective life" (161). Neurosis as a defensive strategy in diasporic literature functions as the cause of neurotic tensions which textually manifest themselves in the form of nostalgia and melancholia (161).

Lahiri's characters within Monaco's theoretical understanding are viewed as subverting "narratives of wholesomeness" in order to generate empathy (161). Her characters

are always shown in inescapable states of vulnerability which manifest themselves in neurotic symptoms of "paralysis, mutism, repetition compulsion and depression" (161). A permanent state of vulnerability seems to be the price Lahiri's characters pay in order to achieve the potential benefits of occupying a liminal position in a globalized world. The complexity of Lahiri's characters lies in the fact they are simultaneously vulnerable and resilient.

Monaco also recognizes the importance of the model minority role for understanding Lahiri's short stories. According to him, some of Lahiri's fictional immigrants who face psychological dilemmas see the role as a source of anxiety while those who are able to adjust "to the host land tend to dwell in the interstices of cultures" (161). In this theoretical approach, Lahiri's fiction weaves an aesthetics of neurosis which functions similarly to Šesnić's uncanny domesticity in the sense that it critically analyzes the psychological costs of assimilation and the model minority as the goal of assimilation for the Indian American diaspora.

Šesnić uses the term unhomely to describe an ambivalent attitude towards America present in Lahiri's writing, both fictional and biographical (95). Koshy explains how Homi Bhabha uses the term to describe a "paradigmatic postcolonial experience that captures the "estranging sense" of dislocation "that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations"" (601). She notes that Bhabha's analysis of the unhomely focuses more on its dramatic expressions through "shock, terror, or revolutionary awakening" while the unhomely in Lahiri's fiction is "more muted and recessive, rendered not as a sudden "invasion" of history into the domestic space but as endemic to it" (ibid.). Unhomeliness in Lahiri's short stories is located in "incremental and ongoing structural adjustments to domesticity in response to dislocation" (ibid.). In essence, Lahiri's focus on the quotidian aspects of life harbor unhomeliness which in turn constitutes the ambivalence of her texts towards accommodation.

Koshy's remarks on Lahiri's style of writing can be connected to Lohafer's central stylistic dichotomy of the American short story. I have previously rephrased her dichotomy from an opposition between Salinger's and Jackson's paradigms of short story writing into a dichotomy between an expressive and gnomic pole of short story writing. The gnomic pole is characterized by short stories that have terse, subtle, associative, open-ended narratives. I believe Koshy's remarks corroborate the contextualization of Lahiri's short fiction within that lineage of the American short story.

A Reading of *Interpreter of Maladies*

This chapter will analyze how Lahiri's first collection of short stories is structured as an ethnic short story cycle. The characters of this collection will be understood as cosmopolitan figures who feel alienated but whose diasporic citizenship offers them a liminal, globalized position where they can transcend affiliations to nation-states. Although most stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* deal with heteronormative romantic relationships, this chapter will also outline a few stories that offer a different way of articulating immigrant subjectivities. In the end, the significance of food metaphors in Lahiri's first collection will be explained and contextualized within Asian American literature.

The connection between the first story in *Interpreter of Maladies*, "A Temporary Matter", and the last, "The Third and Final Continent", exemplifies the structure of an ethnic short story cycle and showcases a combination of ethnic fiction and cosmopolitanism. Lahiri's collection is structured in such a way that each individual story functions as a link in a complex semantic chain whose ultimate meaning is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, each story is dialogically connected. This type of relationship further blurs the line between ethnic short story cycles and novels because it invokes the novel's complexity and totality. Every story is implicitly shaped by the meaning and tone of the stories that precede and follow it. When the reader reaches the end of Lahiri's text, their understanding of the individual stories has become deeper and more connotative. Upon re-reading "A Temporary Matter" previously unnoticed elements become semanticized and form a cultural context and background which went unseen during the initial read.

"A Temporary Matter" depicts the disintegration of a young couple's marriage after the stillbirth of their first child. The story heavily focuses on food, its preparation, cooking and eating rituals. The fact that the husband, Shukumar, cooks dinner for his wife Shoba takes on

the meaning of an implied cultural shift between the first and second generation of Indian American immigrants. The cultural shift is especially visible after reading the entire collection: “Shukumar had been going through their supplies steadily, preparing meals for the two of them, measuring out cupfuls of rice, defrosting bags of meat day after day” (*Interpreter* 8). Shukumar cooks Indian meals for his wife and this act, upon retroactive interpretation, assumes the meaning of a diasporic connection to the homeland, although the connection is reconfigured under the frame of the second generation. It is diasporic because it shows that the homeland still holds a place in the imaginary of the second generation, although with each generation the emotional attachment to the homeland lessens (Rajan and Sharma 7). One of the most important implications of “A Temporary Matter” that becomes apparent through other stories in this collection is the fact that Shoba and Shukumar do not have an arranged marriage, unlike the marriages of their parents. This realization lends potency to Koshy’s remark on how Lahiri juxtaposes the estrangement of intimates and the profound connections unfamiliarity can elicit (599).

The cosmopolitanism in the first story can be viewed in the reversal of the traditional roles men and women fulfilled in a household while at the same time keeping the frame of rituals which had outlined these roles. The ritual of eating together and of preparing food is the most present in “A Temporary Matter”. The reversal of binary oppositions and the translation of cultural elements from one context into another are typical postmodern staples of contemporary cosmopolitanism.

Shukumar and Shoba’s relationship at the beginning was filled with passion which later, due to estrangement and trauma, dissipated and resulted in a distant and cold marriage that ultimately lead them to divorce. In contrast, the arranged marriage in the last story follows an opposite evolutionary path. It started as a dispassionate duty and resulted in a strong bond. The dialogical attribute of *Interpreter of Maladies* is evident in the almost antipodal

complementarity of the first and last story. If "A Temporary Matter" tells the story of a young second generation couple then "The Third and Final Continent" tells the story of their parents. Koshy calls this final story "the most paradoxical of genres, the epic short story" (604). In it we follow a young man who symbolizes the entire wave of post-1965 Indian male immigrants with middle class incomes and arranged marriages (ibid.). The epic element Koshy mentions is present in the fact that the migration assumes a significant and distinct role for the imaginary of an entire people and a pivotal place in the history of a nation. The way these two stories complement each other can perhaps best be shown by comparing Shukumar's mother, a first generation immigrant, to the couple from the last story that symbolize the entire generation.

The plot of the last story occurs at a time that precedes "A Temporary Matter". It can be viewed as an originating myth for the entire imaginary of the collection and its predictions are manifested in the first story. The unnamed narrator in "The Third and Final Continent" describes the nature of his marriage in these terms: "As strange as it seemed, I knew in my heart that one day her death would affect me, and stranger still, that mine would affect her" (*Interpreter*, 213). We see this prediction come to fruition in "A Temporary Matter" when Shukumar's mother still grieves the death of her husband even after considerable time has passed: "Each night his mother cooked something his father had liked, but she was too upset to eat the dishes herself, and her eyes would well up as Shoba stroked her hand" (18). This instance again highlights the importance of food as a metaphor for interpersonal connection.

Cosmopolitanism is also evident in the last story through another reversal of binary oppositions, in this case the position of host-guest and romantic-arranged marriage. Koshy views the unnamed narrator as a diasporic citizen who represents minority cosmopolitanism through his movement between the roles of guest and host (603). He is at the same time an archetypical immigrant, a pseudo-epic hero, a guest in Mrs. Croft's – his American landlady's

– house who undergoes systematic naturalization symbolized by his ritualistic exchange with his landlady, and a host to his wife, a host whose experience as a guest has embedded in him a double perspective. The character occupies a liminal, fluid role in between two fixed positions and thus outlines the paradigmatic problem of situating Lahiri's fiction into either canonical ethnic narratives or world literature. "The Third and Final Continent" also reverses the position of romantic love as the basis of marriage and positions in its place arranged marriage. The reversal also serves a structural purpose within the text because it challenges the reader's horizon of expectations and positions a constructivist approach to cultural institutions. The text refuses to give any definitive qualitative readings regarding the opposition romantic-arranged marriage and resigns itself in the fissure between essentialist perspectives.

Shukumar can be viewed as a member of the second generation that has fully assimilated into the host society but still feels perceived as an Other. He has never been to India, started learning about the country in college as would a foreigner, but is nonetheless viewed as an Indian American, India occupying a place in his imaginary. The fact that India does occupy a place in Shukumar's psyche is most evident when he notices a lack of personal connection, in comparison to his wife, to the country: "He wished now that he had his own childhood story of India" (*Interpreter*, 13). The lack of an emotional and personal cultural connection to India brings Shukumar into a situation where both elements of the liminal position occupied by the category Indian American seem foreign.

In general, Lahiri's stories give a more dynamic and fluid representation of diaspora. The main feature of diaspora in her stories is not just the spatial distance between the country of origin and country of settlement. Lahiri's stories emphasize the transformative abilities of diasporic citizens that are able to take, reshape or misappropriate various cultural elements from host societies, diasporic communities or from the originating country and offer new insights that transcend affiliations to nation-states or class. This makes Lahiri's characters not

just emblems of Koshy's minority cosmopolitanism but of new cosmopolitanism as well: "New cosmopolitans do not depend upon geographical location or the eventual return home to maintain or practice a distinct South Asian identity" (Rajan and Sharma 8).

Although the dynamics of relationships are one of the central themes in *Interpreter of Maladies*, this collection also offers stories that frame the representation of immigrant subjectivities within political or sociological contexts. Stories like "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", "A Real Durwan" or "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" deal with issues like war, class and gender inequality. The story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" presents the character of Mr. Pirzada, a botanist from Dacca that came to the USA to finish his doctoral degree. His wife and seven daughters are waiting for him back in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). During his stay in Boston, a civil war breaks out in Pakistan with East Pakistan fighting for independence.

The first-person narrator of the story is a little girl named Lilia whose parents are first generation immigrants from India. They invite Mr. Pirzada to their home frequently where they have dinner and watch the war unfold on TV. Lilia thinks Mr. Pirzada is Indian like her parents because he looks like them and speaks the same language. After her father explains that Mr. Pirzada is Muslim and no longer considered Indian, Lilia begins observing him more carefully in order to figure out what makes him different. The difference she spots is the fact Mr. Pirzada uses two watches, one set to Boston time and the pocket watch set to Dacca time: "Unlike the watch on his wrist, the pocket watch, he had explained to me, was set to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead" (*Interpreter* 30). The watches function as a motif that highlight the "emotional strain of transnationalism" (Schlote 399): "When I first saw it that night, as he wound it and arranged it on the coffee table, an uneasiness possessed me; life, I realized, was being lived in Dacca first. … Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged"

(*Interpreter* 30-31). Schlote notes that "in South Asian women's writing clocks and watches (marking time zones), phones, overseas operators, and planes (maintaining transnational connections) function as ubiquitous motifs of transnationalism's everyday material realities" (399).

Food is not only a motif and metaphor of central importance for "A Temporary Matter" but it also functions as a leitmotif throughout the entire short story cycle. Food as a metaphor is frequently used in Asian American literature to construct and reflect relationships to racialized subjectivity and also to address "issues of authenticity, assimilation, and desire" (Williams 70). Williams outlines the usual usage of food as metaphor within the Asian American canon: "… in this literature the first generation is often preoccupied with food as *necessity* – associated with nourishment, staples, and survival – while the second views food as *extravagance* – excess, treats, and desire" (70). Lahiri's vulnerable and neurotic characters complicate the usual metaphorical food relations. Characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* may consume an abundance of food only for it to reflect "those characters' poverty (both monetary and emotional) and isolation" (70). Shukumar and Shoba are an example of this. Their pantry is abundant and the dinners they are forced to eat together during power outages are luxurious. Nevertheless, the fleeting intimacy that happens during those candle-lit dinners only leads to Shoba's announcement of divorce.

Williams identifies that the figure of the male immigrant and the relationship between father and son assume primacy in imaginings of diaspora and in diasporic literature. The primacy of this trope in diasporic literature results in the elision of the female diasporic subject (70). Although food metaphors are important in every story of *Interpreter of Maladies*, in certain stories ("A Temporary Matter", "Mrs. Sen's", "This Blessed House") food functions as "the means for characters to assert agency and subjectivity in ways that function as an alternative to the dominant culture" (ibid.). In these stories the repressed female

diasporic subject assumes primacy and food practices signify conditions of migration and diaspora. Williams defines food practices as “the things characters eat and the way they eat them, as well as how characters relate to the preparation of food”. Female characters utilize these “foodways”, as Williams also calls them, in order to “construct their own unique racialized subjectivity and to engender agency” (ibid.).

The development of Shoba’s agency, according to Williams, is represented by her refusal to restock the pantry or cook for her husband (72). The focalizer of the story is Shukumar and during their intimate candle-lit dinners it seems as if they will be able to reconcile and continue together. Both Shukumar and the reader are surprised when at the end Shoba announces she is moving out and that the marriage is over. The fact that Shukumar as the focalizer was surprised by Shoba’s decision signaled for Williams that the dinners were actually developmental stages of Shoba’s agency and subjectivity outside her husband’s knowledge (72).

Food practices for racialized immigrant subjectivities can function both as an act of defiance and as compliance to pressures of assimilation. Williams emphasizes that when food practices articulate difference they embody an act of “subjectivity-making and self-assertion” (78). Foodways then “participate in a literary tradition connecting the Asian American immigrant experience with a visceral, embodied experience of difference” (78). In Lahiri’s first collection of short stories foodways seem to operate as spaces “in which marginalized identities generate a sense of agency and difference with transformative and productive potential” (ibid.).

A Reading of *Unaccustomed Earth*

Unaccustomed Earth is Lahiri's second collection of short stories in which the author delves even deeper into some of her obsessive themes like assimilation, Americanization, intergenerational tensions, male-female relations and sketches of marital life. The stories of this collection expand on previously established themes by, paradoxically, limiting their scope in comparison to *Interpreter of Maladies* but enhancing their focus on the quotidian, the practices of accommodation and on neurotic characters battling an unpredictable world. In *Unaccustomed Earth* Lahiri's characters unsuccessfully attempt to exercise control over their lives while the text constantly emphasizes a fatalistic outlook in which chaos must simply be accepted and where resolution is unobtainable. Her second collection does not contain the type of stories like "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", "A Real Durwan" or "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar". These stories were present in *Interpreter of Maladies* and offered an artistic articulation of Otherness that was not framed by familial or romantic relationships but rather by cultural and political contexts.

The very title of the collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, signals both an intertextual relationship with the American literary canon and the type of characters these texts will present and analyze. The title is taken from a quote in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlett Letter* which is given at the beginning of the book: "Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth" (*Unaccustomed Earth*, n.p.).

Lahiri's stories approach Hawthorne's sentiment ironically and subvert the optimistic idea of immigration as an inherently positive experience. The subversion is achieved by assuming an ambivalent attitude towards immigration and allowing the text to register both its potential

benefits and traumatic costs. The idea that one can "strike roots" anywhere in the world can be connected to the cosmopolitan ideal of being at home in the world. Koshy notes how Lahiri's fiction reverses that ideal and constructs a universality centered on the feeling of not being at home in the world (608). Hawthorne's quote also indicates that the stories will deal exclusively with the experiences of the second generation of Indian American immigrants and the intergenerational traumas they have inherited from their parents.

Lahiri's second collection also offers a different structure of composition. *Unaccustomed Earth* is divided into two parts. The first part consists of five short stories that function like an ethnic short story cycle while the second part titled "Hema and Kaushik" consists of three stories which follow the intertwined lives of the titular characters. The structure of the second part further emphasizes the characteristic of Lahiri's short fiction to blur the lines between it and the novel. "Hema and Kaushik" as a textual whole offer a deeper characterization of the titular characters through each story while simultaneously exhibiting a complex narratological structure that binds the three stories into a more unified composition. Hema assumes the role of narrator in "Once in a Lifetime", Kaushik is the narrator of "Year's End" and "Going Ashore" has an extradiegetic/heterodiegetic narrator that changes back to a first-person narration focalized through Hema after Kaushik's death. The stories can also be viewed as chapters within a single narrative. The second part of *Unaccustomed Earth* can thus formally be described as a novella (Monaco 170).

Marriage is another shared central theme between Lahiri's first and second collection of short stories. *Interpreter of Maladies* dismantled the Western notion that romantic love possessed a universalist quality. Lahiri's first collection juxtaposed romantic marriages to arranged marriages in order to outline cultural assumptions present in the Western notion of romantic love: "… that romantic desire is the sine qua non of marriage, that marriage appropriately expresses individual rather than collective aspirations, and that the

individualism expressed in romantic desire figures the proper citizen subject" (Koshy 604). The main point of Lahiri's critique of romantic marriages was "its monopolistic hold on the social imagination because of its displacement of other modes of intimacy and social life and its insinuation into the very conceptual forms of citizenship" (Koshy 602). However, Lahiri's critiques of romantic marriages serve the purpose of "dismantling colonial binaries" and her texts do not accord superiority to either form of intimacy (ibid.).

A critique of Indian marriages occupies a space of central importance within *Unaccustomed Earth*. The arranged marriages of the first generation function as a leitmotif throughout the collection and are almost always framed as an originating source of the traumas and neuroses for the second generation. The children of Indian American immigrants struggle as adults to comprehend the marriages of their parents and to understand the pragmatism and sense of obligation underpinning those unions. The character of Sudha in the story "Only Goodness" exhibits these struggles: "Thanks to Rahul there was also someone else to witness the perplexing fact of her parents' marriage. It was neither happy nor unhappy, and the lack of emotion in either extreme was what upset Sudha the most. She would have understood quarrels, she believed she would even have understood divorce. She always hoped some sign of love would manifest itself" (*Unaccustomed*, 137).

The second generation represents the end of the process of acculturation and naturalization. They cannot fully understand the price of accommodation their parents were forced to pay both as immigrants and as partners in a new country. The repressed trauma of assimilating into the model minority role and accepting the US middle-class ideal manifests itself frequently in the stories of this collection as cold, dispassionate marriages held together by tradition and duty. The cost of assimilation is evident in the example of Sudha's parents. Their marriage and suburban experience is paradigmatic for all first generation immigrants in the collection: "Wayland was the shock. Suddenly they were stuck, her parents aware that

they faced a life sentence of being foreign. … In Wayland they became passive, wary, the rituals of small-town New England more confounding than negotiating two of the world's largest cities" (*Unaccustomed*, 138).

In Šesnić's terms, the second generation might experience these fractured affective relations as the uncanny return of the repressed material. Because the children have not experienced the parents' trauma of immigration and assimilation, they have inherited the neurotic symptoms of repression without being able to articulate the cause of neurosis. The failure of Sudha's parents to escape the "life sentence of being foreign" signals their failure to assimilate and produces what Monaco terms racial melancholia. Monaco understands melancholia as the idealization of a lost object which in the case of failed Asian American assimilation signifies ideals of whiteness that perpetually remain unobtainable (170). Lahiri's second generation characters epitomize for Monaco "the psychic splitting generated by mimicry and assimilation to whiteness" (170). Monaco understands the neurotic symptoms of intergenerational trauma as a haunting melancholia which leads to intergenerational conflicts (170).

The second generation's inability to articulate the problem and thus resolve it underlines the fatalistic tone of Lahiri's second short story collection. Sudha and her brother Rahul are both plagued by their failure to properly articulate the intergenerational trauma but they handle their melancholic feelings differently:

> While Sudha regarded her parents' separation from India as an ailment that ebbed and flowed like a cancer, Rahul was impermeable to that aspect of their life as well. "No one dragged them here," he would say. "Baba left India to get rich, and Ma married him because she had nothing else to do." That was Rahul, always aware of the family's weaknesses, never sparing Sudha from the things she least wanted to face. (*Unaccustomed*, 138)

Neither Sudha nor Rahul can fully comprehend the experience of failed assimilation and perpetual displacement which haunts their parents but Sudha is at least able to understand the complex diasporic position her parents occupy. Rahul, on the other hand, attempts to repress and isolate himself from the complex immigrant and diasporic position of his family.

Rahul's blunt explanation of his parents' immigrant experience is not in fact an explanation of the cause of their migration nor the cause of the children's feeling of melancholic loss but it is rather a description of the uncanny felt by the children within their household. Sudha recoils precisely from the uncanny that Rahul is able to pinpoint but not explain. The main difference between the siblings is Sudha's acceptance of the complexity of her family's diasporic position and her own inexplicable feelings of melancholic loss. Sudha's acceptance of her liminal identity and its vulnerability allow her to successfully finish the process of constituting her own subjectivity distinct from her parents and to achieve self-actualization. She is able to navigate her parents' expectations to accrue economic success and neutralize biases against minority status (Monaco 160). On the other hand, Rahul buckles under the combined pressure of his parents' expectations and his own repressed feelings of melancholia. In the end, Rahul becomes an alcoholic alienated from Sudha and his family, forced to unconsciously reenact the original trauma of alienation and displacement felt by the first generation of Indian American immigrants.

The short story "Hell-Heaven" offers a more focused critique of arranged marriages by having a second generation focalizer directly compare them to Western marriages. In many ways, this short story is an extension of the story "Mrs. Sen's" from *Interpreter of Maladies*. It is a continuation of the suburban neurosis and racial melancholia inherent in the character of Mrs. Sen but focalized this time through the daughter of the immigrant wife. The first person narrator of "Hell-Heaven" is Usha, Aparna's daughter who was born in the West. Usha

retells the story of her parents' loveless marriage and how her mother fell in love with a young Indian exchange student, Pranab Chakraborty.

Pranab Chakraborty is an engineering student at MIT who came to the USA from Calcutta. Both Pranab and Usha's parents are archetypical representations of middle-class first generation immigrants. Pranab is having a hard time adjusting to America and has even contemplated going back to Calcutta: "Life as a graduate student in Boston was a cruel shock, and in his first month he lost nearly twenty pounds. He had arrived in January, in the middle of a snowstorm, and at the end of a week he had packed his bags and gone to Logan, prepared to abandon the opportunity he'd worked toward all his life, only to change his mind at the last minute" (*Unaccustomed*, 62). At this moment in the text, Pranab and Aparna are equals because they are both struggling to adjust to their new immigrant status. Both of them are facing the traumatic experience of Americanization and assimilation alone. Aparna's marriage offers her no comfort or reassurance in her new environment. Pranab happens to spot Aparna and Usha walking across campus one day. They start a conversation and she ends up inviting Pranab to her house for dinner where he meets her husband, Shyamal.

Pranab soon becomes a frequent guest at their house and is regarded as a fourth member of their family. Usha calls him Pranab Kaku, which means uncle Pranab, and he calls Aparna Boudi, which means brother's wife. Aparna soon falls in love with Pranab but his feelings for her never leave the realm of familial intimacy. Pranab eventually disobeys his parents' wishes to enter into an arranged marriage they have negotiated and chooses instead to marry a white American woman named Deborah. Soon after the marriage, he slowly fades out of the life of Usha's family and cuts ties with other members of the Bengali diaspora.

Aparna experiences a feeling of domestic alienation in her new life in the USA, a staple experience for first generation immigrant wives. Usha describes her mother as isolated

and with plenty of spare time during which she becomes more acutely aware of a lack of interpersonal connection. The introduction of Pranab into her life offers a change for Aparna:

> Before we met him, I would return from school and find my mother with her purse in her lap and her trench coat on, desperate to escape the apartment where she had spent the day alone. […] Pranab Kaku's visits were what my mother looked forward to all day, that she changed into a new sari and combed her hair in anticipation of his arrival, and that she planned, days in advance, the snacks she would serve him with such nonchalance. That she lived for the moment she heard him call out "Boudi!" from the porch and that she was in a foul humor on the days he didn't materialize. (63)

Pranab, at least at the beginning of his life in the US, shared in Aparna's loneliness and offered companionship similar in a way to Eliot in the story "Mrs. Sen's".

Aparna's arranged marriage to Shyamal is loveless and marked by a sense of duty and obligation. Shyamal only married her "to placate his parents" (65). He is distant towards his family and their marriage is characterized by a lack of communication that only serves to emphasize the feeling of isolation in Aparna: "He was wedded to his work, his research, and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate" (ibid.). Aparna had much more in common with Pranab than with Shyamal, sharing "a love of music, film, leftist politics, poetry" (64). Although lacking a sexual relationship, the intimacy Aparna feels with Pranab gives her a glimpse into a romantic marriage she might have had had she not married Shyamal. This intimacy is further highlighted by the fact that she calls him by his first name, while she always addresses her husband in a formal manner: "… she felt free to call him Pranab, whereas she never called my father by his first name" (65).

The different relationships Aparna has with Pranab and Shyamal juxtapose a sense of intimacy and love to a sense of duty and obligation more inherent in first generation arranged

marriages. The most important role Pranab filled for Aparna was that of a listener, a sensitive interlocutor with whom she can share details of her vanishing past. The role of communication is vital for Aparna because it is crucially lacking in her marriage. The opportunity to break out of a state of suburban neurosis through discourse allows Aparna to reinforce her identity which is eroded by her isolation in diaspora: "Pranab Kaku listened to these stories with interest, absorbing the vanishing details of her past. He did not turn a deaf ear to her nostalgia, like my father, or listen uncomprehending, like me" (66). The happiness Aparna felt with Pranab allows the narrator to pinpoint one of the originating sources of trauma for the second generation in the strained, emotionless arranged marriages of their parents: "He brought to my mother the first and, I suspect, the only pure happiness she ever felt. I don't think even my birth made her as happy. I was evidence of her marriage to my father, an assumed consequence of the life she had been raised to lead. But Pranab Kaku was different. He was the one totally unanticipated pleasure in her life" (67).

Aparna's brief escape from her quiet isolation is cut short by Pranab's marriage to Deborah. The trauma of returning to the alienation of her marital life proves too much for Aparna and she attempts suicide. The attempted suicide highlights the weight of isolation faced by first generation immigrant wives and the importance of communication in constructing autonomous subjectivities. Aparna is stopped in the end by a simple remark from her neighbor, acknowledging her existence and breaking the alienation Pranab's marriage has pushed her back into: "It was not I who saved her, or my father, but our next-door neighbor, Mrs. Holcomb, with whom my mother had never been particularly friendly. She came out to rake the leaves in her yard, calling out to my mother and remarking how beautiful the sunset was" (83).

Although critical of Indian marriages, Lahiri's text still maintains an ambivalent attitude towards both romantic and arranged marriages. Pranab ends up cheating on Deborah

and divorcing her after twenty-three years of marriage while Aparna's marriage seems to eventually foster a type of intimacy born from partnership and duty. In that sense, the marriage in "Hell-Heaven" follows a similar path as other arranged marriages described in Lahiri's short stories, for example, the marriage in "The Third and Final Continent". On the other hand, the potential positive intimacy that grows from stability inherent in arranged marriages is immediately undercut by the narrator attributing that delayed fondness to nothing more than habit: "… as my parents approached their old age, she and my father had grown fond of each other, out of habit if nothing else" (81).

The narrator of "Hell-Heaven" also retells the story of how she manages to assert herself as a subjectivity whose experience of America is fundamentally different than that of her mother. The form of this short story might be interpreted as mimicking the form of a *Bildungsroman*. A particularity of the *Bildungsroman* is the subjectivity of the narrator. The narrator's subjectivity is frequently portrayed as fragmented at the beginning of the text but by the end it is able to achieve some type of unification. The symbolic mending of the narrator's subjectivity is the moment that allows for the articulation of the story the reader has just read. In "Hell-Heaven" the resolution of the intergenerational conflict between Usha and Aparna allows for the constitution of Usha's narrative subjectivity and, in a sense, allows for the story to be "told" in the first place.

One of the ways the text conveys intergenerational tension between mother and daughter is by using the motif of clothes as a way to signify their cultural and ideological difference. Aparna's clothes assume an important role from the very beginning of the text because it is how Pranab is able to recognize Aparna as a Bengali:

> … he tapped my mother on the shoulder and inquired, in English, if she might be a Bengali. The answer to his question was clear, given that my mother was wearing the red and white bangles unique to Bengali married women, and a common Tangail sari,

> and had a thick stem of vermillion powder in the center parting of her hair, and the full round face and large dark eyes that are so typical of Bengali women. (*Unaccustomed,* 61)

Aparna's clothes function as an especially important metaphor for culture and the signifying of culture, especially in female Indian American characters. Schlote notes how South Asian women often wear traditional clothes while their husbands frequently dress in Western clothing (400). An explanation for this is that women are tasked with being "the bearers of culture, the preservers of heritage" (Mazumdar qtd. in Schlote, 400).

The role of South Asian women in diasporic communities can also be understood as having a centripetal function established by reducing the scope of Indian womanhood: "… in their efforts to present the South Asian American community as flawless (i.e., a 'model minority'), community leaders have been eager to suppress intra-communal dissent and to create a monolithic notion of 'traditional Indian culture' symbolized by the figure of the 'pure and chaste South Asian woman'" (Schlote 400). Intergenerational conflicts between mothers and daughters are thus a common theme in South Asian fiction because the daughter frequently challenges the idea of Indian womanhood as being tied to the cultural survival of a nation. Anannya Bhattacharjee states that "anything that threatens to dilute this model of Indian womanhood constitutes a betrayal of all that it stands for: nation, religion, God, the spirit of India" (qtd. in Schlote 400-401).

Usha's first subtle challenge to both her mother and the role her mother is meant to fulfill is expressed by a longing for Deborah's casual clothes: "I longed for her casual appearance; my mother insisted whenever there was a gathering that I wear one of my ankle-length, faintly Victorian dresses, which she referred to as maxis, and have party hair, which meant taking a strand from either side of my head and joining them with a barrette at the back" (*Unaccustomed*, 69). The first direct conflict between mother and daughter occurs at

Pranab's wedding. Usha's family were the only members of the Bengali community who were invited and her parents felt out of place at the completely American wedding ceremony. Usha, again wearing the clothes her mother picked, wishes to stay with Deborah and her side of the family while her parents wish to leave. This moment marks the beginning of their tumultuous relationship: "As we drove home from the wedding I told my mother, for the first but not the last time in my life, that I hated her" (74).

Usha's rebellion against her mother also marks the beginning of a complex process of acculturation where the narrator's subjectivity slowly assumes a more liminal, transnational perspective. This perspective is most evident when Usha's hatred towards the authority of her mother transforms into pity because of the gradual realization of how the immigrant experience has traumatically affected Aparna: "I began to pity my mother; the older I got, the more I saw what a desolate life she led. She had never worked, and during the day she watched soap operas to pass the time. Her only job, every day, was to clean and cook for my father and me" (76). Usha's realization of the oppressive reality immigrant Indian wives faced signifies a turning point in their relationship.

The end of the conflict between mother and daughter is achieved in a symbolic repeating of the beginning. Many years after Pranab's wedding, Pranab and Deborah invite Usha's family to celebrate Thanksgiving together. Thanksgiving, just like the American wedding ceremony, signal Pranab's repression of the trauma of Otherness in order to occupy the role of the model minority. Pranab's melancholic longing to achieve an ideal of middle-class American domesticity functions as a backdrop to the resolution of the conflict between Usha and Aparna. The initial problem from the wedding repeats itself: Usha is again dressed according to her mother's demands and she again wishes to stay with Deborah's family while her parents wish to leave. This time Usha changes from her shalwar kameez into Deborah's jeans, sweater and sneakers. While wearing Deborah's clothes Usha states that she finally

feels like herself (80). Aparna notices Usha changed clothes and says nothing, signaling an acceptance of Usha's liminal second generation position and an end to their conflict: "… I noticed my mother lift her eyes from her teacup and stare at me, but she said nothing, and off I went…" (80).

Aparna's acceptance is reinforced by quietly slipping away from the party while leaving Usha to come back on her own. This act finishes the inversion of the wedding scene where Usha first articulated that her cultural experience differs from that of her mother. The intergenerational tension is thus resolved when Aparna is able to accept that Usha is "not only her daughter but a child of America as well" (82). Structurally, this moment of acceptance can be understood as the moment of unification of the narrator's fragmented subjectivity, as the moment which consequently allows her to articulate her own story. The narrators and focalizers of Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* are almost exclusively second generation immigrants who attempt to articulate their own stories which are inextricably tied to the immigrant and marital traumas and crises of their parents.

Conclusion

This thesis has shown that Lahiri's fiction occupies a liminal position in the interstice between ethnic studies and cosmopolitanism within the context of the American short story. It has also diachronically demonstrated how the form of the short story has changed along with the critical understanding of the American canon within American Studies. Particularly, Susan Lohafer's observation that the style of the American short story after 1945 can be divided into two oppositions was used as a jumping point in order to tentatively sketch out a dichotomy. That dichotomy was used to approximate Lahiri's style of writing and establish a connection between her writing and the fractured American canon. The style of Lahiri's short stories was connected to the lineage of gnomic, terse, open-ended American short stories.

This thesis has also demonstrated the characteristics of ethnic fiction on the example of ethnic short story cycles. Special focus was given to ethnic short story cycles in the theoretical understanding of Rocío G. Davis. Her analysis of ethnic short story cycles was used to highlight general tendencies of ethnic fiction and offer a better understanding of Lahiri's short stories. Using theories and ideas by Susan Koshy, Christiane Schlote, and Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma, this thesis also offered a dialectic approach to the fields of ethnic studies and cosmopolitanism.

Lahiri's fiction was then explained using a psychoanalytical literary approach with emphasis on the elements of ethnic fiction and cosmopolitanism which are both present in her texts. The psychoanalytical interpretive framework heavily relied on the works of Jelena Šesnić and Angelo Monaco and their ideas of uncanny domesticity, racial melancholia and suburban neurosis. Special importance was given to the idea of a model minority which was explained in the context of Lahiri's short stories. A connection between assimilation and model minority was understood in the context of psychological repression. In the end, this

thesis used the psychoanalytic tools previously explained in order to analyze Lahiri's two short story collections, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. In the analysis of *Interpreter of Maladies,* emphasis was given on the structure of the short story cycle and Davis's ideas were implemented in order to offer a deeper understanding of the collection's structure. The importance of food as a constant metaphor within the collection was also highlighted. In analyzing *Unaccustomed Earth*, this thesis implemented Šesnić's and Monaco's theoretical frameworks and identified instances of uncanny domesticity and racial melancholia. The particular position of second generation immigrants and the importance of intergenerational trauma were also explained in the context of Lahiri's second short story collection.

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Abstract

The main objective of this thesis is to explain the liminal position of Lahiri's fiction in the context of the American short story. Lahiri's short fiction is positioned in this thesis as occupying the interstice between U.S. ethnic studies and cosmopolitanism. The context of the American short story is presented through a diachronic overview of the literary form from the beginning of the 19th century to the beginning of the 21st century. In order to fully understand the context of the American short story this thesis also shows how critical understandings of the American canon have changed within the field of American Studies, especially after the 1970s.

This thesis then continues to elaborate on the specificities of U.S. ethnic fiction, its general characteristics and tendencies and applies certain elements of them to Lahiri's fiction. Ethnic fiction is explained using the literary form of the ethnic short story cycle. Furthermore, this thesis outlines the respective theoretical fields of ethnic studies and cosmopolitanism but also shows the limitations of both of these theories. A potential overcoming of those limitations is seen in the combining of the two antagonistically defined fields into a dialectic method.

This thesis also offers a theoretical understanding of Lahiri's fiction through a psychoanalytical prism. The psychoanalytical approach also puts special emphasis on the elements of ethnic fiction and cosmopolitanism found in her short stories. The focus of the psychoanalytical approach is on the effects of assimilation, repression, the uncanny and on analyzing Lahiri's neurotic characters. Implementing the psychoanalytical framework, this thesis offers an analysis of Lahiri's two short story collections, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. In analyzing the first collection, emphasis is put on the structure which exemplifies the structure of an ethnic short story cycle and on the importance of food

metaphors. Lahiri's second collection is understood through the figures of the second generation immigrants and intergenerational trauma.

Key words: American short story, Jhumpa Lahiri, U.S. ethnic fiction, cosmopolitanism