

## ABSTRACT

SEARS, TOMMIE ADRIENNE. Racialization and the Formation of Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. (Under the direction of Dr. Mike Grimwood.)

This thesis examines how a history of racialization in the United States impacts the identity formation of the South Asian American characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. It also includes an examination of the ways in which South Asian Americans are often inaccurately labeled as "foreign" and "other" in relation to white Americans and the ways in which race often functions as an ineffective signifier of group homogeneity. To date relatively little has been written about race in South Asian American fiction, and in examining how racialization affects the South Asian Americans in Lahiri's stories I hope to contribute another element to the study of identity formation in South Asian American literature.

In particular, this thesis focuses on the effects of racialization in three of the ten stories from *Interpreter of Maladies*— "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," "Interpreter of Maladies," and "Sexy,"—because they encompass a variety of relationships and points of view. Part I of this thesis serves as an introduction to the history of South Asian Americans and of the emergence of "Asian America," while Part II is an analysis of the three aforementioned short stories from Lahiri's collection. While in each short story varying misperceptions of race are shown to affect South Asian American identity, an analysis of the stories shows that these misperceptions can be traced to the racialized history of South Asian Americans in the United States and the ambiguity that has resulted from trying to categorize individuals on the basis of race and ethnicity.

**RACIALIZATION AND THE FORMATION OF IDENTITY IN  
JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES***

by

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For my mother and friend, Elizabeth Horne Sears, who has always supported me in my  
academic endeavors.

## BIOGRAPHY

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## Introduction

The purpose of my study is to examine how racialization impacts the identity formation of the South Asian American characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. In particular, I will be analyzing the ways in which South Asian Americans are often inaccurately labeled as "foreign" and "other" in relation to white Americans and the ways in which race often functions as an ineffective marker of group homogeneity. Lahiri does not explicitly address racial politics in the United States; however, her characters' experiences reflect the effects of a history of racialization on modern South Asian Americans. While subtle effects of racialization appear in most of the stories of *Interpreter of Maladies*, three of them—"When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," "Interpreter of Maladies," and "Sexy"—encompass the greatest variety of relationships and points of view. These stories most effectively present the ambiguous and conflicted identity that is a consequence of contradictory racial definitions of South Asians in the United States.

Although the issue of conflicted identities is a common one in ethnic American literature, the field of Asian American literary studies is fairly new and is constantly being expanded and redefined in order to incorporate new ethnic groups, among them South Asian Americans. To date relatively little has been written about South Asian American fiction. In looking specifically at how the racial politics of the United States

affect the lives of South Asian Americans in Lahiri's stories I hope to add another dimension to the study of identity formation in South Asian American literature.

In order to understand the literary texts fully, however, it is necessary to place them within the context of both the general history of South Asian Americans and the history of the development of South Asian American literature as a separate subgenre of Asian American literature. To that end, Part I of this thesis serves as an introduction to the history of South Asian Americans in the United States and of the emergence of Asian America both as a political category and as a literary category.

The first chapter of Part I examines the history of racialization in the United States as it affects South Asian Americans. While much legal discrimination has collectively targeted Asian Americans, the ambiguity created by the attempts to categorize South Asian Americans as a racial group throughout their history in the United States has also resulted in confusion for South Asian Americans in both determining their own identities and having their identities determined for them by the American majority. In particular the conflicting ways in which South Asian Americans, the majority of whom are Indian American, have been labeled and categorized have led to several changes both in the legal classification of South Asian Americans and in the common terminology used to refer to South Asian Americans.

The second chapter of Part I explores the emergence and growth of Asian American literature. I consider the problems inherent in the ways in which South Asian Americans have been seen as a part of Asian America, and the ways in which South Asian American literature has been viewed in relation to Asian American literature as a



whole. Finally, I discuss the burgeoning popularity of and critical acclaim for South Asian American literature and particularly for Lahiri's work, which brings awareness of the struggles due to racialization to the attention of a wide readership.

Part II is an analysis of the three aforementioned short stories from Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. Each of these texts portrays race as a problematic means of determining identity. However, while the history of racialization in the United States is implicit in Lahiri's presentation of South Asian American characters in terms of their racial identities, each story highlights the problems associated with race from a different perspective. For example, in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," race is seen from the point of view of a young Indian American girl as an ineffective marker of commonalities among individuals through the relationship between a Pakistani man and an Indian American family, as well as an indication of foreignness and difference for the Indian American girl in relation to a white American majority. In "Interpreter of Maladies," the disconnection between an Indian man and an Indian American family, which Lahiri presents from the view of the Indian man, shows that race cannot be the sole basis for human connections, because even in the absence of racial diversity, differences in nationality, religion, and culture trigger misunderstandings that cannot be bridged by racial similarity. "Sexy," told from the point of view of a white American woman, demonstrates that race often functions both as a method of homogenizing people based on racial similarities and as a sign of the exotic other. While in each short story very different misperceptions of race are shown to affect South Asian American identity, these misperceptions can all be seen to have roots in the racialized history of South Asian

Americans in the United States and the ambiguity that has resulted from attempting to categorize South Asian Americans on the basis of race.

## **Part I: South Asian American History and Literature**

## Chapter I

### South Asians in the United States and Racial Politics

*“Race, as we all know, is a social construct, a mass fantasy in which we all participate, yet it persists as a constant material force as well as a visceral and lived reality.”*

—Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren, *East Main Street*

As Davé, Nishime, and Oren point out, race is a constructed and often very ambiguous method of identification, based on phenotypical characteristics such as skin color, eye shape, and hair color. However, race has continually been used throughout the history of the United States as a way of informing perceptions of identity and “foreignness” and as a method of both including and excluding racialized<sup>1</sup> minority groups from full participation in American society. Michael Omi and Howard Winant assert in *Racial Formation in the U.S.* that in the United States, “Without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity” (62). As a racial group, Asian Americans have consistently been denied recognition as completely American, and as a result have been denied rights granted to other Americans.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the first federal laws enacted in the United States in order to exclude a particular group of people were in response to Asian

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms “racialized” and “racialization” to refer to the reality that members of one race hold power over members of other races. Some effects of racialization are discrimination and violence.

<sup>2</sup> Omi and Winant point out that the division of minorities in the United States into four races is commonly accepted across disciplines. These four minority races are African American, Asian American, Latin American, and Native American, while white Americans are the fifth and majority race (16).

immigration,<sup>3</sup> beginning with the Naturalization Law of 1790, which limited citizenship to “free white persons.” The last discriminatory legislation was not removed until the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Nguyen 143). South Asian Americans in particular have had a complicated and confusing racial history in the United States.

The first period of South Asian immigration, which was largely defined by male Punjabi laborers traveling to California, began in the early 1900s, and by 1920, approximately 6400 South Asians were living in the United States. However, this wave of immigration was stifled shortly after it began, and Congress eventually prohibited immigration from India completely.<sup>4</sup> The Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 was the first legal measure to exclude all Asian immigration, and this attempt to bar all Asian immigration to the United States uniformly also served to redefine America’s concept of “Asian,” as it was expanded to include all of Asia as one undesirable category (Palumbo-Liu 33).<sup>5</sup> However, the difficulty of defining race as a social construct made excluding all South Asian immigrants from citizenship in the United States complicated.

The 1923 case of Bhagat Singh Thind in particular shows the problematic nature of the efforts by Americans in power to redefine race and law in order to bar South Asians from entering the United States. Several Indians argued before courts that they should be eligible for naturalization because they were considered Caucasian for

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<sup>3</sup> While restrictions on Asian immigration applied to all of Asia (South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia), different legislation targeted specific areas of Asia according to the U.S.’s political situation.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. legislation restricted Asian immigration in 1909, two years after South Asians began arriving in the U.S., and prohibited it eight years later. For more information on this subject, see Ronald Takaki’s *Strangers from a Different Shore*, which offers a comprehensive history of Asian Americans.

<sup>5</sup> This act expanded on earlier attempts to bar Chinese and Japanese immigration, which started as early as 1882 with the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1908, and the 1924 Immigration Acts. For more information about these acts, see chapter two of Takaki’s *Strangers from a Different Shore*.

geographic and ethnographic reasons.<sup>6</sup> The courts refused to accept these arguments, thus showing an effort to resist any definition of Caucasian that may include people of “other” parts of the world, and instead favoring one that is synonymous with “white.” Thind argued that as Indians were generally considered to be Caucasian, he should be eligible for naturalization, since during the previous year, the court had refused naturalization to Takao Ozawa, a Japanese man, based only on the fact that he was not considered Caucasian. However, the government argued that the term “white” should be interpreted according to regular usage by the “common man,” and that by this definition Indians were not “white.” As a result of the 1923 *Thind* decision as well as the earlier 1920 Alien Land Law,<sup>7</sup> South Asians, along with other Asians in the United States, were defined as racially “other” and thus were subject to anti-miscegenation laws and denied the right to own land in California, making them dependent on “white” Americans for access to land ownership.

In spite of the fact that during World War II the United States fought against the racist ideology of Nazism, it continued to practice racial discrimination within its borders. In fact, the United States refused naturalization rights to South Asians until 1946, when, due largely to the denunciation of this double standard by South Asians in the United States, Congress allowed India a small immigration quota and granted Indians naturalization rights. While progress has been made to decrease racial inequalities for

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<sup>6</sup> South Asian Americans were generally accepted as Caucasian upon their arrival in the United States in the early 1900s. In fact, the Asiatic Exclusion League even asserted in 1910 that South Asians were “members of the same family” as Americans of European ancestry (Takaki 298).

<sup>7</sup> Under the 1920 Alien Land Law, Asian immigrants (who were denied citizenship) were barred from owning property on the basis that they were not U.S. citizens (Takaki 205).

South Asian Americans, sociologist Nazli Kibria asserts that “the racial identity of South Asians in the United States is ambiguous in certain respects, and this ambiguity has resulted in a sense of marginality for South Asian Americans in a variety of social contexts” (69).

### **Labeling and Grouping South Asian Americans**

*“I am tired of being told what I have to be, and I am tired of defending who I am.”*

— Sucheta J. Doshi, *Contours of the Heart*

The ambiguity of identity for South Asians in the United States expressed by the 1923 *U.S. vs. Bhagat Singh Thind* case continues today. In his history of Asian Americans, Ronald Takaki points out that the earliest South Asian Americans were collectively referred to as “Hindoos” because of the tendency of Americans to confuse race and religion, even though only a small number were actually followers of Hinduism (295). However, the term “South Asian” is a relatively new group identity for individuals from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, and “South Asian American” is used to describe American citizens of South Asian ancestry.<sup>8</sup> The terms are problematic, however, as “South Asian” and “South Asian American” are often used synonymously with “Indian” and “Indian American,” and thus serve as a means of excluding other South Asian Americans rather than being inclusive. According to sociologist Prema Kurien, the tendency of most Americans to group individuals of one

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<sup>8</sup> Although, as Rajini Srikanth points out in *The World Next Door*, South Asian America also includes individuals of South Asian descent in Canada and South America, in my thesis I will be discussing individuals of South Asian ancestry who are citizens of the United States.

race together leads many Americans to view all South Asians as Indian, as Indians represent the majority of the South Asian population of the U.S. (267). Kurien quotes Asian American studies critic Madhulika Khandelwal as saying that the grouping together of all South Asians and, more broadly, of all individuals with similar racial characteristics, has actually created a need for solidarity within the South Asian community in the post-9/11 period: “Because to American bigots, Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs all look the same—brown—many victims are deciding they have a lot more in common than they had previously realized” (273).<sup>9</sup> Kurien further argues that many South Asian Americans are “forced to come to terms with their cultural and religious heritage when their ‘brown skins’ preclude them from being accepted as ‘just American’” because of the assumption that all individuals of one race are similar to one another but inherently different and “other” in comparison to the majority (280). A case study conducted by race theorist Pawan H. Dhingra concluded that although the Indian Americans surveyed generally felt no connection to other South Asian Americans, they nonetheless felt that they were constantly perceived as indistinguishable from other South Asian Americans and collectively treated as “foreigners” even though they consider themselves fully American (127). Furthermore, they expressed a desire to be more closely associated with other Americans rather than “defined...as foreigners based on their physical appearances” (137). Because race often marks South Asian Americans as “other” or “foreign,” many individuals neglect the “American” part of “South Asian American,” thus showing a refusal to recognize that

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<sup>9</sup> This quotation is reprinted in Kurien’s article. The original source is Sarah Wildman’s December 24, 2001 article “All for One” in *The New Republic*.



people of Asian ethnicity can have American nationality. In addition, this neglect conveys a refusal to see the term “American” as representative of something other than “white.” As literary critic Rajini Srikanth asserts in *The World Next Door*, many Americans view South Asian Americans as outsiders, “regardless of the number of generations that their families have been in the United States, their dedication to the U.S. Armed Forces, or the number of flags they fly from their businesses and homes” (53).

The tendency of most Americans to perceive South Asian Americans as foreign is aggravated by the fact that most Americans are not well-informed about the South Asian Americans who make up part of the United States, or even about the meaning of the term “South Asia” (Leonard 93). Confusion has ensued from the need of Americans to label groups in order to differentiate them from the ethnically unmarked majority.<sup>10</sup> In an article on the politics of identity, Sucheta Mazumdar points out that “quantifying, categorizing, and classifying populations has been one of the primary systems of bureaucratic control of all modern states,” with the result that “with a stroke of the pen, ‘ethnicities’ based on ‘national origins’ become fixed public entities” (463). South Asians have alternately been perceived as Caucasian, Asian, simply “not white,” or “other,” throughout their history in the United States.<sup>11</sup> In 1975, for example, Indian Americans were declared “white,” and thus denied minority status or benefits. Due to this classification, Indian Americans were included under the census category “Caucasian” until 1980 for lack of a more definitive group with which to associate. After

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<sup>10</sup> I allude to Caucasian Americans as ethnically unmarked in reference to the pervasive assumption that because “white” Americans of often vastly different European ancestries share a similar skin color and other phenotypical traits, they are unmarked as foreign and thus completely American.

<sup>11</sup> See chapters one and eight of Takaki’s *Strangers from a Different Shore*.

lobbying from Indian American groups, the Bureau of the Census replaced the “East Indian” subgroup with “Asian Indian” under the broader “Asian” category, so that Indian Americans could identify themselves as Indian rather than Caucasian on the census. However, South Asian Americans who are not of Indian origin still have no category to identify with, and must choose either to falsely identify themselves as Indian or to identify themselves as “other” on census forms. In her essay “The Language of Identity,” Grace Poore advances Mazumdar’s argument that methods of categorizing minorities in the United States have resulted in ambiguity and have exacerbated the division between “white” and “other.” Poore questions the usefulness of terms that assert ethnic<sup>12</sup> and racial identities and argues that both minority and majority populations have taken such terms for granted with the result that the terms no longer empower and signify inclusion for the groups they are meant to represent, but instead simply exclude them further from being seen as completely American by labeling them as “not white.”

Additionally, the common discourse in the United States about South Asian Americans has been problematic because of the confusion over the meanings of labels all Americans use to describe South Asian Americans and Indian Americans. The term “Indian” (in the United States) is immediately ambiguous because it connotes images of two different ethnic groups: Native Americans (American Indians) and South Asian Indians. The confusion over this term and the ambivalence it provokes in the majority of Americans are examples of the difficulties South Asian Americans face in establishing

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<sup>12</sup> Whereas race is a social construction based on physical characteristics, ethnicity points to a country or area of ancestry or origin. For example, while the boundaries created by both of these terms are easily blurred, ethnicity can often be determined through linguistic, ancestral, and cultural ties.

their identities in the United States. Because of uncertainty over how to group South Asian Americans and other non-white Americans, labels like “minority,” “ethnic,” “diverse,” and “person of color” are used to describe individuals when ethnic or racial origin is unclear. Political scientist and historian Sucheta J. Doshi calls such terms demeaning to the self-images of those that they are meant to identify, because they seem “specifically invoked by ‘white’ society to mark an essential difference” (211). The “essential difference” to which Doshi refers is of course race, and the bearing that race has on American society as a whole is evident in the persistence of prejudice, anti-foreign sentiments, and hate crimes against South Asian Americans as people of color.<sup>13</sup> Doshi argues that labels are neither indicative of true identity nor necessary, because “...we need to understand that we do not need to be defined or have to define ourselves” (211).

The ineffectiveness of labels is also manifest in the relationship of South Asian Americans to Asian America as a whole. The fact that South Asian Americans are generally perceived by the dominant population of the United States as racially “other” in relationship to East Asian Americans has contributed to a divide between Asian America and South Asian America.<sup>14</sup> Literary critic Viet Thanh Nguyen points out a significant concern among Asian American intellectuals about the limits imposed by Asian America. These limits often exclude Asian American ethnic and racial minorities (for instance,

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<sup>13</sup> Anti-South Asian sentiments are easily found across the country, and one well-publicized initiator of hate crimes against South Asian Americans is the “Dotbusters” group in New Jersey. In addition, hate crimes against South Asian Americans increased considerably after 9/11, when their ambiguous racial identity made them targets of anti-Arab attackers. See Takaki and also chapter two of Rajini Srikanth’s *The World Next Door* for more information on these instances.

<sup>14</sup> *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*, edited by Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth, which focuses on understanding South Asian American identity within Asian America, includes a further examination of this issue.

those of Filipino and South Asian descent) in favor of intellectuals who come primarily from Japanese American and Chinese American backgrounds, and who continue to dominate Asian America (11). Because South Asian Americans are viewed as racially different, they often feel conflicted about their inclusion within the Asian American label.

### **South Asian America within Asian American Studies**

*There are no Asians in Asia, only people with national identities....But on this side of the Pacific there are Asian Americans. This broader identity was forged in the crucible of racial discrimination and exclusion: their national origins did not matter as much as their race. Thus, out of "necessity," theirs became a community rooted in the struggle against racism.*

—Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*

After the Civil Rights Movement brought attention to racialization in the United States, Asian Americans argued for racial restrictions to be removed from immigration legislation. The result was the 1965 Immigration Act,<sup>15</sup> which reopened immigration for Asians to the United States, and Asians quickly became the fastest growing minority group in the U.S. This population increase, along with the Asian American political and literary movement in the late 1960s, made Asian Americans more visible to the general American public. In 1968 Asian American intellectuals formed a political movement and public struggle for racial equality that took place largely on West Coast college campuses and spread to the United States as a whole. After the initial formation of the political movement, Asian Americans became more aware of their identity as a racial group as defined both by the government and by themselves (Nguyen 15). A group of

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<sup>15</sup> The Immigration Act of 1965 allowed a quota of 20,000 immigrants from each country in the Eastern Hemisphere in addition to the entry of family members (Takaki 419).

predominantly East Asian American student activists at San Francisco State College coined the term “Asian America” as a result of political awareness and strife (Nguyen 87). The term recognizes the existence and importance of Asians who are American, and challenges the pervasive assumption that Asians cannot really be from the United States, “when the reality is that several generations of Asian people in the United States have been born and raised here or became naturalized” decades ago (Poore 25).

In the 1990s, a resurgence of interest in Asian American studies and politics took place in the United States, in part due to the emergence of powerful Asian American literature, which helped establish Asian America as a point of reference. Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, two Chinese American writers, were instrumental in bringing attention to Asian American literature both within and outside the academy in the 1960s and 1970s, but the publication of Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* in 1989 brought the subject of Asian America to the attention of the mainstream public. Literary critic David Palumbo-Liu asserts that the most lasting effect of the Asian American movement may be the “reshaping of American consciousness of ethnicity and race” (307). Although awareness of minorities within Asian America is still emerging, much progress has been made in bringing attention to the experiences of Asian Americans as a whole, and much of this progress has come through literature.

In particular, literature written by and about South Asian Americans has been instrumental in bringing the lives of South Asian Americans to the attention of the mainstream public in the United States. Some of the earliest South Asian American experiences were recorded in memoirs by Dhan Gopal Mukerji (*Caste and Outcast*,

1923), Dalip Singh Saund (*Congressman from India*, 1960), and Ved Mehta (*Sound-Shadows of the New World*, 1986).<sup>16</sup> Although fiction, memoirs, and poetry by South Asian American writers have vastly increased in number since the late 1980s, particularly through the publication of anthologies, Srikanth asserts that the present moment is “a high point for South Asian American literature” (8). The growing impact of South Asian American writing is evident in the plethora of endorsements and awards bestowed on South Asian American literature, as well as in the popularity of works by Bharati Mukherjee, Abraham Verghese, Chitra Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri, among others. Srikanth suggests that the growing readership of South Asian American literature is imperative in that more individuals will be able to view “the complexity and nuances of the South Asian American experience” through literature (Srikanth 16).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For more information on these and other South Asian American writers, see Rajini Srikanth’s *The World Next Door*.

<sup>17</sup> In reference to the popularity of Bharati Mukherjee among mainstream audiences, it should be pointed out that Mukherjee has been accused by other South Asian Americans of contributing to the exoticism and stereotyping of South Asian Americans through her fiction writing. For more information, see chapter one of Inderpal Grewal’s *Transnational America* as well as Susan Koshy’s article “The Geography of Female Subjectivity: Ethnicity, Gender, and Diaspora.”

## Chapter II

### Asian American Literature

*...Asian American literature inhabits the highly unstable temporality of the “about-to-be,” its meanings continuously reinvented after the arrival of new groups of immigrants and the enactment of legislative changes.*

—Susan Koshy, “The Fiction of Asian American Literature”

As literary critic Susan Koshy explains, the genre of Asian American literature is constantly shifting and expanding in order to encompass writing from different Asian American ethnicities. The influx throughout history of immigrants to the United States from various parts of Asia, and the writing that emerges from their experiences, has resulted in a constantly changing Asian America, which expands and is redefined with each new ethnic group and its literature.

According to Koshy, the widening scope of Asian America and its stratified and uneven internal structure have resulted in a community of literature that is ever growing and difficult to contain within the model of a pluralized ethnic identity (“Fiction” 315). In addition, she states that too often critics of Asian American literature simply include “other” Asian American literatures (Vietnamese, South Asian, Korean) according to changing Census classifications or changing numerical ratios, without taking the time to analyze historical commonalities and differences among groups (“Fiction” 324). The majority of theoretical and critical analysis in the field of Asian American literature have

focused on Chinese American and Japanese American texts. However, because of the shifting nature of Asian American literature and the constant emergence of new groups of ethnic literatures within the field, the current analysis has proven inadequate. As Koshy points out, this dearth of criticism has resulted in a canon-formation that prioritizes Chinese American and Japanese American texts as the “canonical” Asian American texts, while other Asian American ethnic works are viewed as “marginal” or “emergent” (“Fiction” 325). In order to avoid creating hierarchies within the field by prioritizing older and more familiar forms of Asian American literature (such as Chinese American and Japanese American literature) and to give adequate representation to smaller minority groups within Asian American literature, Koshy argues that the field must make a concerted effort to investigate the “premises and assumptions underlying our constructions of commonality and difference” (“Fiction” 317).

The term “Asian American,” in addition to offering a group identity, allows for representation and recognition for many ethnic groups within the term. Therefore, although to discard the term “Asian American” in favor of individual ethnic groups in defining literature may not be plausible, both Koshy and Nguyen assert that, rather than perpetuate a “fictional notion of unity” among different Asian American ethnic groups, the unique contributions of each group should be fostered (Koshy “Fiction” 318).

While the experiences of Asian ethnic groups in America vary, a commonality exists in that their lives and identities have all been marked by discrimination and alienation based on race. Therefore, Asian American literature, regardless of ethnic associations, is unified in that it brings attention to the impact of racial difference on the



Asian American subject. Asian American literature as a whole is intrinsic in conveying the experiences of Asian Americans and defining what constitutes Asian America.

### **South Asian American Literature's inclusion within Asian American Literature**

*For the second- and third- and fourth-generation Asian Americans, mostly of Chinese American and Japanese American origin, who emerged as the progenitors of the Asian American movement in the late 1960s, "Asia" was easily and readily identified with the homeland of their parents [and grand- and great-grandparents]. Radical politics did not translate into radical rethinking of national-origin categories; there was no perceived need to redefine the "Asia" in Asian American, or to reach out to strange black and brown peoples.*

—Sucheta Mazumdar, *Contours of the Heart*

Frank Chin states (now infamously) in *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, that Asian American means "Filipino-, Chinese-, and Japanese-Americans, American born and raised" (vii). Although Chin made his statement in 1974, his view exemplifies an inability of many to expand their vision of Asian America despite demographic changes. Because the landscape of Asian America has changed vastly since the Asian American movement (largely pioneered by Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans) in the 1960s, the definition must change as well. However, Mazumdar calls attention to the fact that the Asian American movement, and in fact Asian America, is still most closely associated with East Asia by both Asian American intellectuals and mainstream America.<sup>18</sup> The term "Asian" continues to privilege East or Southeast

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<sup>18</sup> Although as Mazumdar point out, Asian America still must undergo changes, the fact that efforts are being made to expand the concept of Asian America is clear in the difference between Chin's anthology, published in the mid-1970s, which includes selections from only Japanese American, Chinese American, and Filipino American authors, and the anthology *Contours of the Heart*, which is where Mazumdar's passage appears. *Contours of the Heart*, published in 1996, was the first anthology of its kind. Editors Rajini Srikanth and Sunaina Maira describe it as an effort to map South Asian America as part of Asian

Asians, “rendering South Asians as the nonexistent Asians among Asians and non-Asians alike” (Poore 25). This understanding of Asian America and the biases the term connotes can also be understood in relation to Asian American literature.

While East Asians and South Asians have very distinct histories within the United States, their experiences are similar in that they have been racialized upon their immigration to the United States. In addition, their ethnic origins, although different, have made them subject to similar forms of exclusion and discrimination dependent on the historic circumstances in the world. However, because of the physical differences between East Asian Americans and South Asian Americans, the political and social constructs of race vary from one group to another. For example, depending on the state of political alliance or alienation between the United States and their countries of origin, at certain times throughout history various Asian American ethnic groups risk being identified as noticeably foreign and possibly dangerous.<sup>19</sup>

Poore argues that only through solidarity can Asian Americans protect their rights from Americans who perceive foreign-looking people as dangerous outsiders and that while an eventual relinquishing of the blanket label is preferable, it may not be possible now. However, despite the inability of some to recognize the changing nature of Asian American literature and the inclusion into the genre of works by more recently

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America, and the anthology includes selections from Americans with ancestral origins throughout the region of South Asia.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, whereas East Asians were targeted as the enemy during World War II and, as a result, Japanese Americans were interned, currently South Asian Americans are identified with Middle Easterners and Arabs because of their racial similarities. For a detailed discussion of the Japanese Internment, see Ronald Takaki’s *Strangers from a Different Shore*. For a further discussion of the racial association of South Asians post 9/11, see Pawan H. Dhingra’s “Being American Between Black and White: Second-Generation Asian American Professionals’ Racial Identities.”

immigrated Asian American minorities, Ruth Yu Hsiao, a scholar of Asian American literature, observes that in spite of their differences, “East and South Asian writers share the goal of ‘redefining and stretching’ the boundaries of Asian American literature by challenging the common standards of the West for great literature” (230).

### **The Role of South Asian American Literature**

*South Asian immigrants have been highly individualized as a group by their cultural behavior that separates them physically and psychologically from the term and group identity of Asian American even though their racial classification (since 1980) has been Asian American.*

—Shilpa Davé, *East Main Street*

In the genre of Asian American literature, South Asian American literature is one of the “emergent” categories to which Koshy alludes in “The Fiction of Asian American Literature” (325). Although South Asian American literature shares many traits with Asian American literature, the experience of South Asian Americans is for the most part newer and lesser known to the general public. According to cultural theorist Inderpal Grewal, “It was only when upper-caste South Asian migrants educated in English literature, who were able to migrate after 1965, came to the United States in larger numbers that a so-called Indian-American literature was produced which focused on the experiences of migrants in North America and gained the attention of a reading public in the United States and of scholars of literature” (61). Before the 1980s, the best-known authors of Indian or South Asian descent were viewed by academics as post-colonial writers from British colonies (for instance, V. S. Naipaul in Trinidad and Salman Rushdie in Britain). Bharati Mukherjee was one of the first authors of South Asian descent to

gain popularity in the United States when her first novel, *Jasmine*, was published in the United States in 1989, and many South Asian American authors have since written about the South Asian immigrant experience in America.<sup>20</sup>

Grewal, who calls Mukherjee a “pioneer” in writing about Indian Americans, argues that Mukherjee’s success can be at least partially attributed to her ability to “articulate the trope of the Asian woman within the context of a liberal idea of America” (62). However, despite the popularity of Mukherjee’s novels, many critics claim that she disregards racialization in the United States as an obstacle to her characters’ efforts to assimilate to American society. Koshy asserts that Mukherjee’s first novel only alludes to racial bigotry while mainly ignoring the history of discrimination based on race in the United States. Rather than simply discussing assimilation and racial differences in their texts, Koshy argues that authors of South Asian American literature must also confront the practice of racialization in the United States that has made assimilation difficult for South Asian Americans (“Geography” 150). Asian American studies scholar Anita Mannur asserts that Asian American literary studies have begun to gravitate toward “understanding the everyday as an important site of racial formation for Asian American subjects” in that both critics and readers have started to “examine how the literary narrative about the everyday is political” (57).

The inclusion of specific historical and cultural contextualization within South Asian American literature and other ethnic texts can often cause the misperception that they are less “universal” than “mainstream” literature (Koshy 345). However, Lahiri’s

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<sup>20</sup> Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni, Kavita Daswani, Abraham Verghese, and Sohrab Homi Fracis are some of the many authors who have written about the immigrant experience of South Asians in America.

*Interpreter of Maladies* is an excellent example of the fact that ethnic literature can encompass universal themes and experiences while still drawing attention to the history and culture of a specific group of people. Although the short stories are about the Indian diaspora, the themes of foreignness, belonging, and human connections cross ethnic boundaries.

**Part II: Jhumpa Lahiri and *Interpreter of Maladies***

## **Jhumpa Lahiri and *Interpreter of Maladies***

*When my father asked whether Indian nationals were eligible for the Pulitzer, I told him what I knew: that the book had to be by an American citizen, and deal, preferably with “American life.” At this point my mother interjected that the judges had made an exception in my case. I might have been naturalized as an American citizen when I was eighteen (I was born in London), but in her eyes I am first and forever Indian. Furthermore, my book, in her opinion, wasn’t about American life. It was about people like herself and myself—Indians. I suppose I should be grateful that my mother wasn’t on the Pulitzer committee.*

–Jhumpa Lahiri, “To Heaven without Dying”

As Lahiri points out, her status as a racial “other” creates ambiguity about her identity. Since the publication of *Interpreter of Maladies*, both Lahiri and her book have been labeled in various ways: critics have categorized Lahiri as an American author, an Asian American author, a South Asian American author, an Indian American author, a British-born author, an Anglo-Indian author, a NRI (non-resident Indian) author, and an Indian author, among others, and have referred to her work variously as Asian American fiction, Indian American fiction, immigrant fiction, ethnic fiction, and diasporic fiction. The different ways in which Lahiri and her work are described demonstrate both that labels are not all-encompassing—one can have a hybrid identity or be described by more than one adjective—and that her stories resonate with many different groups.

When Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000, she became the first Indian American, and in fact the first Asian American, ever to do so. The recent popularity of South Asian American works of fiction, and in particular the success of *Interpreter of Maladies*, indicates a growing recognition of and appreciation for the South Asian immigrant experience in the United States. The fact that Lahiri’s work has received both critical and popular acclaim points to her ability to convey both historical and

contemporary realities of Asian American life to a mainstream audience. Lahiri, like most Asian American authors, is aware of the history that has defined American life for immigrants, and through her writing shows how past injustices create present biases that affect the lives of South Asian Americans. Lahiri's stories offer an opportunity for readers to learn about the specific experiences of South Asian Americans "as an integral part of the social fabric of the United States" (Srikanth 148).

The subjects of Lahiri's writing consistently reflect racial and political experiences that are particular to South Asians in the United States. While Lahiri does not make race or racial difference a focus of her writing, it is present nonetheless, just as it is always present in the lives of South Asian Americans. Lahiri's work reflects the impact of the history of racial politics in the United States on the formation of identity by demonstrating that racialization in the United States makes race an intrinsic and inescapable part of identity for immigrants whose skin color is not white. The accounts of the experiences of South Asian Americans she weaves throughout her writing depict connections to being American and the challenges that being of foreign descent brings within a racialized society.<sup>21</sup> In *Interpreter of Maladies* Lahiri presents racial issues realistically, conveying the racial bigotry experienced by South Asian Americans without seeming confrontational. The success and appeal of Lahiri's debut collection are in large part due to her ability to evoke the "ordinariness of the immigrant existence" rather than

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<sup>21</sup> Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*, was recently chosen as the freshman reading selection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for Fall 2006. That this work, which focuses on the formation of identity of an Indian American male character, was selected demonstrates recognition on the part of the selection committee of the importance of promoting awareness of and information about the South Asian American community.



present exoticized or exaggerated versions of her characters (Mannur 63).<sup>22</sup> The stories instead serve as “tales of alienation that provide subtly pointed critiques about the racialized underpinnings of Indian American immigrant experiences” (Mannur 63).

Although Lahiri addresses the difficulties of belonging that accompany perceived foreignness and presents a picture of the everyday struggles of South Asian Americans, the characters’ problems often remain unresolved, just as racialization in the United States remains unresolved. The common but still very significant experiences of Lahiri’s characters demonstrate that the process of being accepted by a historically racialized American society is ever-evolving and that Asian America is an entity that “is always in process” (Palumbo-Liu 393).

Lahiri’s fiction effectively conveys the difficulties of identity formation experienced by South Asian Americans to a mainstream reading audience. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri portrays the difficulties for South Asian Americans that come with being both American and racially “other.” Lahiri does not explicitly address the effects of race on South Asian Americans; however, by demonstrating that race can function as both a unifying and dividing agent, she subverts common assumptions of race as an indicator of similitude, and instead conveys that one’s identity is not completely determined by race, but that ethnicity, nationality, religion, and cultural background, among other factors, combine to create an identity.

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<sup>22</sup> Some earlier South Asian American writers, for instance, Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Divakaruni, have been accused of ignoring the history of racialization in the United States in relation to the perceptions of South Asian Americans as foreign. In addition, both authors have been the subject of criticism for exoticizing the plights of their South Asian American characters. See Susan Koshy’s “The Geography of Female Subjectivity: Ethnicity, Gender, and Diaspora” for a further discussion of Mukherjee, as well as Inderpal Grewal’s first chapter in *Transnational America* for a further discussion of both authors.

In the ten stories that make up the collection, Lahiri shrewdly but without judgment confronts the intricacies of displacement, belonging, and human relationships. Although the constructions and details of these relationships, as well as the physical settings, presented in each short story differ, Lahiri consistently points to moments in the everyday lives of her characters that help to define their identities. Through the experiences of her characters, Lahiri examines the ways in which people interact with one another and assimilate to change. The misconceptions about, and false identities attributed to, Lahiri's characters of South Asian descent are related to the history of racial stratification in the United States, and particularly to the way in which America as a whole views South Asian Americans as "foreign."

The three stories on which I have chosen to focus differ in that they are told from the perspectives of an Indian American girl, an Indian man, and a white European American woman. In addition, the ways in which race affects perceptions of identity vary among the stories. "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," portrays race as an ineffective indicator of similarities within one racial group and of foreignness in relation to majority racial populations. "Interpreter of Maladies" presents race as an unsuccessful basis for relationships between individuals of the same race. Finally, "Sexy" portrays race both as a way of grouping individuals with similar racial characteristics together as "other" in opposition to white America and as a means of evoking exotic fantasies of the racial "other."

In each story Lahiri points to the superficiality of race as a marker of identity for South Asians and South Asian Americans. Lahiri effectively pinpoints the "maladies" of

identification experienced by her characters—false labels of foreignness, homogenization of racially similar people, and associations with the exotic other—by demonstrating that they are grounded in misconceptions created by a history of racialization.

### **“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”**

*[My mother] seemed genuinely proud of the fact [that I was American], as if it were a reflection of my character. In her estimation, I knew, I was assured a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity. I would never have to eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from my rooftop, or hide neighbors in water tanks to prevent them from being shot, as she and my father had.*

—Jhumpa Lahiri, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”

“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” takes place in 1971, in a New England college town. The narrator is Lilia, a ten-year-old Indian American girl who lives with her parents. Because her parents feel lonely in America, they often look through a university directory, call people with Indian names, and invite them to their home. Mr. Pirzada is a Pakistani (soon to be Bangladeshi)<sup>23</sup> man who is studying botany in the United States while his wife and daughters remain in Dacca, East Pakistan, in the midst of a civil war. Lilia’s parents entertain Mr. Pirzada almost every night, sharing dinner and news of what is happening on the subcontinent, so that he temporarily becomes part of their family. During the time in which she is acquainted with Mr. Pirzada, Lilia struggles to negotiate

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<sup>23</sup> During the time in which Mr. Pirzada is acquainted with Lilia and her parents, West Pakistan and East Pakistan (the area that is today known as Bangladesh) were involved in a civil war. India joined East Pakistan in fighting against West Pakistan. In 1972, East Pakistan became independent and was renamed Bangladesh.

her own Indian American identity while constantly confronting the perceptions of foreignness her skin color creates.

Lilia assumes that because Mr. Pirzada is outwardly similar to her parents in looks and speaks the same language—Bengali—he must be Indian. However, when Lilia refers to Mr. Pirzada as Indian, her father informs her that “Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian...Not since Partition. Our country was divided. 1947” (Lahiri 25). Lilia’s parents differ from Mr. Pirzada in religion and nationality, but they share physical and cultural similarities, so Lilia is confused by her father’s assertion: “It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night with their hands” (Lahiri 25). While Lilia sees only their outward similarities and immediately identifies them as alike based on their similar appearance, she does not see that race is not the binding feature of their relationship. She does not recognize that the bond between her parents and Mr. Pirzada is created primarily by common cultural backgrounds that involve shared practices, and that their relationship is centered on what they do together, not the way they look. Thus, although their racial similarity is not the main reason for their resemblance, the fact that Lilia initially equates shared skin color with shared identity makes clear that it is the most immediately obvious reason.

While Lilia sees her parents and Mr. Pirzada as united because of their skin color, her father uses colors on a map to show that they are different: “‘As you see, Lilia, it is a different country, a different color,’ my father said. Pakistan was yellow, not orange” (Lahiri 26). Here, ironically Lilia’s father uses color as a way of both uniting some

people and separating others based on the ways in which they identify themselves religiously and nationally. Pakistan is separate from India not because the people are inherently different, as the similarity between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents shows, but because of religion, which is not always outwardly recognizable. India's declaration of war against Pakistan shows the superficiality of marking individuals as "different" based on religion, race, or ethnicity alone. Just twenty-five years before Bangladesh's fight for independence, everyone on the Indian subcontinent was Indian, and in 1971, these people—who were once the same nationality—are divided between Pakistanis and Indians and become enemies because of borders visible only on maps. The similarity between Lilia's parents and Mr. Pirzada shows that individuals are not defined solely by race, religion, or nationality, because their relationship points to a shared culture—a Bengali culture—that is exceeded by imagined borders signifying religious and national status.

However, even after being told the truth, Lilia is still unable to understand how Mr. Pirzada and her parents can be so similar in race and customs yet have different nationalities. As a result she closely observes Mr. Pirzada in order to ascertain visually what differentiates him from her parents; that is, she tries to find physical indications of his Pakistani identity: "Now that I had learned Mr. Pirzada was not an Indian, I began to study him with extra care, to try to figure out what made him different. I decided that the pocket watch was one of those things" (Lahiri 30). Because she cannot find any other physical markers of difference between Mr. Pirzada and her parents, Lilia concludes that the pocket watch Mr. Pirzada has set to East Pakistani time serves as an outward indicator

of his identity. However, like race, Mr. Pirzada's pocket watch is only a superficial marker of difference, and it is also a misleading one because it signifies different meanings to different people. While to Lilia, the watch symbolizes Mr. Pirzada's difference from her parents as not Indian, to Mr. Pirzada, the watch is a constant reminder that he does not belong in the United States because it is not his home. As a child, Lilia is able to see what adults often cannot—that the differences that separate people are often very superficial. Through Lilia's narration, readers have access to her innocent observations of the outward differences that define identities and are able to recognize the absurdity of the fact that these differences are often socially constructed rather than essential.

Whereas Mr. Pirzada relies upon his watch as a constant reminder of his identity, Lilia continually struggles to negotiate her own identity. While her physical appearance is an inescapable reminder of her "otherness," at school Lilia is discouraged from learning about South Asia and urged to express interest in the United States. Although Lilia's mother takes pride in the fact that Lilia is American, her father laments that she learns nothing about the world in American schools. Lilia reflects that this is true, as she studies only American history and geography in school, and "that year, and every year, it seemed, [she] began by studying the Revolutionary War" (Lahiri 27). An incident with her teacher shows that, as an American student, she is expected to take interest primarily in American history, rather than in world events. Her teacher, Mrs. Kenyon, makes this clear when she tells Lilia that she sees "no reason to consult" the book on Pakistan she looks at in the library (Lahiri 33). Lilia is curious about Mr. Pirzada's relatively new

identity as a Pakistani rather than an Indian, and wants to learn more about what makes Mr. Pirzada so different from her parents, since his differences are not visually compelling. Judith Caesar points out that “Mrs. Kenyon apparently can’t understand why a child whose parents are Indian might want to read about the subcontinent rather than the American history she was taught and is now teaching” (85). Her reprimand to Lilia for showing an interest in world affairs shows the emphasis and precedence she gives to all things American and a distinction between American and “other.” Moreover, this distinction is not neutral, as Mrs. Kenyon shows a distaste for the “other” when she holds the book on Pakistan “as if it were a hair clinging to [Lilia’s] sweater” (Lahiri 33). For Mrs. Kenyon, learning about the world outside of America is not important, and she expects Lilia to be immersed in American history and culture rather than showing interest in a place as far removed from America as Pakistan. However, as Srikanth points out, to turn one’s attention toward Pakistan does not imply a turning away from the United States, because one can certainly be American and still have connections to other parts of the world (51). Unfortunately, because Lilia and other South Asian Americans are often perceived as foreign, they risk, in being attentive to nations other than the United States, being viewed as less “American.” In writing about the South Asian American experience, ethnic authors like Lahiri achieve what Mrs. Kenyon is unable to imagine: they engage with both the United States and other nations, showing that to recognize the “South Asian” part of one’s identity does not necessarily negate the “American” aspect (Srikanth 51). As someone who is often perceived as foreign in relation to white America, Lilia is aware of the consequentiality of race but unsure why it is important. In

attempting to understand the implications of skin color, she exceeds imposed boundaries of American hegemony in order to learn more about an “other” person like Mr. Pirzada, who is both like Lilia (in race) and unlike her (in ethnicity, nationality, and religion).

Lilia’s struggle to define her own identity is complicated by the fact that the world outside her family often is unable to take into account the multi-faceted aspects of her individuality—the fact that she is of Indian ancestry, but that her nationality is American. For example, to Mrs. Kenyon, Lilia is too “American to need to know anything about any history other than America’s,” but when Lilia goes trick-or-treating, she is labeled as foreign (Caesar 86). Although her mother takes pride in the fact that Lilia was born in America and therefore, she hopes, will have an easy life, her skin color keeps her from being recognized as American by ethnically unmarked Americans. When she goes trick-or-treating dressed as a witch, several people tell her “that they had never seen an Indian witch before” (Lahiri 39). Even when Lilia’s skin is painted green, people notice her underlying skin color and race and point to it as a sign of her difference, or “otherness.” Furthermore, these individuals assume that she is Indian, but as the confusion over Mr. Pirzada’s nationality confirms, Lilia’s family could actually have originated from any of several regions in South Asia. Moreover, she is called “Indian,” not “American,” “Indian American,” or even “of Indian descent.” Although Lilia, as an American citizen, is as American as her neighbors, her race marks her as foreign to them because it is something that can be seen, unlike nationality or religion. Omi and Winant argue that “racial meanings pervade U.S. society” and shape “individual racial identities” based on skin



color, which is the most superficial indicator of both race and identity (66). Therefore, for her neighbors, Lilia's ethnicity takes precedence over her nationality—and perhaps in some cases is used to define her nationality as not American—and is a physical reminder of her “otherness.” Caesar even suggests that “for the rest of her life, Lilia would be an American to some Americans but an Indian to others, no matter how she chose to define herself” (86).

Although Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents are living in the United States physically, they share a connection to their ancestral home in their attentiveness to current events in South Asia. During the time in which East Pakistan and West Pakistan are at war, Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents watch the news on television each night in order to learn of new developments and to share their concern over the safety of Mr. Pirzada's family. Lilia notes that she remembers her parents and Mr. Pirzada “operating during that time as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear” (Lahiri 41). This closeness is both moving and ironic, because as their friendship intensifies, their respective nations are entering into war. Noelle Brada-Williams points out that human connection and human communication are themes that run through the stories in Lahiri's collection, but that these relationships are not always created by shared race (454-5). Lilia eventually recognizes that her parents transcend their national and political allegiances in sympathizing with Mr. Pirzada and showing concern for a common ancestral land, and that race is only an outwardly

recognizable and neutral marker of similitude which does not necessarily indicate any personal connections between people.<sup>24</sup>

Because Lilia and her parents live in a historically racialized society, their identities are racially constructed, so that to most Americans, differences in religion and nationality would not distinguish Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents from one another. Lahiri conveys the effects of racialization on Lilia and her family in that Lilia recognizes Mr. Pirzada as racially like her parents in comparison to the white majority, but eventually learns that although race is perhaps the most visible part of one's identity, it is neither the most significant nor the most defining, and therefore cannot be the sole basis for a meaningful relationship between people. Lahiri also demonstrates that perceptions of identity based on race often cause misconceptions so that paradoxically even while Lilia struggles to understand the effect of race on identity, she is constantly (and wrongly) defined by the world outside her home as "other."

### **"Interpreter of Maladies"**

*Mr. Kapasi pulled over to the side of the road as Mr. Das took a picture of a barefoot man, his head wrapped in a dirty turban, seated on top of a cart of grain sacks pulled by a pair of bullocks. Both the man and the bullocks were emaciated. In the back seat Mrs. Das gazed out another window, at the sky, where nearly transparent clouds passed quickly in front of one another.*

—Jhumpa Lahiri, "Interpreter of Maladies"

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<sup>24</sup> While Lilia's parents are Indian and Mr. Pirzada is Pakistani, they speak the same language because they are both from Bengal, which is divided by the border between India and Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan).

“Interpreter of Maladies” describes the encounter, during a day-trip, between Mr. Kapasi, an Indian man who works for a local doctor translating patients’ descriptions of their symptoms Gujarati to Hindi and as a tour guide for English-speaking tourists, and the Das family, an Indian American family who are vacationing in India. The story explores the misconceptions and misunderstandings that result from the assumption that race and ethnic origins indicate more profound and personal human connections. Immediately upon meeting them Mr. Kapasi ascertains that Mr. and Mrs. Das and their three children resemble him physically because they are all Indian in origin and he identifies with them on this basis. Although he recognizes that the family are different from him culturally and learns that they do not share a nationality with him, he chooses to focus on their visually obvious shared race as a sign of shared ethnicity and thus imagines a personal connection with the Das family, and especially with Mrs. Das, thinking that they have much more in common than they actually do. He does so in spite of intimations, from the beginning of the story, that the Dases are more different from than similar to him.

In the very first paragraph of the story Mr. Kapasi watches “through the rearview mirror” as Mrs. Das emerges slowly from his car “dragging her shaved, largely bare legs across the back seat” (Lahiri 43). The fact that Mr. Kapasi watches Mrs. Das through the mirror, rather than directly, signifies the distance between them which Mr. Kapasi either fails to initially recognize or deludes himself into ignoring. He does notice that although the Das’s look Indian, they dress “as foreigners,” shake hands like Americans, and use methods of parenting that are strange to Mr. Kapasi from his Indian perspective (Lahiri

44-45). Because the family *look* Indian, Mr. Kapasi takes for granted that they must be from India. However, when he asks Mr. Das if he “left India as a child,” Mr. Das corrects him, saying that he and his wife “were both born in America” (Lahiri 45). The connection Mr. Kapasi feels to the Das family based on their shared race and ethnicity soon appears imaginary and one-sided; clearly the Das family see him and all of India in a very exoticized way, far removed from their American lives.

Unlike Mr. Kapasi, Mr. Das does not suppose that they have a lot in common with one another because of their shared race. When he says, “In a way we have a lot in common, you could say, you and I,” to Mr. Kapasi, he is being polite and referring only to the fact that he takes his students on tours of museums while Mr. Kapasi leads tours in India (Lahiri 46). Unlike Mr. Kapasi, Mr. Das seems aware that they are not intrinsically alike simply because of their shared race and ethnic origin. In addition, Mr. Das views India and, by extension, Mr. Kapasi in an exoticized way, as is shown in his lack of emotion or connection as he takes a picture of a “barefoot” and “emaciated” man, “his head wrapped in a dirty turban” (Lahiri 49). Mr. Das shows no feeling of identification with or sympathy for him, but instead sees the Indian man as a world away from himself in spite of their shared race. In fact, the scene in which Mr. Kapasi takes a picture of the Indian man directly mirrors an earlier scene in which Mr. Das asks Mr. Kapasi to stop the car so that he can photograph monkeys that are wild and therefore, like the Indian man, “exotic” (Lahiri 47). The detached way in which Mr. Das views both the man and the monkeys as foreign objects through the lens of his camera emphasizes his detachment from India as a whole, and points to his tendency to reduce everything in India—even

human beings—to objects that exist to enhance his pleasure in the exotic spectacle of the country.

While Mr. Das exoticizes India and its people, Mrs. Das indulges in the romanticization<sup>25</sup> of Mr. Kapasi's profession. She calls his job as an interpreter in a doctor's office "so romantic" for no specific reason (Lahiri 50). Their perceptions of each other, based on their differences, lead them to fantasize about each other. As a result of Mrs. Das's vague remark and her subsequent questions about the details of his work Mr. Kapasi begins to idealize their relationship as well and to create romantic fantasies about their future. He finds her interest in him "mildly intoxicating," and when he remembers "how she had said, 'romantic,' the feeling of intoxication [grows]" (Lahiri 53). Thus, when Mrs. Das asks for Mr. Kapasi's address to send him a picture, he creates a detailed scenario of how their relationship might grow:

She would write to him, asking about his days interpreting at the doctor's office, and he would respond eloquently, choosing only the most entertaining anecdotes, ones that would make her laugh out loud....In time she would reveal the disappointment of her marriage, and he his. In this way their friendship would grow and flourish. (Lahiri 55)

Mr. Kapasi's vision of a romantic relationship with Mrs. Das is based on a comment that meant nothing to Mrs. Das and on commonalities that do not exist. The connection he imagines with Mrs. Das is founded on a completely superficial element—shared skin color—which does not guarantee the existence of other similarities.

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<sup>25</sup> Throughout my analysis of "Interpreter of Maladies," I use the definition of "romanticize" that means "to idealize."

Mr. Kapasi does not realize the falseness of his fantasies until he becomes aware of the true nature of Mrs. Das's relation to him. In spite of their shared race, Mrs. Das knows that they will never meet again, so she feels free to tell Mr. Kapasi her secret—that one of her sons was fathered by a man other than her husband. Such a vast cultural distance exists between them that sharing her secret with Mr. Kapasi will in no way affect Mrs. Das's life—he will remain in India; she will return to America—and she obviously plans not to speak to him ever again. However, her decision to confide in him is also based on a misinterpretation and misunderstanding of their cultural differences. Although Mr. Kapasi's job is only that of a translator of symptoms from one language to another, Mrs. Das seems to believe that he can diagnose and cure her psychological pain.

While Mr. Kapasi views skin color as a sign of deeper similarities that connect people, Mrs. Das's revelation shows that it can also signify disconnection and not belonging. Because Bobby is “slightly paler than the other children,” his skin color constantly reminds Mrs. Das of her “secret” and is a marker of shame and illegitimacy (Lahiri 48). However, the superficiality and insignificance of race are evident in that although Mr. Kapasi notices the difference in Bobby's skin color, the distinctiveness of it is completely insignificant to everyone but Mrs. Das: none of the members of the Das family is aware of it. Neither the Das family nor Mr. Kapasi seems to correlate Bobby's difference in skin color with belonging, but to Mrs. Das his skin color is significant because it is an outward sign of her guilt.

Ironically, only after their most intimate moment together—the moment of Mrs. Das's confession—does Mr. Kapasi see something in Mrs. Das's eyes that makes him

realize finally that common race and ethnicity cannot make up for the division caused by differences of nationality, culture, and life experience. Mrs. Das confesses to Mr. Kapasi in order to share the burden of her secret and to receive absolution from him, but she does not realize that what she feels is more than just pain. When Mr. Kapasi suggests that she feels guilt rather than pain, she “opened her mouth to say something,” but “some certain knowledge seemed to pass before her eyes, and she stopped” (Lahiri 66). Mrs. Das’s indifference to defending her actions to Mr. Kapasi indicates her acknowledgement that they have no real connection to one another. When she chooses not to speak to Mr. Kapasi, “It crushed him; he knew at that moment that he was not even important enough to be properly insulted” (Lahiri 66). Although Mr. Kapasi is hurt by Mrs. Das’s disregard, he seems to realize at last that he does not matter to Mrs. Das at all, and that they share no connection based on race, ethnicity, or shared secrets.

With the knowledge of the superficiality of their similarity, Mr. Kapasi can watch the piece of paper on which his address is written—his last connection to Mrs. Das and her secret—fly out of Mrs. Das’s purse and “flutter away in the wind” (Lahiri 69). Only Mr. Kapasi notices the scrap of paper floating away on the breeze. His last connection to the Das family drifting away symbolizes both that he is unimportant to them and that his romantic notions of their similitude and future relationship have been crushed. He *lets* the paper with his address float away because he sees it for what it is—a meaningless object, not a real connection, just as their shared race is a skin color, not a sign of more substantial similarities. What becomes clear in the story is that although race is an obvious aspect of identity, it is not indicative of meaningful connections between

members of the same race. Mr. Kapasi is eventually able to realize what the Das family already knows—that shared race alone cannot bridge the gulf of misunderstanding that results from more fundamental differences.

### “Sexy”

*“It is the goddess Kali,” Mrs. Dixit explained brightly, shifting the dowel slightly in order to straighten the image. Mrs. Dixit’s hands were painted with henna, an intricate pattern of zigzags and stars. “Come please, time for cake.”*

*Miranda, then nine years old, had been too frightened to eat the cake...It shamed her now. Now, when she and Dev made love, Miranda closed her eyes and saw deserts and elephants, and marble pavilions floating on lakes beneath a full moon.*

—Jhumpa Lahiri, “Sexy”

“Sexy” basically describes a brief adulterous relationship between Dev, who is Bengali, and Miranda, who is white, but also includes accounts of Miranda’s interactions with other South Asian Americans, namely her Indian American coworker Laxmi and the Dixit family, whom she knew as a child. However, while the erotic relationship between Dev and Miranda is certainly central to the story and the others only peripheral, ultimately the latter are essential to the full understanding of the racial dynamic delineated in the text. Miranda’s relationships with South Asian Americans throughout her life are framed by stereotypes based on race and ethnicity—the characteristics she associates with the Dixit family from her childhood, her coworker Laxmi, and her lover Dev all reinforce their difference from her. Although throughout the story Miranda shifts from a childhood view of South Asian Americans as frightening to a view of Dev as



desirable, she continues both to homogenize all South Asian Americans and to view them individually as foreign and exotic.<sup>26</sup> Both of these tendencies are reductive, as they destroy individuality. Whereas race functions as a way of grouping people of South Asian descent together both as foreign in “Interpreter of Maladies” and as separate from white Americans in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” in “Sexy” Lahiri explores an entirely different function of race within interpersonal relationships as a marker of the cultural and exotic other.

Upon first seeing Dev, Miranda finds him attractive and notices his apparent wealth and sophistication (Lahiri 86). Soon thereafter she becomes aware of his dark skin and his voice, which bears “only the hint of an accent,” guessing that “he might be Spanish, or Lebanese” (Lahiri 87). Miranda’s reaction gives credence to Shilpa Davé’s assertion that South Asians have an “ambiguous racial identity,” as well as to her theory of “brown voice,” which extends racial stereotypes beyond phenotype to voice and suggests that accented English among South Asians is a racializing trait that automatically connotes foreignness (314). In other words, Miranda almost immediately recognizes Dev as racially and ethnically different because he does not share her own unmarked or “white” ethnic identity. Clearly, from the beginning of their relationship, racial identification greatly influences the way Miranda views Dev.

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<sup>26</sup> My use of the term “exotic” in this story refers to the theory that the East has been viewed as “exotic” and inferior in relation to the West. The viewpoint that the study of the East by Western scholars was shaped by imperialist attitudes and prejudiced interpretations of Eastern cultures and peoples was famously advanced by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, published in 1978. The term “Oriental” is now considered outdated and offensive, and its use has been replaced by the term “Asian.”

However, this identification is not merely an awareness of one of many different personal qualities. According to Eva Tettenborn, who discusses colonial fantasies in “Sexy,” Miranda’s relationship with Dev “is tainted from the very beginning” because Miranda “frames his identity in terms of racist stereotypes” (11). Dev thus becomes the personification of the sexually desirable “exotic foreigner” rather than an individual. That Miranda exoticizes Dev is apparent in the way in which she chooses to feel closer to him during his absence. Their affair begins while Dev’s wife is in India, when Dev introduces Miranda to experiences that are novel and exciting to her but that are not associated with his identity as South Asian American. However, when Dev’s wife returns and he is unable to see Miranda very often, she does not attempt to revisit the places that they went to together but rather copes with his absence by emphasizing his difference from her and focusing on elements of Indian and Bengali culture. For example, she goes to eat at an Indian restaurant where she tries to “memorize phrases printed at the bottom of the menu, for words like “delicious” and “water” and “check, please”” (Lahiri 96). She also frequents the foreign-language section of a bookstore in order to study the Bengali alphabet. When she attempts to transcribe Mira, the “Indian part of her name,” into her Filofax, her hand moves in “unfamiliar directions, stopping and turning and picking up her pen when she least expect[s] to” (Lahiri 97).

That Miranda exoticizes Dev—that is, insists on his difference and foreignness through her behavior—is particularly emphasized since he is culturally and probably<sup>27</sup> nationally American. However, her most blatant casting of Dev in “the role of the

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<sup>27</sup> Although Dev’s nationality is never explicitly stated, it is implied that he is American because he lives and works in the United States and speaks only slightly accented English.

cultural other” occurs when they make love and she thinks of marble pavilions, deserts, and elephants (Tettenborn 12, Lahiri 95-6). Marble pavilions, while stereotypical in that they conjure up the quintessentially romantic image of the Taj Mahal, and elephants are at least found in India, but deserts are an image of the exotic that has little to do with India.

Miranda’s tendency to define others by racial differences is emphasized by the fact she groups everyone she has ever known of South Asian origin together only on the basis of race. When Miranda starts her relationship with Dev, she wants to tell her friend Laxmi from work, “if only because Laxmi was Indian, too” (Lahiri 89). Laxmi and Dev are unacquainted, and because South Asia and India are so diverse, they could differ culturally, ethnically, and religiously. However, Miranda groups Dev and Laxmi together based only on the fact that they are both of Indian ancestry, and does not seem to recognize that their shared race and ethnicity do not necessarily signify a strong connection between them. In her encounters with the Dixit family, Miranda also seems to concentrate only on their differences from her. She recalls being invited to the birthday party of the Dixit girl as a child, but remembers only the details that indicate the family’s racial and ethnic difference—“a heavy aroma of incense and onions, . . . a pile of shoes heaped by the front door,” and a picture of the goddess Kali, which frightened her so much that she was afraid to eat the cake Mrs. Dixit offered her (Lahiri 95). Miranda recalls that the incident had stuck with her for months afterward, and that for a long time she was even afraid to walk on the same side of the street as the Dixits’ house. In short, every South Asian American Miranda has met throughout her life is reduced to

stereotypical associations—to spicy foods, foreign goddesses, and exotic locations and animals.

Ironically, as Kurien points out, although the South Asian American characters in “Sexy” have no connection to one another, most Americans would probably view them as Miranda does—as the same—based on their physical similarities (267-68). In an article describing the Asian American Identity Development Theory, Jean Kim further elucidates Kurien’s argument that most Americans tend to group individuals of one race together and make collective generalizations about those racial groups. She asserts that, “For the most part, we [Americans] do not accord different status or treat an Asian person differently depending on the ethnic group he or she represents,” and she cites the murder of Vincent Chin as an example of this fact.<sup>28</sup> Kim says that the equation of race with ethnicity or deeper commonalities is prevalent in American society, and that it is “their racial membership, not their ethnic membership,” that determines how other Americans view Asian Americans (82). Kim’s assertion implies that although Dev, Laxmi, and the Dixit family are very different from one another, they are likely viewed as “foreign” in their own country because of their physical traits, and would probably be seen in the U.S. as having more in common with each other than with most white Americans.

This is not to say that Miranda’s attempts at learning are insincere, but that they are superficial. Once Dev becomes a part of her life, Miranda expands her view to see

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<sup>28</sup> Vincent Chin was murdered in 1982 in Detroit. His Asian appearance made him a target in an area where there were prevalent anti-Japanese sentiments due to competition in the auto industry. It is speculated that Vincent was thought to be Japanese, although he was Chinese American. In addition, Kim rightly argues that the fact that the (white) men who murdered Chin received minimum sentences of probation is an example of institutional racism against Asian Americans built into the U.S. legal system and society in general.

more of the world, but only in order to highlight and understand his differences. Dev represents excitement and exoticism for Miranda, who leads a predictable life until she begins a relationship with him, thus becoming involved in an extra-marital affair. While Dev's racial difference from Miranda is not the only feature of their relationship, by constantly emphasizing his foreignness to herself, Miranda makes his race more significant than it actually is.<sup>29</sup>

Even while continuing to emphasize Dev's racial difference, Miranda concedes that her reactions to the Dixits now shame her (Lahiri 96). While in her adulthood Miranda finds associations with India enticing rather than distasteful, she does not recognize that she is still making assumptions about people based primarily on race. In an article on globalization in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Geeta Ganapathy-Dore suggests that in making attempts to learn about Dev's culture, Miranda tries to make up for her "unfounded childhood fear [of the Dixits] and her adult sense of guilt" (63). However, she reveals the limits of her knowledge of the world when she makes an effort to learn about Bengali and Indian culture. For instance, Miranda has never traveled outside of the United States other than during a childhood vacation to the Bahamas, and when she discovers that Dev is Bengali, she at first thinks that "Bengali" is a religion and is unable even to attempt to locate Bengal on a map because she does not own any (Lahiri 84, 91). Moreover, her "shock" over the idea that the Bengali language is understood in some parts of the world shows her tendency to view the world only as it concerns her or

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<sup>29</sup> Significantly, Dev at times seems to recognize that Miranda exoticizes him. When he meets her, he points out the "Indian" part of her name, and plays into the "exotic" way in which Miranda views him by taking her to ethnically diverse restaurants (Lahiri 87, 90).

touches her life (Lahiri 97). Caesar points out that the well-meaning Americans in Lahiri's stories are "annoyingly and embarrassingly ignorant of the world outside the United States and of how they look to the educated foreign-born," and that Lahiri "depicts the narrowness of these characters without comment" (89). However, by highlighting Miranda's reduction of all South Asian Americans to one homogenous group and her construction of Dev as the racial and ethnic "other" in "Sexy," Lahiri points to the ways in which the homogenization of a group and the reduction of individuals to stereotypes strip them of their individual identities and humanity.

## Conclusion

According to literary critic Sushila Singh, ethnic American authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri “endeavor to apply the knowledge gained from the past to the questions of the present and the future” (266). While nationality, ethnicity, and race are all parts of one’s identity, Lahiri elucidates the problems associated with race as an immediate physical marker of identity. Although racial identity has no intrinsic connection to national or ethnic identity, Lahiri’s writing demonstrates that a history of racialization undoubtedly influences modern assumptions about nationality and ethnicity.

In choosing to draw attention to the relationships between characters such as Mr. Pirzada and Lilia, who are of the same race and ethnicity but differ in nationality and religion; Mr. Kapasi and the Das family, who share a common race and ethnicity but differ in culture and nationality; and Miranda and Dev, who differ in race and ethnicity but are presumably alike in nationality, Lahiri effectively demonstrates the weakness of race as a determinant factor of identity and as the foundation of meaningful relationships. In addition, in utilizing the differing narrative points of view of an Indian American girl in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” an Indian man in “Interpreter of Maladies” and a white American woman in “Sexy,” Lahiri conveys that while misconceptions about race may vary from person to person, they are nonetheless present in every social situation.

Simon Lewis points out that in Lahiri's stories, the problem of misunderstanding is "supposed to go even deeper than race and culture," and that in exposing false connections based on racial sameness, Lahiri reveals that the maladies that separate people do not have "origins in race," and that race alone is not able to "bridge the communicative gaps that inevitably separate human beings" (220). In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," race is shown to be only a superficial signifier of similitude between people, and to communicate foreignness to Lilia's teacher and neighbors, but not other identifying features such as nationality and religion. The experiences of the Das family and Mr. Kapasi in "Interpreter of Maladies" demonstrate that despite the common perception that race indicates other similarities, such as nationality and cultural values, individuals cannot create relationships based on shared race alone. Miranda's treatment of Dev, Laxmi, and the Dixits in "Sexy," demonstrates that the grouping of individuals based on shared race and the labeling of others as "exotic" based on racial difference denies everyone individual identities.

The functions of race as a marker of identity in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," "Interpreter of Maladies," and "Sexy" are indicative of the way in which Lahiri "constructs a conversation among her pieces" by bringing attention to the effects of race on South Asian American identity (Brada-Williams 453). Although Lahiri does not explicitly confront race in her works, the realities of racialization in the United States are embedded in Lahiri's narratives just as they are embedded in American history, and the experiences of her characters demonstrate the inefficiency of race as a determining factor of identity.



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