"Imagined Homelands: Fractured Domesticities in Disparate Histories in Jhumpa Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth"

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Abstract

This paper proposes to read Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection Unaccustomed Earth (2008) as instances of fractured domesticities and domestic fractures. This paper aims to examine how the apparently quiet, normal, routine intimate family moments and relationships Lahiri features in these stories are ways by which Bengali-Americans exhibit their own diasporic subjectivities.

While the stories focus on Indian-Americans living apparently affluent, upper-middle class American lives, the shifts in relationships, generations, and literal geographic movements could be tracked as ways to "build hybrid realizations" (see also Katrak) in everyday life as im/migrant histories, especially in a South Asian sense.

This paper problematizes, too, the United States and India as "imagined homelands", thereby reckoning with Unaccustomed Earth's characters not only as hybrid identities but as liminal ones, as identities negotiating transnational migrant histories and conditions for which concepts of American domesticity are seen as a possible palliative.

Keywords: ***diasporic identities, everyday life, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bengali Americans, imagined homelands***

In 1988, Bharati Mukherjee wrote an article in *The New York Times Book Review* entitled "Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists", and in it, Mukherjee "demand[ed] to know who speaks for 'the new Americans' from non-traditional immigrant countries" quoted in Rao (1999, p. 271). P. Mallikajurna Rao which does not deal with the lives of minority Americans who have considerably altered the cultural landscape of America in recent times", and describes Mukherjee as being "sour that these people, in spite of their 'sophistication and struggle and hunger to belong', have not found a place in American fiction" (p. 270-271).

Jhumpa Lahiri's stories about Indian-Americans written some twenty-odd years after Mukherjee's phenomenal success with *Darkness*, *Jasmine*, and *Wife* could be seen now as a response to this question posed by Mukherjee decades earlier. Jhumpa Lahiri, of course, "won the Pulitzer Prize right out of the gate with her 2000 debut collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, and Ian McGillis (2008), in examining her latest collection *Unaccustomed Earth*, states that "… Lahiri has answered the question of where she could possibly go from there by doing basically more of the same, only better. The subject she has made

her own - the adjustment pains of Bengalis who left India in the 1960s and '70s for lives of academic and professional prominence in the American northeast…" is extended now "… through a subtle and by no means complete shift of focus [to an examination of] the lives of those pioneers' children, the first-generation Americans" (McGillis, 2008).

Unaccustomed Earth (2008), Lahiri's collection of stories following the critical successes of *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *The Namesake* (2003), continues to

> …revisit themes concerning cultural displacement, only with a different focus. The eight stories in this collection revolve less around the dislocation Lahiri's earlier Bengali characters encountered in America and more around the assimilation experienced by their children -- children who, while conscious of, and self-conscious about, their parents' old-world habits, vigorously reject them in favor of American lifestyles and partners. (Wiltz, 2003)

Where earlier Indian-American/ South Asian literary texts and narratives "dealt with issues emanating from the gap between expatriation and assimilation" (Rao, 1999, p. 271), Lahiri explores the "Indianness" that is negotiated not now in the bitter dislocations of new immigrants, not in the theoretical clashes of beliefs and traditions, but mapped in the terrain of everyday American life. The project of this paper is not just to prove that questions of "homeland" are always interwoven in hyphenated Americans' lives, but to seek to examine how the apparently quiet, normal, routine intimate family moments and relationships Lahiri features in these stories are ways by which Bengali/Indian-Americans exhibit their own diasporic subjectivities. While the stories focus now on Indian-Americans living apparently affluent, middle/ upper-middle class American lives, the shifts in relationships, generations, and literal geographic movements could be tracked as ways to "build hybrid realizations" (see also Katrak in Singh and Schmidt, 2000) in everyday life as im/migrant histories. This makes these moments instances of fractured domesticities and domestic fractures, and these moments of fracture and rift become so much more poignant when seen in the light of, or in the clarity of, specificities of domestic practices, such as family habits, quotidian routines, instances that have to do with food --- cooking and eating, drinking, keeping house, gardening, traveling and raising children, using language to tell and exchange stories. These are the acts of the everyday life in which questions of alienation and dis-identity occur, and in this paper I shall examine two stories from Lahiri's short story -- Unaccustomed Earth (2008) and Only Goodness -- collection in which these are so poignantly woven through with the interrogation of how being Indian in the United States necessarily complicates and indeed changes the nature and apprehension of home and homeland.

1. "Unaccustomed Earth": 'Flourishing in other birthplaces'

The title story in this collection focuses on Ruma, thirty-eight year-old lawyer turned stay-at-home mom, married to an American hedge fund manager, Adam, and born to Indian parents, the father now a retired pharmaceutical researcher and the mother recently deceased from what should have been a routine gallstone operation. We find in this narrative the juxtaposition of characters of which Lahiri seems to employ so evocatively, and here, the complications of loneliness and isolation are explored in the generational rift between Ruma and her father. Ruma has decided to leave her working life and take care of her young family, her son Akash and another on the way, and keep house in Seattle where she and Adam have relocated their family, and while this seems to be the logical solution--- "…Adam's new job came through, with a salary enough for her to give notice. It was the house that was her work now…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 6), this use of the house and housekeeping as retreat is really a way that Ruma has chosen to cope with her mother's loss: "…After the two weeks Ruma received for bereavement, she couldn't face going back. Overseeing her clients' futures, preparing their wills and refinancing their mortgages, felt ridiculous to her, and all she wanted was to stay home with Akash, not just Thursdays and Fridays but everyday" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 5).

The story patently focuses on Ruma's unease with her father's impending visit to her Washington home, but this really is only part of the whole undercurrent of disconnection with which Ruma is plagued throughout the narrative. One of her worries is how to deal with her father as a daughter, and as the owner of this new home that he is visiting. Ruma's distress stems too from feelings of inadequacy when faced with her father, not having been close to him, and "never [having] spent a week alone with him" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 6), an indication of the traditional hierarchy observed in the Indian households Lahiri describes in all of her stories, in which fathers are portrayed as detached heads of the families, and mothers are depicted as more involved with the children. Ruma's anxiety also has, more deeply, to do with having to ask her father to live with her family now that her mother has passed, a duty to which she only half-heartedly subscribes, because she really

> …feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to. It would mean an end to the family she'd created on her own: herself and Adam and Akash, and the second child ….She couldn't imagine tending to her father as her mother had, serving the meals her mother used to prepare. Still, not offering him a place in her home made her feel worse…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 7)

This sense of duty is what remains of the "Indian" in what otherwise is an American woman: "… she knew her father did not need taking care of, *and yet this very fact caused her to feel guilty* [emphasis added]; in India, there would have been no question of his not moving with her…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 6). In the story, Ruma is debilitated by a gnawing and amorphous unease that apparently only had this difficult father-daughter relationship as its fulcrum, but I think Ruma is really suffering from a psychic bifurcation of which she is unaware, or one for which she has no name. Her mother's death is the catalyst of this depression, and while it appears to be a personal grief, Ruma's identification with her mother is more profound, as her isolation in her own home and "home state", echoes her lack of mooring from a self that she knew intimately, a younger self that took her Indianness for granted. Her father had sold their old house after Ruma's mother's death, and this was a house that Ruma knew,

> …with the rooms her mother had decorated and the bed in which she liked to sit up doing crossword puzzles and the stove on which she'd cooked, was too big for her father now. Still, the news had been shocking, wiping out her mother's presence just as the surgeon had". (Lahiri, 2008, p. 6)

This erasure of home extends now to her new home in Seattle, where her isolation is so ironically emphasized by her daily tasks that are so markedly part of an American routine: "…having to fill the car with gas, making sure there was air in the tires. Though she was growing familiar with the roads, with the exits and the mountains and the quality of the light, she felt no connection to any of it, or to anyone" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 34). Her picturesque house,

> a home so close to the lake… a large window in the living room framing the water, beyond the dining room … a screened-in porch with an even more spectacular view: the Seattle skyline to the left, and straight ahead, the Olympic Mountains, whose snowy peaks seemed hewn from the same billowing white of the clouds drifting above them…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 14),

that she and Adam had begun to furnish "…slowly with …simple expensive sofas covered with muted shades of wool, long, low bookcases on outwardly turning feet" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 14), seems to have become less a showcase with her father's visit, as Ruma, "showing it off to her father… felt self-conscious of her successful life with Adam, and at the same time felt a quiet slap of rejection, gathering from his continued silence, that none if it had impressed him" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 15-16).

Peter Schwenger (2005) cites Merleau-Ponty and his notion of chiasmus: defining it as "…a body-world relationship… recognized, [and] there is a ramification of my body and a ramification of the world and a correspondence between its inside and my outside, between my inside and its outside". This paralleling of the psyche as a house interior "… invaded from the start by structures ranging from the primal dynamics of the senses to family romances, to cultural and political assumptions, and all of these structures structur[ing] the psyche in turn… the inside is the outside, the outside is the inside…" (Schwenger, 2005) Ruma suffers not just a rejection, as she does an estrangement--her identification of herself confident in the routines, the tasks, the duties, the spaces of her daily life is undercut almost phenomenologically: her personal and ethnic relationships are scrutinized now through an "experience of objects and spatial relationships", in which enclosures (house interiors, gardens) influence the ways by which she materializes loss, growth, separation (see also Bachelard in Schwenger, 2005). Ruma evinces an "unstable chiasmus between exterior and interior", with "that interior betray[ing her], … narrow[ing] claustrophobically until what had been the security of enclosure became an oppressive and terrifying threat…" (Schwenger, 2005), or at the very least, a cause of emotional upheaval.

Ruma, as an adult Indian-American woman, making a home for her family, has also begun to move away from the certainty afforded her by her earlier career, and with her father's visit begins to acknowledge lacks, falling short of her valuation of herself as a householder and as a mother: she begins to notice Akash's stubbornness, and while only three, "…she already felt the resistance, the profound barrier she assumed would set in with adolescence… Akash would throw himself without warning on the ground, the body she'd nurtured inside of her utterly alien, hostile…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 10). Ruma also begins to feel guilty for

> …lack[ing] the discipline to stick to Bengali… Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult. Her own Bengali was slipping from her. Her mother had been so strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English…On the rare occasions Ruma used Bengali anymore…she tripped over the words. And yet it was the language she had spoken exclusively in the first years of her life (Lahiri, 2008, p. 13).

Akash's youthful frankness ["I hate that food" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 23)] turned him, in Ruma's eyes, "…into the sort of American child she was always careful not to be, the sort that horrified and intimidated her mother: imperious, afraid of eating things…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 23).

Even cooking became an act fraught with a struggle to confront her Indian legacy, as her Indian cooking becomes a remembrance not just of her mother's culinary prowess, but a description too of how this domestic task is imbued by embedded traditional expectations of an Indian homemaker even outside of India, and of how Ruma herself has adapted Indian cooking to her own American needs. Where "her mother had never cut corners; even in Pennsylvania she had run her household as if to satisfy a mother-in-law's fastidious eye" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 22), Ruma, when she cooked Indian food for Adam… could afford to be lazy… do[ing] away with making dal or served salad instead of a chorchori…and it was in such moments that Ruma recognized how different her experience of being a wife was" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 22). Where Ruma's mother "…had been an excellent cook… Ruma's cooking didn't come close, the vegetables sliced too thickly, the rice overdone…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 22).

Laura Anh Williams (2007) avers what Jennifer Ho says about

> food [being] a critical medium for compliance with and resistance to Americanization, a means for enacting the ambiguities of an Asian-ethnic identity that is already in a constant state of flux… For writers, food may also function autobiographically to enact identities that are always unstable and in flux… cooking constructs a sense of identity, interrelationship, and home that is simultaneously communal and yet also highly personal (Williams, 2007).

The ways by which Ruma attempts to get Akash accustomed to Indian food by "poach[ing] chicken and vegetables with cinnamon and cardamom" (Lahiri, 2008: 23), or serving her father Darjeeling tea with milk and sugar, and a plate of Nice biscuits which he "associated deeply with his wife--- the visible crystals of sugar, the faint coconut taste-their kitchen cupboard always contained a box of them…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 18), are evocations of "… both home and displacement, abundance and lack, well-stocked American cupboards as well as a certain hunger" (Williams, 2007). Williams posits that "for transplanted, racialized subjectivities, culinary practice may be a comfort as well as a bittersweet act, a surrender to pressures to assimilate and an articulation of difference". Williams proceeds to comment on "Lahiri's stories often deny[ing] narrative closure, making them slightly unsettling and difficult to swallow, yet her foodways open up spaces in which marginalized identities generate a sense of agency and difference with transformative and productive potential".

We find a parallel isolation in Ruma's father, not only because he equally suffers the loss of his wife after her death, but because he has dealt with immigrant anxiety throughout his life in America. Unlike Ruma's, and Adam's, attempt to shape their Seattle home into one that will intimately embody their hopes for their family, Ruma's father viewed American dwellings with nervousness and worry, especially as a new immigrant working on his Ph.D. in biochemistry, renting a cheap apartment in New Jersey (see also Lahiri, 2008, p. 28). His history with houses in America is not one marked by pride of ownership. The apartment in New Jersey was cramped, the rooms smelling of cooking, the bedrooms dreary (Lahiri, 2008, p. 29), the house he eventually "…bought in the suburbs with willow trees in the backyard with rooms for [Romi and Ruma] and a basement filled with their toy [was] a flimsy structure that he always feared could burn down from the flare of a match" and "was nothing …compared to where Ruma now lived…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 29). This dismal view of American spaces in Lahiri's fiction is examined by Judith Caesar in "American Spaces in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri," and Caesar (2005) states

> if in much mainstream American fiction the house is the prison from self from which one must escape to discover the spirit of America, in Lahiri the house is where the spirit of America resides. The knowledge of the self is part of the spirit of America that did not expand westward but burrowed inward, a countermovement, against the stream, but part of America all the same.

And if this is an Indian-American valuation of America as a domestic space, for the immigrant Indian-American father, American homes are now only seen as witness to a kind of psychic injury. This could be explained by Togashi's argument that looks at the process of migration as involving "injury to an immigrant's central organizing fantasy of himself or herself, which was formed before immigration" (Tummala-Narra, 2009). While Ruma's father is a first-generation immigrant and "… first-generation immigrants' pre-immigration notions of the adoptive country may evoke feelings of hope, excitement and anxiety related to the shaping of a new sense of self in a new, idealized cultural environment", we find in Ruma's father only a fractured sensibility about his stay in America. He appears to have succeeded as a working professional in America, making good for himself and his family, but he lets on that his family life was marked by disaffection, feeling condemned and resented by Ruma, "…never telling Ruma his side of things, never saying that his wife had been overly demanding, unwilling to appreciate the life he'd worked hard to provide...", being reminded "…of the early years of his marriage, the years for which his wife had never forgiven him" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 40). This could explain why

> he did not want to be part of another family, part of the mess, the feuds, the demands, the energy of it… he did not want to live again in an enormous house that would only fill up with things over the years, as the children grew, all the things he'd recently gotten rid of, all the books and papers and clothes and objects one felt compelled to possess, to save… (Lahiri, 2008, p. 53)

The literal emptiness of the house that he provided for his family is testament to the father's belief in "…the deterioration that inevitably took place in the course of a marriage" and that "… the entire enterprise of having a family, of putting children on this earth, as gratifying as it sometimes felt, was flawed from the start" (Lahiri, 200, p. 54-55).

Tummala-Narra (2009) states that immigrants have "fantasies of visiting the home country post-immigration" as a nostalgic reconnection with an idealized known cultural environment", but Ruma's father does not harbor any such nostalgia, as he understands all too well the repudiation of the Indian concept of duty while one turns "American": he says he does not expect Ruma "to take him in", as he himself abandoned his family back in India

> when his own father was dying [and] when his mother was left behind... there was no question of his moving the family back to India, and also no question of his eighty-year old widowed mother moving to Pennsylvania. He had let his siblings look after her until she, too, eventually died. (Lahiri, 2008, p. 29)

While Ruma's father paints this abandonment as a betrayal on his part, admitting at this late period in his life that "… he… had turned his back on his parents, by settling in America. In the name of ambition and accomplishment, none of which mattered anymore, he had forsaken them" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 51). This is the reason why India as the home country is not fantasized about as "a means of coping with the losses that accompany immigration" (Ainslie in Tummala-Narra, 2009). Where nostalgia functions as a possible recapturing of an element of one's life in the home country to allow one to "temporarily reunite one with the past in fantasy" (Tummala-Narra, 2009), the father's clear- eyed but wistful and poignant realization is that this reunion is not now a possibility and that through his own fault, he has left himself bereft of family, both in the home country and in the United States, by shirking filial duty and paternal affection. His "own location on American society provides no buffer between the self and the impersonal world, no larger circles of family or friends, to validate the

reality of [the] intimate relationships. The outside world is all there is beyond [his] own small world of self" (Caesar, 2005).

McGillis (2008) offers another perspective of Ruma's father's distance and isolation that supports the portrayal of the father as solitary, and he asks if it "could … be the modern, Westernized daughter who craves the family connection" by offering her father a place in her home, "… while the widowed father, now free to travel and not yet ready to give up on the idea of romance, wants to be unencumbered?" McGillis rightly looks at this as "alienation… cut[ting] both ways", and more tragically, states that "the gap between the first-generation Americans and their parents is in many ways even wider than that between the parents' American life and the India they left behind". Integral, too, to this alienation is the father's acceptance that life in America lacked solidity---in America, he learned the hard lesson that one cannot assume anything. His wife's death was a series of pat assumptions based on certainties:

> …the assumption that the procedure would go smoothly, the assumption that she would spend one night in the hospital and then return home, the assumption that friends would be coming to the house two weeks later for dinner, that she would visit France after that. The assumption that his wife's surgery was to be a minor trial in her life and not the end of it… (Lahiri, 2008, p. 31).

One site in which we see this struggle for, and reliance on, certainty and control, is in the way Ruma's father cultivates gardens. He helps Ruma lay down a garden during his visit to her home, and even as he just arrived at Ruma's home, he already notices the dismal state of her garden. He waters the delphiniums, and pronounces that "…they won't survive another day" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 16). He surprises Ruma by going to the nursery and buying "…bags of topsoil, flats full of flowers, a shovel, a rake… a hose (Lahiri, 2008, p. 43), and transforming what was bare ground to

> …a modest planting, …slow-growing myrtle… phlox under the trees, two azalea bushes, a row of hostas, … clematis…, and in honor of his wife, a small hydrangea. In a plot behind the kitchen, unable to resist, he also put in a few tomatoes, along with some marigolds and impatiens… he spaced out the delphiniums, tied them to stalks, stuck some gladiola bulbs into the ground. He missed working outside, the solid feeling of dirt under his knees… (Lahiri, 2008, p. 48-49).

Ruma's father finds steady footing in planning and shaping this garden, domestic acts that hold in abeyance the loneliness and distance he feels even while on a visit with family. Judith Caesar (2005) writes that American writers deem houses as a trope for "…confinement within one's ego, or confinement within a set of conventions that deny intimacy and individuality", and therefore the characters which inhabit these spaces look at life as located outside, not within these (see also Bachelard in Caesar, 2005). Inside Ruma and Adam's well-appointed house, Ruma's father literally and figuratively feels ambivalence and uneasiness, and outside in the garden, this unmooring is replaced by purposefulness and belonging in this controlled space.

The garden is bounded space at its most specific, and Ruma's father sees it both as a reminder of fecundity and abundance--- he favoring a vegetable garden more than he does a flower one, remembering how, when he and his wife entertained, they cooked with potatoes and other vegetables from their backyard, and had more than enough to give away to friends (Lahiri, 2008, p. 49). The garden is certainly a site of productivity and fertility, and "…Ruma's father makes provisions for the well-being of his bereft daughter in the only way he can: toiling in 'unfriendly soil'" (Chakraborty, 2011). But this productivity and fertility are now juxtaposed against the aging and creeping decrepitude Ruma has begun to observe earlier, when her father watered Ruma's dying plants, carrying the kettle "…slowly and carefully… taking oddly small steps, and for the first time since his arrival [Ruma] saw that in spite of his clear eyes and skin, her father had become an old man" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 17). Gardens and gardening are a typical trope for the cycles of growth and decay, but in Ruma's father, this nurturing space literally becomes one that is poignantly allied to erasure and effacement. Even while he cultivates and creates a garden for Ruma, he is already anticipating its loss and death: while "the garden was coming along nicely", he saw this as "… a futile exercise… He could not picture his daughter or son-in-law caring for it properly, noticing what needed to be done. In weeks… it would be overgrown with weeds, the leaves chewed up by slugs…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 48). This projection renders his cultivation useless, an enterprise doomed to failure and forgetting. This ultimately connects to his avowed detachment from the home and all its detritus in his old age, and parallels his lack of faith in certainties and solidities in American life.

The incipient disappearance of the garden also emphasizes the cycle of death in his own family. The hydrangea in honor of his wife was a tender touch, that Ruma does realize after her father takes his leave, but the garden is a site of mourning and loss too, as he says that "…when he thought about his garden was when he missed his wife most keenly" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 49). We can ally this view of gardens and gardening by Ruma's father to what Mridula Chakraborty (2011) calls the "thematics of rooting and routing…. nativeness /foreignness and

hybridity, distance and parting… ultimately death in absentia and coping with the remains of loss…".

Finally, Ruma's father's apparent distrust of American certainty and control is tacitly juxtaposed against the vagaries of fate and supernatural interventions in Indian life, to which we really see no reference in his American life, thus underscoring for us the consideration of the father's "Americanness". During his visit to Ruma's home, he brings up the subject of Ruma's work, and tries to pin her to returning to it. He could not understand Ruma's new life track, and sees her decision to wait until "the new baby starts kindergarten" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 36) as a waste, and counters: "…They won't be young forever, Ruma… then what will you do?... You'll be over forty. It may not be so simple" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 36). He continues: "… *Work* is important, Ruma. Not only for financial stability. For mental stability… *Self-reliance* [emphasis added] is important, Ruma… Life is full of surprises. Today, you can depend on Adam, on Adam's job. Tomorrow, who knows…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 38). These statements that evince belief in the value of work as anchor to self-worth and self-identity, and in self-reliance and independence, make him more American than a green card or naturalization can, because he has taken in the marrow of Americanness: the belief in work as a palliative for anything, and in self-reliance as self-definition. This identification with the American spirit seals his uneasy transplantation to this "unaccustomed earth".

We had noted earlier on Ruma's father as being himself psychically injured by his migration to America, but we see proof of this rift from India as "desh", as country or nation (see also Wiltz, 2003) withering away and becoming inscribed only by the incidence of color (and at some point in the story Ruma remarks that "with his gray hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere" [Lahiri, 2008, p. 11]), as he takes on, consciously or not, an interior transformation that removes him from India and roots him in America, even while he travels to places elsewhere, other than India itself. Ruma and her father in this story negotiate a "post-mortem" life--- both are scarred by the mother's death more than they care to admit, or perhaps even more than they realize, and their return to the normalcies of domesticity and everyday life only serve to highlight "mourning what remains of lost histories as well as histories of loss" (Eng and Kazanjian in Chakraborty, 2011). Death extends so profoundly into Ruma's and her father's lives, not just as the bereaved, but in the injured, fissured Indian/Bengali-American psyches they nurse: in the absence of her mother, Ruma loses an anchor in her Indian heritage and appears to skim now only the surfaces of her American existence, unable to moor herself in her new life in Seattle with her young family, unable to reconnect fully with her father, leaving this relationship to dwindle to distance and disconnection. Ruma's father, in turn, suffers his wife's death and with this, separation from the certainties for which he lived his life: family, heritage, nation/s. Chakraborty

(2011) states that "death becomes a loss that is inseparable from other losses of diasporic life (of name, nation, home, language, and of the other)… [and] … becomes the locus at which immigrant life enacts its poignancy and ephemerality…". She continues

> … death… for Lahiri's migrants… end… memory in [the] land where immigrants have been able to realize their dreams as Americans and their dreams as Indians but are unable to manage their nostalgia: the ache and longing (*algos*) to return home (*nostos*). In Lahiri's fiction, death in the adopted land becomes a site for fixing and rooting the migrant into his or her adopted country, a claim final and irrefutable; thereby turning the question, "Where are you from?" into "Where will you die?" (Chakraborty, 2011).

2. "Only Goodness": the typical and the terrifying

Where in "Unaccustomed Earth" Lahiri explores generational dislocations, her story "Only Goodness" examines the downward spiral of fraternal bonds in Indian-American families, complicated by the demands of "superachievement" and "upward mobility expected of these upper-middle class Indian families which made good in America" (McGillis, 2008). The juxtaposition of the lives of siblings Sudha and Rahul Mukherjee intersect along lines of rivalry in excellence, their excellence signaling the success of their Bengali parents.

This burden to excel is part of an inheritance of filial piety, and Sudha's and Rahul's successes are reflections of the success of their Bengali parents: Sudha was salutatorian of her high school class (Lahiri, 2008, p. 130), "…studied diligently, double-majoring in economics and math…", later "…getting a master's in international relations" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 129), then to London, to get a "second master's at the London School of Economics" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 132). These are outstanding qualifications, but her brother Rahul was deemed to be more admirable--- where Sudha "only" went to Pennsylvania, Rahul got a place at Cornell; where "Sudha… struggled to keep her place on the honor roll", "…Rahul never lifted a finger, never cracked a book unless it appealed to him, precocious enough to have skipped third grade" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 130). This was a game of one-upmanship, but while these will have catastrophic consequences later in the story, we are seeing these scholastic feats, and the later rebellion and descent to mediocrity, on Sudha's and Rahul's parts, as filial responses to a sad kind of parenting that not only demanded perfection, but one that abetted this rivalry. Sudha and Rahul's Bengali parents were immigrants to America from London, and in America "for years, they had compared [Sudha and Rahul] to other Bengali children, told about gold medals

brought back from science fairs, colleges that offered full scholarships" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 129). their father

> …clip[ped] newspaper articles about unusually gifted adolescents--- the boy who finished a PhD at twenty, the girl who went to Stanford at twelve--- and tape[d] them to the refrigerator. When Sudha was fourteen her father had written to Harvard Medical School, requested an application, and placed it on her desk. (Lahiri, 2008, p. 129-130)

This desire for perfection used the totems of success--- medals, advertisements, application forms--- as a carrot-and-stick method to keep Sudha and Rahul in tow. The visible artifacts were meant to encourage the siblings to excel, but these also were approved standards the parents tacitly indicated as acceptable qualifications not just to arrive at American success, but to court a favorable place in their affections.

This is a logical assumption here, given the way Rahul was prized by the parents, more than Sudha was: "They bragged about [Rahul's] school, more impressed by it than they'd been with Penn", they "threw a party, inviting nearly two hundred people, …bought Rahul a car, justifying it as a necessity for his life in Ithaca". With Rahul's acceptance to Cornell, their parents pontifically pronounced "Our job is done", as though Sudha's successes were a trial run for this ultimate prize (Lahiri, 2008, p. 129).

This inequality in the way Sudha and Rahul were treated can also be seen in a pathetic dismissal of the young Sudha, who, when her mother was undergoing birth pains in their Boston house, tried to comfort her mother, only to be rebuffed and told, "Go away!... I don't want you to see me this way…", "… in a tone that had stung" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 134). Among Sudha's "first sustained memory of her life" at age six, was being left at the home of her parents' Bengali friends as they went to hospital for her brother's birth, "…Sle[eping]on a cot in a spare room containing no permanent furniture other than an ironing board and a closet devoted to cleaning supplies" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 133-134), having "no Frosted Flakes for her to eat, only toast with margarine…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 134). These memories of physical and emotional privation are concretized by, and in, domestic spaces and objects, and while these memories may be seen as trivial and childish, do form indelible imprints that shaped Sudha's relationship with her parents primarily as authority figures.

Sudha's familial status, and the way she was treated by her parents, is also sealed and complicated by her parents' own migration experiences. We spoke of an imprinting of loss, rejection, and detachment in Sudha's early life, but in the same manner that we allied this lack in their American life to her

memories of domestic occasions [parties] and loci [empty tables, bare cupboards] and objects [washers and dryers] (see also Lahiri, 2008, p. 134), we noted that there already are patterns of experiencing this privation as interwoven into their family life as new Indian immigrants in London, where "…half the rentals …in the sixties said WHITES ONLY…", where "none of Sudha's toys …made it on the journey across the Atlantic; no baby clothing or bedding or keepsake of any kind", where the few baby pictures she had were taken by their Bengali landlord in Balham, named Mr. Pal (Lahiri, 2008, p. 134-135).

In consequence, Sudha was drawn to American homes, "…crammed and piled with things…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 134), and with Rahul's arrival sought to recreate this nurture of her brother by equating this with abundance and disorder, reveling in

> …his lotions and diapers heaped on top of the dresser, stockpots clattering with boiling bottles on the stove… moving her things to one side to make space in her bedroom for Rahul's bassinet, his changing table, his mobile of stuffed bumblebees… stuffed white rabbit… countless photographs… (Lahiri, 2008, p. 134-135).

In addition to this preference as thought-patterning, Sudha saw in objects the conveyance and the affirmation of an American status, as, in looking out for Rahul, "…she was determined that her little brother *should leave his mark as a child in America* [emphasis added]" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 136). She ensured this transformation to Americanness not by way of verbal explanations, but by way of artifactual confirmation:

> … She sought out all the right toys for him, scavenging from yard sales the Fisher Price barn, Tonka trucks, the Speak and Say that made animal sounds, and other things that she'd discovered in the playrooms of friends….asked her parents to buy him the books she'd been read by her first teachers, *Peter Rabbit* and *Frog and Toad*…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 136).

This adherence to American life by way of underscoring identification with this new nation as home is emphasized by the patronage of objects valorized by the society, whose brand names are metonymic icons that signal pleasure and affluence. These are assisted by Sudha's move to provide for Rahul an entry to American traditions--- marking the seasons with the appropriate appliances and accoutrements: asking her parents to assemble lawn sprinklers and swing sets for the summer, "elaborate Halloween costumes, turning [Rahul] into an elephant or a refrigerator, while hers had come from boxes…" (Lahiri, 2008, p.: 136).

Sudha's turn to American objects and practices, and her assent to standards of success set by her Indian parents, which are seen as primary necessities to assimilate in American life, may also explain the way Sudha is treated by her parents, in contrast to the indulgence with which Rahul is dealt. The parents' apparent disregard of Sudha's struggle for excellence, taking this matter-of-factly, the almost maternal concern Sudha has taken to exercising over Rahul, are manifestations of "shifts in status and affiliation" that "can be highly disorganizing to one's sense of identity, both for children and adolescents", as they "did not have a choice in the decision to relocate to a new country" (Tummala-Narra, 2009). This manner of locating and re-locating one's sense of self palliates loss

> …commonly experienced by immigrants, including separation from family and friends; reduced access to language, cultural conventions, food, places of worship, familiar objects and social surroundings; and climate changes. These losses are especially salient for non-European immigrants. They may experience hostility in the new, adoptive country, which imposes new social categories… in the United States (Comas-Diaz in Tummala-Narra, 2009).

We noted earlier how Sudha suffered in an unfair comparison with Rahul, and with other Bengali-American children in the US, but one way to look at this treatment is to realize, too, that migrant parents "…must engage in a process of cultural adjustment simultaneous with that of their children" and that they are forced to adopt "new sets of rules and standards in the new country" (Tummala-Narra, 2009). This creates misgivings and doubts about changes in beliefs and practices the immigrant has to accept to be able to assimilate in "mainstream society", thus resulting in, and repudiating, "immigration-induced anomie" (Tummala-Narra, 2009).

The narrator made much of the parents' difficult life in Berlin and London, in which they were "…uprooted adventurers from India who arrive in America ready to work hard and become assimilated… cling[ing] to beloved cultural traditions but heartily embrac[ing] the Western world's wondrous opportunities for happiness and success" (Memmott, 2008). In America, however, "… they were stuck…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" (Lahiri, 2008: 130).

Sudha and Rahul's parents responded to the challenges of immigration by "… [relying] on their children, on Sudha especially" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 130). Sudha became the family's conduit to American life, "… explain[ing] to her father that he had to gather up the leaves in bags, not just drag them with his rake to the woods opposite the house…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 138), "…she, with her perfect English, who called the repair department at Lechmere to have their appliances serviced" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 130). Sudha appears to have taken on a strange status in their home: she is a child of Indian parents and obedience from her was an expectation, but she is also the liminal, unbound character here, living now in between Indian and American worlds, negotiating "'culture shock' and discontinuity of identity" (Garza-Guerrero in Tummala-Narra, 2009), "…disorganization, pain, frustration…" (Grinberg and Grinberg in Tummala-Narra, 2009) in the vagaries of contemporary everyday life, and thus taking on a strangely equitable and sympathetic role in this Indian-American family's life. She "regarded her parents' separation from India as an ailment that ebbed and flowed like a cancer" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 128), in which, she has become some kind of willing and necessary conduit. Rahul has no such sympathetic gaze for these immigrant woes, pragmatically, if disrespectfully, stating, "'…no one dragged them here… Baba left India to get rich, and Ma married him because she had nothing else to do'" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 138).

One review of Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* puts loss at the center of these stories (Memmott, 2008), and the earlier part of this reading focuses on parenting and child-rearing, adaptations to migration, as domestic backdrops to this story of loss. This story, though, while a chronicle of Sudha's continuous work toward scholastic and professional excellence, is also a chronicle of Rahul's slide into alcoholism and obscurity as an American. We are surprised at Rahul's dissipation of this American promise, his descent to mediocrity a result of alcoholism, which Lee Mhatre (2008) notes is a problem rarely discussed in Indian families, or in literature.

The narrative's innocuous beginning, Sudha innocently introducing Rahul to alcohol, first "from a keg", and later to secret purchases of six-packs at the local liquor store (Lahiri, 2008, p. 128), already foregrounds Rahul's tragedy, and Sudha's complicity in it. Sudha's sporadic visits to the family home in between her college studies saw her initially strengthening her bond with Rahul by indulging his requests for her to do the liquor store runs in the beginning and later, unwillingly keeping the secret of this imbibing, "an adolescent conspiracy between brother and sister" (McGillis, 2008). But Rahul's drinking spirals out of control, and Rahul at Cornell begins to get C's, and then is finally expelled as his addiction to alcohol escalates, and he loses his interest in studying. He "drift[s] in and out without explanation…waiting tables part time at a seafood restaurant" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 139), later "managing a Laundromat in Wayland…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 151). Sudha watched helplessly as

her brother maintained a state of sullen denial. Not only did Rahul live at home, he became the focus of Bengali community gossip, who "…prayed their own children would not ruin their lives in the same way" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 151), the poster boy for

> …what all parents feared, a blot, a failure, someone who was not contributing to the grand circle of accomplishments Bengali children were making across the country, as surgeons and attorneys, or writing articles for the front page of *The New York Times*.

Lee Mhatre (2008) focuses only on the cluelessness of the Indian parents of their son's problem, but McGillis (2008) rightly remarks on the "shame of underachievement and alcoholism" as being "all the worse for being played out in a community unequipped to acknowledge it, let alone deal with it (McGillis, 2008). Here, the Bengali community's views are a verbalization of what Sudha and Rahul's parents tried to avoid, the inutility of the transplanted Indian migrant, to which now Rahul has been led by his alcoholic excesses. His parents, as well as the Bengali community, see Rahul's problem as a result of "too many freedoms, too much having fun… life wasn't about fun…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 143), and not as a disease of which he needs to be cured. And while Rahul's failures are explained here within Indian discourse, we should not forget that this failure and the chronicle of this addiction and its effects exist within a white dominant culture whose expectation of individuals of color are no less stringent or judgmental.

Rahul's self-destruction influences and creates its own community of loss, too, and Sudha, and her parents, become the casualties of Rahul's lack of control. His parents suffer from their "…refusal to accommodate such an unpleasant and alien fact, [the] need to blame America and its laws instead of [their] son… In their opinion their children were immune from the hardships and injustices they had left behind in India…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 144-145), and Rahul's defiance is, for them, a consequence of Americanization and a betrayal of their belief that America would make them prosper. Rahul's alcoholic paranoia ruins Sudha's wedding to the Englishman Roger by quarreling with their father at the reception, and giving rein to his despision of this middle-class life, and if he were honest, of himself, and "..Sudha could not forgive Rahul for what had happened, those dreadful minutes he stood at the microphone the only thing she remembered when she looked at the photographs of her reception…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 158).

His departure and self-imposed disappearance mean rupturing this family, and more particularly, his fraternal alliance with Sudha. When he does resurface, he appears to have been cured of his addiction, and to have cleaned up

and turned a new leaf over. He also tries to reconnect with Sudha, finally apologizes to her, and finds her settled in London with a new baby. Sudha welcomes Rahul back into her and her new family's life, and while in London, Rahul helps Sudha take care of her baby Neel, brings Neel to the zoo, cooks for Sudha and Roger. And just when Roger and Sudha begin to trust him, and when Sudha appears to get over her doubts about his sobriety, Rahul slips monumentally and drinks himself to stone-cold oblivion, after he offered to babysit and let Sudha and her husband enjoy a night out. They return to the house to find Neel sitting in a tub of water, left by himself in danger of drowning, and Rahul passed out in inebriation. This destroys whatever relationship Sudha and Rahul had rebuilt, and as Sudha expels Rahul from her home, she suffers from the irreparable fracture of this fraternal bond. Even more profoundly, she suffers from the derangement of her home, not only because of the fright over the near- disaster they faced which Rahul's alcoholism caused, but because the direst of these problems is the "…husband who no longer trusted her, … the son whose cry now interrupted her, …the fledgling family that had cracked open that morning, as typical and as terrifying as any other" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 173). Sudha's return to her everyday familial life after Rahul's unforgivable lapse is marked not by familiarity with the known but by the creation of a scene of unrecognizable terror. The final scene of the narrative shows her "… taking out a packet of Weebix, heat[ing] milk in pan… clip[ping a balloon's] ribbon with scissors and stuff[ing] the whole thing into the garbage…" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 173). Sudha is oppressed by this terror as her known world explodes, juxtaposed against the demands of housekeeping and child-rearing. The clipping of the balloon's ribbon, the balloon a memento of their zoo visit, appears to be a mindless task, but this is really all that is left of Rahul's possibility of salvation--- perhaps a fake rehabilitation, good intentions, a chance for amendment. The balloon symbolizes the normalcy of solvency, of sobriety, of family, versus a concatenation of losses in Rahul's, and now, Sudha's, life.

> I posit that part of Sudha's loss is also one that relates to our earlier valuation of her habit of nurture, first, of Rahul, and now of Neel. All the care she expended on Rahul was rendered moot because of what she sees as a slackening of her judgment and her betrayal by Rahul's weakness. But she herself, ironically, was the cause of Rahul's addiction to alcohol, and this reflexive guilt is also part of this loss (she asks him: "Is I me? [Lahiri, 2008, p. 72]).

This "training in mothercraft" that is necessary "because it is only through this that mothers will be able to provide [us] with ideal citizens (Verma in Thapar-Björkert, 1996), so obviously felt short in this situation. That Rahul

ended up a menace to their family exhibited her own failure as a mother, so evident in the danger in which she put Neel, however inadvertently.

Shankar and Srikanth speak of the "desperate loneliness and alienation of the postcolonial immigrant…who can no longer live in the native homeland, and yet despondently searches for new communities…" (2000, p. 379). In Rahul this takes on more interior and smaller circles, as he attempts to rediscover the lost self in the native "homeland", not the geographical India, but India and America in the topography of memory and community in the form of Sudha, and now his nephew Neel and brother-in-law Roger. His reconnection with his sister Sudha is an "imagined return home", and while he is not a first-generation Indian immigrant, he is not immune from "the longing for home that is essential to understanding immigrants' identity transformations. This longing for home is worked through in an immigrant's actual visits to the home country and re-creation of home in the adoptive country" (Tummala-Narra, 2009). In Rahul, as a second-generation Indian-American, we can argue that the "home country" is really the United States, but the home country for Rahul is a composite of American and Indian traditions, practices, spaces, acts, and visiting Sudha is a "re-creation" of this home. His betrayal of this community means exploding all fantasies he has of home and adoptive country, and a severing of all ties to home and identity. (see also Tummala-Narra, 2009).

3. Conclusion

Jasbir Puar (1996, p. 130) speaks of the "…South Asian other's identity…as directly oppositional to white culture----defined not by the self but by the dominant white other". In reading Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories, the opposition between India as the old home land and the United States as the adoptive and adopted land seems to me to be more fraught. I adopt Puar's (2009) definition of the first-generation immigrant South Asian woman as one whose identification is "primarily with… birthplace", and the second-generation "… is completely and directly 'identified" by relational discourses of difference---white/black… East/West… timid/independent… freedom/security". It is in this second-generation of Indian-Americans/South Asians in the US that we find complicated intersections of just what constitutes "home". I posit that the characters that we have seen in these stories--- Ruma and her father, Sudha and Rahul ---have to contend with Indianness within familiar, domestic sites, because the selves of color, the immigrant selves that provide the opposition here are now also *themselves*--- they are themselves "the dominant white other", even while as second-generation immigrants, they do "… navigate both the traditional values of their immigrant parents and the mainstream American values of their peers" (Chotiner, 2008).

Lahiri admits to writing about "… growing up brown and 'foreign' in a town where white was the predominant theme had its challenges. There was the persistent feeling of other, not American enough, not Indian enough, of constantly straddling fences, stretching identities" (Wiltz, 2009), but we also ironically note in these stories how "Indianness" seems to be erased in the apparently ordinary, therefore "universal", "white" dilemmas. Indeed, in examining Abraham Verghese's memoir about being an Indian doctor in rural Kentucky, Shankar and Srikanth (2000, p. 382) come to this view:

> An immigrant who is a doctor, who plays tennis, drives a Datsun Z, and who accompanies his wife, however reluctantly, to look for a house to purchase is not the stuff of oppositional literature. Verghese does not fit the role of an ethnic victim, a deprived racial being…

M. K. Naik (1987, p. 76), in noting the alienation of the contemporary Indian poet in English, states that the Indian writer in English suffers from alienation not only because he writes in English, because he finds himself far removed from "the vast rural masses but also with traditional religious and cultural beliefs and values", and "mostly belongs to the urban or semi-urban middle class". We may extend this to writing by second-generation Indian immigrants like Lahiri, who peoples her stories with "ordinary" Indian-Americans, who have to go to work, who study and get advanced degrees in urban or semi-urban centers, whose "Asian-Americanness" does not lie in "bitterness and anger in a kind of political activist model" (Hongo in Shankar and Srikanth, 2000, p. 382). It is at this crux that we find the value of Lahiri's imagination of the Indian-American's homeland not now in the overt struggles between geographies of belonging, but in the re-view, and a re-focus of the everyday and of the domestic as sites of identity creation and affirmation, moving away from the "too-easy implementation of multiculturalism" (Palumbo-Liu in Shankar and Srikanth, 2000, p. 383).

Sucheta Mazumdar in her afterword to *Contours of the Heart* (1996), asks: "Does my identity have to be constructed by what I have inherited and not by what I have struggled to make of myself? Am I doubly doomed by my genes and country of origin?…" (Shankar and Srikanth, 2000, p. 383). In delineating the lives of middle-class or elite, educated Indian-Americans, Lahiri complicated the ways by which we could understand the Indian-American experience, and thus she responds to Mazumdar's question by painting "homelands" and "heartlands" as imagined spaces. In Lahiri's stories, we find a powerful complication of the Indian-American experience by portraying these lives as firmly entrenched within everyday practices, in which domestic acts, traditions, artifacts interrogate the interstices of these disparate histories and experiences.

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