

SPACES, OBJECTS, AND IDENTITIES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "SEXY,"  
"MRS. SEN'S," AND "THIS BLESSED HOUSE"

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by

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## ABSTRACT

I examine three stories from Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), "Sexy," "Mrs. Sen's," and "This Blessed House," in terms of the idea of "home" as opposed to the more fixed and vague category of "homeland" (or, a "native" land). I want to emphasize the stories' characters' constitution of their social lives through the manipulation or mastery (or the lack of it) of their social spaces. I make the claim that in these three short stories, space is reflective and constitutive of the experience of "modernity" in the lives of these characters, whether they are immigrants from South Asia or EuroAmericans, classified widely as "Caucasians." In their ways of negotiating the modern spaces of American cities and suburbs, these characters produce new modes of identification and building a home (community) that cannot be simply reduced to "assimilation" (successful or unsuccessful) or the existence of a "native" place, a "back home."

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Maria Hafeez Awan is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Asian Studies at Cornell University. Previously, she completed a Master's in Global History from Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. (2011), as well as in English Literature from the University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware (2008). She also holds an undergraduate degree in Psychology from Hope College, Holland, Michigan (2005). She came to the United States in 2001 to attend Hope College from Karachi, Pakistan. She will continue her Ph.D. in History at Stanford University.

For Professor Kathleen Verduin,  
who besides being beautiful  
has always welcomed and given shelter to helpless strangers  
for my mother, Dr. Shahjehan Chennah, a stranger in her own country, and  
one of the strongest, prettiest, and hospitable women I know  
and for all my favorite teachers who inspire me  
with their intellectual depth and strength

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This idea really began from nothing and nowhere. And yet it was everywhere and always returned to me, especially in classes which examined ideas and concepts of the nation, identity, and space. I started thinking about issues of cultural geography, the idea of the "fetish," and the object world since my class with Julian Yates, where I began thinking about Lahiri's short stories more seriously, and in my classes with Martin Brückner, one of the most excellent and kind scholars I have had the privilege to work with. I will forever be grateful to him for spending time with me discussing these ideas.

But perhaps my encounter with Jhumpa Lahiri would have been impossible if I

had not randomly run into her first collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, in-- yes-- Barnes and Noble, that space of mass consumer culture that is featured and critiqued in Lahiri's stories, but which, alas, is used by many academics....

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## CHAPTER 1

### SPACES, OBJECTS, AND IDENTITIES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "SEXY," "MRS. SEN'S," AND "THIS BLESSED HOUSE"

#### *Introduction*

Jhumpa Lahiri is a Bengali American writer whose first collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, appeared in 1999 and not only won the Pulitzer Prize but was widely popular in the United States as well as in other countries. Since then she has published a novel, *The Namesake* (2003), which was adapted as a movie with the same title; another collection of stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2009); and a second novel, *The Lowland* (2013), which was a nominee for the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award for Fiction. Appointed by President Barack Obama, she serves as a member of the Committee on the Arts and Humanities. Lahiri was born in London in 1967 but immigrated to the United States with her Bengali parents at the age of two, settling in South Kingston, Rhode Island. The family often visited Calcutta, her parents' home, while she was growing up.

In this essay I will examine three stories from *Interpreter of Maladies*, "Sexy," "Mrs. Sen's," and "This Blessed House," in terms of the idea of "home" and building a home, as opposed to the more fixed and vague category of "homeland" (or, a "native" land). I want to emphasize the stories' characters' constitution of their social lives through the manipulation, or mastery (or the lack of it), of their social spaces. I am looking at individuals' relations to space in a more experiential and phenomenological way except for the third story's analysis, where I look into the epistemic spatial relations to see how Twinkle's mobilization of her cultural capital displaces Sanjeev's patriarchal socioeconomic forms of building a "home." I make the

claim that in these three short stories, space is reflective and constitutive of the experience of “modernity” in the lives of these characters, whether they are immigrants from South Asia or EuroAmericans, classified widely as “Caucasians.” Taking into consideration spaces and the spatial manipulations (successful or failed) by the various characters in the stories blurs, contests, and reconstitutes identity markers and categories and in the process makes us look at the idea of “being modern” as it is understood and performed by these characters. In their ways of negotiating the modern spaces of American cities and suburbs, these characters produce new modes of identification and building a home (community) that cannot be simply reduced to “assimilation” (successful or unsuccessful) or the existence of a “native” place, a “back home.”

Even though Lahiri’s works are widely seen as “immigrant” fiction, they really are about American society, in that they reveal the various schisms and lack of homogeneity not only among the “white, Caucasian” EuroAmericans but also within the so-called “immigrant” communities of Indians, Bengalis, or the second-generation Americans. These stories highlight the vacuity of popular imagination about immigrant communities in the United States, namely, that immigrant communities are tightly knit and homogenous: the characters in these stories reveal that their communities are always already divided and marked by schisms. These divisions in immigrant communities in turn reflect the lack of coherence of the “white Caucasian” communities themselves, especially in the juxtaposition of “immigrant” characters (and larger communities including second and subsequent generations) with “Americans” (EuroAmerican Caucasian); the latter are popularly supposed to be always already naturalized as citizens, assimilated, “insiders,” but in these stories often are not (Miranda, Eliot’s mother—even to an extent Sanjeev’s office underlings—are all isolated and alienated, lacking even in political consciousness). Thus, in

Lahiri's fiction, assimilation, citizenship, and membership in a modern democratic nation such as the United States always appear to be tentative and a fiction.

The ideas of belonging, membership in a community, and assimilation, in all these three stories are investigated and critiqued through the idea of modern romantic love, as understood in the modern and capitalist socioeconomic culture in the United States. The stories thematize the way romantic love is an integral part of and participates in the construction of modern social space, specifically in American cities and suburbs, and causing the atomization and isolation of people (now "individuals") who are, through these modern spaces, kept from organized political action and thought. And yet these stories highlight how it is within these modern, non-traditional (whether from an American or an Indian/Bengali perspective) spaces that people from different social backgrounds come together and re-think what constitutes a "home." These three stories ponder issues that many foreign settlers, as well as what we refer to as "white, Caucasian" EuroAmericans, in American cities and suburbs go through, specifically alienation and the encounter with the "other," an encounter that occurs on multiple axes of power, including class, race, and nationality/citizenship.

The female protagonists of these three stories belong to different socioeconomic spheres and are in their different ways "strangers" and "foreigners." In their struggle to build a home and acquire some sense of belonging or familiarity with their environs, in establishing social contact within their communities, and even in gaining dominance in their community or household, I claim that these disparate female protagonists blur the distinction between the "assimilated" and the "not-assimilated," between the "immigrant" and the "American," and in doing so make us re-think notions of "home," what constitutes a "home," and social membership (social status, participation, and inclusion). So, in "Sexy," Miranda comes from a lower-middle class midwestern American family; just out of an undergraduate school and

relatively inexperienced, she can only work at a place that does not require any particular specialization or expertise, to which she does not seem too attached, and that only increases her alienation and positions her as an outsider in the cosmopolitan city of Boston. So, compared to Dev, Miranda is an underprivileged young woman with no family or friends in the city. Yet she exoticizes Dev and his “native” land as alien, a stance that problematizes her marginalization vis-à-vis Dev, an upper-middle, well-educated, well-employed, and well-travelled man, in its figuring Miranda as the “Caucasian” woman who is now dabbling in “cosmopolitanism.”

However, in “Mrs. Sen’s,” Mrs. Sen, through the hints given in the story that she used to have chauffeurs driving her around “back home,” is from a middle-class family. But still she and her family cannot be too affluent since for her traveling back and forth between India and the United States is next to impossible (she has to wait for her husband to get tenured before they will be able to lawfully and easily travel outside the United States). So, too, Mrs. Sen’s socioeconomic class in India immediately problematizes the issue of “back home,” since it throws into relief the class divisions in India separating someone like Mrs. Sen from her “chauffeur,” while simultaneously, through the effect of her nostalgia and the sympathy the readers feel for her isolation in the new country, we acknowledge the distance between “here” and “there,” that is, between “foreigner” and “native (land).”

On the other hand, in “This Blessed House,” Twinkle is from a middle-class family but after her marriage to Sanjeev, an immigrant from India, she becomes an upper-middle class privileged stay-at-home wife. Even though it is Sanjeev who enables them to occupy this position in the American suburban social structure, it is Twinkle who confirms it by mobilizing the cultural capital that she has acquired through cultural institutions, in this case Stanford University. But in this story it is not clear whether she is an immigrant or a second-generation Indian American, and I

argue in the fourth essay that this ambiguity is significant to the story itself and my analysis of it.

The existing scholarship on Lahiri's short stories is still relatively scant and weak; it is almost always concerned with questions of "immigrant identity" and nation states even though it uses the word "transnational" cursorily. For that reason, I have avoided referring to specific critical studies on Lahiri. However, I raise a few issues with these studies here in my introduction. This criticism suffers from its use of broad and vague categories of "identity," often in combination with the term "identities," the latter a convenient way to bypass the complexities and problematics that arise from using the term "identity"; that is, this scholarship still interprets these stories within the rigid and vague framework of "identity" while painting over this framework by superfluous usage of the plural form "identities." Terms such as "homeland," "American," and "hybridity," rampant in this body of scholarship, are employed in a simplistic way—which is surprising, since most of these scholars, before giving an analysis of the stories themselves, tip their hats to and go through a faithful explication of the theories of prominent names such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivack. This trend, of giving nods to well-known postcolonial critics before succumbing to using broad general categories of "nation," "home," and "identity," indicates, on the part of Lahiri scholars, an unwillingness to see the complexities inherent in the idea of an "immigrant" in the era of late capitalism and within colonial history; it blatantly fails to historicize and contextualize Lahiri's fiction within capitalism and modern forms of sociocultural production; and it fails to register the alienation embodied in the modern American landscape and geography—immigrant or not. At the cost of ignoring Lahiri's texts and their complexities, these scholars mold and fix Lahiri's characters within arbitrary and vaguely defined polarities of "free" and "contained" and "American" and "non-American/immigrant."

Lahiri has serious misgivings about labeling her work as “immigrant fiction.” In a 2013 interview with the Sunday Book Review of the *New York Times* she said,

I don't know what to make of the term “immigrant fiction.” Writers have always tended to write about the worlds they come from. And it just so happens that many writers originate from different parts of the world than the ones they end up living in, either by choice or by necessity or by circumstance, and therefore, write about those experiences. If certain books are to be termed immigrant fiction, what do we call the rest? Native fiction? Puritan fiction? This distinction doesn't agree with me. Given the history of the United States, all American fiction could be classified as immigrant fiction. Hawthorne writes about immigrants. So does Willa Cather. From the beginnings of literature, poets and writers have based their narratives on crossing borders, on wandering, on exile, on encounters beyond the familiar. The stranger is an archetype in epic poetry, in novels. The tension between alienation and assimilation has always been a basic theme.

While not completely agreeing with or following the author's intentions, I propose using more caution and applying a different set of critical theories in order to understand Lahiri's inquiry into the experience of liminality, assimilation, “native” and “foreign” identities. Indeed, Lahiri's texts are deeply critical of popular terms such as “multicultural” and “transnational.” In order to look at and critique her fiction in more nuanced ways, it is necessary to see, perhaps, in what ways the texts are both participating in and diverging from received ideas of “multicultural,” “transnational,” or “immigrant” identity, and what makes a citizen really an “insider” as opposed to what she calls in the above interview a “stranger.” It is not just in her interview that she makes the claim that the term “immigrant” is problematic, but in her fiction as well, where she presents richly textured characters: that is, many of her stories problematize white Americans' status and question the limits of their belonging as “citizens.” Hence, in her stories, it is not always the “ethnic” or “immigrant” Indian or Bengali who stands out as the unassimilated, the not-quite “citizen,” but also

“Caucasian,” Christian Americans. But this does not mean that her fiction does not comment on or hint toward colonial histories, the violent past behind such immigrants’ life histories, and the capitalism that drives modern-day ideas of globalization, travel, and mobility.

In order to examine these issues in their nuances, I look into Lahiri’s use of spaces and objects/things and the ways her various characters interact with these. Lahiri’s texts openly critique the modern suburban bourgeois landscape, both in terms of spatial geography and of interpersonal modes of interaction that are a result of capitalist market economy. Primarily I use Richard Sennett, Yi-Fu Tuan, Dean MacCannell, and Susan Pearce in order to examine the ways in which spaces and their negotiation are central to these stories. I am also interested in looking at the issues of trauma, personal memory, and the longing for a “native” place. In other words, I want to focus on the geography and spaces to understand the ways they illuminate Lahiri’s various characters, whether “American” or “non-American”: their sense of isolation and alienation, their desire for “home” (not “homeland”), and their communication with their surrounding community at large. I try to contextualize these stories within the socioeconomic milieu of capitalism and modernity. I try to see similarities between characters and steer clear of drawing dichotomies in terms of “tolerant” and “intolerant,” “assimilated” and “resistant to assimilation.” I try to investigate how and why Lahiri’s texts emphasize spaces and objects/things, be it food or commodities sold at a shopping mall, or at an “ethnic” grocery store, or in a large representation of the globe at Boston’s Mapparium. How are Lahiri’s characters positioned by virtue of these spaces and things, how do they claim mastery over them (or contrariwise, fail to do so)?

In “Sexy,” the first story I discuss, I look at how the protagonist, a Caucasian American young woman of twenty-three, negotiates her place as a “cosmopolitanite”

or a “cosmopolitan citizen” in the precincts of a city, Boston, that is an integral part of the globalized capitalist market. This story, in examining gender and economic/class difference, complicates its inquiry into socioeconomic relationships between global capitalism and the postcolonial world as driven by concepts of nation states. The second story, “Mrs. Sen’s,” places the two protagonists in a caretaking relationship: Mrs. Sen is a stay-at-home wife to whose house Eliot, a nine-year-old boy, is dropped until his mother gets off from work and pick him up. The story takes place in a suburban town, in Mrs. Sen’s tiny apartment, and in a complex of streets and roads and examines how Eliot and his mother are as isolated and alienated as Mrs. Sen. Despite Eliot’s gaining “independence” by the end of the story, he feels his space to be as small and inadequate as home-and-nostalgia bound Mrs. Sen. In the third story, “This Blessed House,” I look at how the protagonists, a newly married couple, negotiate the space of their new home and the ways that this negotiation sheds light on the simultaneous negotiation of their socioeconomic status among their peers.

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## CHAPTER 2

### LOVING SOMEONE YOU DON'T KNOW: URBAN SPACES, COMMUNITY, AND BECOMING COSMOPOLITAN IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "SEXY"

He admires her, her Bengali-born lover tells Miranda, the protagonist of Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "Sexy" (1999), "for moving to Boston, where she knew no one, instead of remaining in Michigan, where she'd grown up and gone to college." There is "nothing to admire," Miranda counters, because she has "moved to Boston precisely for that reason" (Lahiri 89). Twenty-two-year-old Miranda, this exchange implies, has relocated from her provincial origins in search of a brave new world of otherness, experience, and personal growth. But Lahiri's story seems to be asking the question, can the inhabitants of such a place really learn about each other and cross boundaries of otherness, the otherness that produces the desire to gain knowledge about the other, without actually experiencing the other? To know about a person as an object of desire is one thing, but to know a person together with oneself, within one's experience, is another. Is it the exoticism of the exotic that generates the desire to know—but does the exotic object lose its attraction once it becomes familiar? Can desire of this sort be adequate for any meaningful community in the globalized, cosmopolitan space that the story seems to present?

#### *Urban spaces*

In *The Body and the City* (1996), Steve Pile explains the complex interaction and interdependency between human fantasy and physical space: the "mind, the geographical world, and the outside world . . . [are] always fictional to some extent," because "dreams, images, and perception are so linked in the mind" that "fantasy is

simultaneously social, spatial, and personal.” Further, “stories about a place are written through and embedded in the desires and fantasies of the narrator . . . the place is reproduced and appropriated partly as a myth, partly as a concrete experience, which is never fully conscious and never completely abstracted from unconscious association” (13, 62). Miranda, we assume, has been driven by socially constructed myths of independence and personal fulfillment in an urban environment. Yet as Richard Sennett points out in his magisterial study *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (1996), the modern city, though based on Enlightenment ideals of freedom rendered tangible by wide and open thoroughfares, may produce instead increased isolation, the paradox of feeling alien in the midst of a crowd: “When modern society began to treat unobstructed movement as freedom,” Sennett writes, “it fell into a quandary about what to do with the desires represented by [the body] . . . these are fraternal desires for connection to/with other people, [a desire for] a social rather than merely sexual touch. . . the impulse of sympathy which individuals may feel in the city looking at the scene around them becomes in turn momentary . . . a second of response looking at snapshots of life” (310).

Sennett’s interpretation of the movement of things and people through space design is not unique; it is in fact inspired by Walter Benjamin’s discussion in the *Arcades* project of modern ideas of motion and individualism in urban spaces. Like Sennett, Benjamin discusses the alienation of urban dweller, the atomization produced by crowds, especially in shopping arcades consisting of spectacular displays of commodities: “the modes of being that the arcades encouraged or envisioned [were] warm, desultory, pleasure-grabbing, but also clean and safe . . .” (Buse 26). David Harvey, too, in his investigation of Balzac’s depiction of Paris in terms of historical and sociopolitical history, shows how this city, considered exemplary through Haussmann’s renovation in the latter half of the nineteenth century, engendered

instead a center marked by “incapability of intimacy” or “inner feelings,” where everything’s significance boiled down to utilitarian and monetary value and commodity replaced community in an increasing obsession with display:

[The] present-day experience of the commodified world [is produced and lived] in terms of spectacle. . . . In societies where modern conditions prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. . . . The spectacle [is] the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world. . . . (32)

The inciting incident in Lahiri’s story occurs accordingly in the labyrinth of Filene’s department store, where Miranda buys “discounted pantyhose in the Basement” and then ascends the elevator into the cosmetics department, a “cramped, confined maze, which was familiar to her in a way the rest of Boston was not.” The famous emporium serves as a kind of abstract of the varied spaces of the city: “She liked negotiating her way past the women planted at every turn, who sprayed cards with perfume and waved them in the air; sometimes she would find a card days afterward, folded in her coat pocket, and the rich aroma, still faintly preserved, would warm her as she waited on cold mornings for the T” (85). Enacting the role of a flaneur enjoying a glamorized commercial landscape where “soaps and creams were displayed like jewels, and eye shadows and powders shimmered like butterflies pinned behind protective glass,” Miranda is attracted by a man whose presence seems inextricable from the visual panoply surrounding him: “The man was tanned, with black hair that was visible on his knuckles. He wore a flamingo pink shirt, a navy blue suit, a camel overcoat with gleaming leather buttons. In order to pay he had taken off pigskin gloves. Crisp bills emerged from a burgundy wallet” (85-86). Designated immediately in her imagination as exotic (“She thought he might be Spanish, or

Lebanese”) and “the first man with a mustache, Miranda decided, she found handsome” (86-87), Dev represents for Miranda the exotic flavor of the city that she so wants to taste; he initiates their conversation by pointing out how “part of your name is Indian” (87), tacitly hailing her into a phantasmagoria of cultural intermixing and an escape from the limits of her previously confining identity. Like the “blusher Number Two” simultaneously urged on “pale as paper” Miranda, Dev may “give her some color” (86-87).

As Miranda leaves Filene’s with her jar of skin cream, Dev rightly senses that she wants him to follow her, and the two commence an affair. The encounter is generated, however, in a temple of commercialism, and here Lahiri exposes the mendacities of commodity culture. In his book *Ways of Seeing* (1977), the essayist John Berger comments on “publicity images” as presupposing the consumer in need of self-transformation and therefore essentially commodity-dependent”; the article of merchandise holds a promise not of pleasure but of happiness; happiness as judged from the outside by others” and therefore patently fraudulent as a means to selfhood (86). As Robert G. Dunn writes, within the increasing relationship between market growth and privatization “self projects and identity formation have been intertwined with a private appropriation of cultural goods, with implications of withdrawal from the structure of public and community life in favor of individualized, impersonal, and often isolated modes of consumption. . . . In a vast, eclectic, and changing landscape of competing objects and images, identity formation can be problematic at best and hazardous at worst” (14-15).

In a similar vein, Jon Stratton in *The Desirable Body: Cultural Fetishism and the Erotics of Culture* (2000) surveys the great department stores of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the Bon Marché, Harrod’s, Selfridge’s, Marshall Field’s, Macy’s, and Filene’s (founded 1852, established as a landmark department

store in 1912), themselves outgrowths of the great national expositions of the same period—to show how the modern culture of shopping as more a leisure activity than a chore of acquisition—Miranda visits Filene’s during her lunch hour—joined a culture of commodity and exhibitionism to produce a fetishism, not simply of commercial goods but also of the female body, the presence of women and the uses of women’s bodies in advertisements reinforcing a link between commodity fetishism and a fetishism for women’s bodies in marketplaces and shopping arenas (Stratton 28). In Lahiri’s story, while Miranda is looking at commodities and “negotiating” her way through a phalanx of saleswomen in an atmosphere intoxicating with fragrance, Dev indulges in eyeing her: both are shoppers caught up in a commodity world, a world that encourages commodity fetishism as much as it produces a fetish for the female body as an object to be consumed. Yet in her intentional facilitation of his inclination towards her, Miranda too is arguably engaged in making a purchase, to be seen, desired, selected, acquired, and taken home as a possession. If, as Pile suggests, building on the theories of Henri Lefebvre, the modern city organizes itself in imitation of the bourgeois family “that is organized through genital sexuality” (215), the relationship evolving between Miranda and Dev suggests the bond between man and woman traditionally foundational to the family structure—yet only as parody. Amid others, including Dev, who are caught up in their families, Miranda can only receive a simulacrum of personal connection by becoming the sex partner of a married man. Dev, after all, does not show any interest in her beyond sexual pleasure cut off from any social concern: he wakes smiling from their intercourse, “full of a contentment she wished she felt herself” (94). Through this simulacrum of erotic freedom, Dev creates the illusion that he is sympathetic towards her, telling her “I know what it’s like to be lonely” (89) but at the same time rendering her an object for

aesthetic assessment: “‘You’re the first,’ he told her, admiring her from the bed. ‘The first woman I’ve known with legs this long’” (89).

### *Commodity culture*

As this remark suggests, the sterility of Miranda’s affair with Dev is confirmed by its grounding in the very commodity culture that fostered it in the first place: to sustain the affair, both spend money. Dev, “the first always to pay for things,” buys Miranda “immense” bouquets of flowers, and their relationship develops amid catalogues of purchased food and drink whose very inventory boasts a global scope: “pulled pork and cornbread in Davis Square,” “sangria at the bar of a Spanish restaurant,” “foie gras and a soup made with champagne and raspberries,” “a baguette and little containers of things Dev liked to eat, like pickled herring, and potato salad, and tortes of pesto and mascarpone cheese” (90, 93). Miranda herself seeks to enhance their encounters by returning to Filene’s, “to buy herself things she thought a mistress should have”—high heels, a satin slip and knee-length silk robe, “sheer stockings with a seam” and “cocktail dress made of a slinky silvery material that matched her eyes” (92)—thus essentially constructing her own new status as an object of desire one step removed from the cash nexus of prostitution.

We see therefore a contradiction in Miranda’s love affair: her encounter with Dev is experiential and yet not. It is an imaginative exercise. In search of filling out her idea of him, she turns to spaces available in the ostensibly carnivalesque landscape of the city: an Indian restaurant where she eats tandoori, “the foreign-language section of a bookstore in Kenmore Square, where she studied the Bengali alphabet in the Teach Yourself series” (96), then “an Indian grocery in Central Square which also rented videos” featuring “women wearing skirts that sat low on their hips and tops that tied like a bandanna between their breasts” (99). The kinds of things she hangs on to in

order to make sense of Dev are experientially neutral even as they are laden with cultural and exotic significations: a half-naked, pelvis-thrusting dancer in an Indian movie, the “spicy” food that the shopkeeper warns her against. The bookstore is yet another space in the city that constitutes its imaginarium, the impression of endless opportunities for encountering, seeing, and meeting all through its huge collection of books, a display of its accumulation of knowledge for sale: yet the space comes across as dead and deadening, an inactive and neutral space where learning another language seems remote if not impossible. Miranda leaves it as ignorant of Dev and his life as before.

But it is not only Miranda’s imagination that is at work here; in fact, Dev himself presents himself in a carefully abstract way. Since, as the narration pointedly mentions, Miranda does not own “an atlas, or any other books with maps in them,” hence revealing again her isolation (she has thought “Bengali” might denote a religion) and lack of a global or historical consciousness, Dev shows her a map printed in the *Economist*, having “brought the magazine specially to her apartment” (84). But by marking his own origin on the blank map of a magazine page, he abstracts it, keeping the space blank, easily demonstrable and palpable yet strangely void. In the same way, he abstracts Miranda and their relationship as part of his weekly jogging routine. The everyday, the mundane, the routinized aspects of their relationship, as in any other human relationship, is completely missing, so that the alibi he invents for his wife to explain away the weekly visit to Miranda, weekend jogging, acts as a metaphor: sex with Miranda is also a physical routine, a regimen, a sexual outlet, and strangely detached from the rest of his life—a place where he can shed the weight of his economic and familial maturity (Miranda notices that he is “beginning to develop a paunch” [94]) and feel like a young man again in her cheap apartment but return home essentially unchanged. We are told that Dev “washes himself when he gets home, first

thing” (89). After showing Miranda the location of Bangladesh on the map in the *Economist*, he throws the magazine in the trash can along with the cigarettes he routinely smokes, making Miranda too expendable and exercising a freedom empty of social content. Retrieving the magazine after his departure, Miranda “studies” the borders of Bangladesh in her bed, “still ruffled with their lovemaking,” imagining and eroticizing the border between her and Dev, despite her direct sexual experience with him—which is why she finds herself poring over a little blank map, over graphs and charts, wanting to find a photograph of Bengal, something more satisfying material than just an abstract map. Much like her sexual encounter, however, the graphs and charts, despite their factual accuracy, are unable to familiarize her with the place in any embodied, experiential, or tangible way. Miranda still feels clueless about Dev and his “place.”

Miranda attempts another exercise in imagining the other through commodities and urban spectacles at the Boston Mapparium, an exhibitionistic site symbolizing internationalism, cosmopolitanism, contact, and other forms of mastery of the globe through “modern” technologies that collapse distance between countries. It is here, in the line that gives the story its title, that Dev tells her “You’re sexy”: “All the countries had seemed close enough to touch, and Dev’s voice had bounced wildly off the glass. From across the bridge, thirty feet away, his words had reached her ears, so near and full of warmth that they’d drifted for days under her skin” (109). Of course Miranda does not realize that looking at the globe of the world while still in the throes of her sexual and ostensibly intercultural experience is not the same as “knowing” the “other” or experiencing it in all its diversity and strangeness. But she earnestly experiences the trip to the Mapparium and simultaneously sensationalizes it, encouraged by its structure and soundscape made of glass. The transparent surfaces generate an abstract imagined “globe” that is visible, legible, and hence knowable.

The structure of the Mapparium thus gives the illusion of connectedness, thus embodying the ethos of the modern metropolis, where people's whispers bounce off walls "seeming to land in Miranda's chest," making her feel intimate with these places (90). She thinks she can imagine the world through the Mapparium, through Boston, through her affair with Dev. The Mapparium stands as one of the symbols of cultural and technical modernity where various places are already discovered, known, and brought home as samples to modern Bostonians, creating a false imaginarium of close connectivity and intimacy between people. But it is all glass, a flat surface, that does not alleviate Miranda's daily loneliness—"how she felt some nights on the T, after seeing a movie on her own" (89)—and detachment from others. Echoing Miranda's sensations about the world's becoming accessible, Dev sees her as accessible and available to him and calls her "sexy." Yet she knows that in fact she does not know, so that she privately wonders "which of the cities in India Dev's wife was in" (91). She thus registers a desire to know India, where his wife, as a real woman, may be at that very moment, as a place, in a more intimate, socially connected, and bodily way, not just as an empty space represented on a map or an architectural feat.

### ***Other women***

Miranda's isolation is signaled from the outset of the story, where we see her and her co-workers in their respective cubicles in a dreary office doing monotonous and unspecialized work, calling potential donors for a public radio station. Neither Miranda nor her closest co-worker, Laxmi, are shown to have any enthusiasm for their work; in fact Laxmi often talks to her friends on the phone instead of performing the duties of her occupation. As urban characters, Miranda and Laxmi are apparently situated close to each other, and yet are apart, behind their cubicles. However, the scene also depicts a more complex picture of this environment, not only as a space for

multicultural encounter—Laxmi is an Indian American who snacks on Hot Mix and whose telephone conversations are “peppered every now and then with an Indian word” (84), but as a potential nest for the generation of a genuine familiarity and care for others. In fact, it is from Laxmi’s cubicle that Miranda catches the drift of the story of another wronged wife, Laxmi’s cousin, whose husband has fallen in love with an Englishwoman met on a plane from Delhi to Montreal (82). This overhearing inevitably creates in Miranda a desire to know the other’s story while simultaneously positioning her outside it. Despite its apparent focus on a sexual encounter with a man, then, the story also presents Miranda’s desire to know other women, something that signals her detachment from them (we hear nothing, we notice, of her own mother, sisters, or other friends) and so from herself. As such, the “other” and the desire for it are always already within and for the “self,” something Miranda will realize more clearly at the end of the story.

Right from the outset, then, Laxmi calls on Miranda to “imagine an English girl, half his age,” and so sympathize with another woman, and one of another race. Symbolically, this is an important task Miranda is being called on to take up, but she fails to rise to it. The narrative is gesturing toward various kinds of imagining that a truly mixed community requires. But Miranda, already in the throes of her now weeks-long affair, maintains an air of self-conscious blasé-ness, perhaps reproducing Laxmi’s own (and by extension other women’s) indifference toward her, perhaps hiding her own guilt at finding comfort at the cost of someone else’s marriage. Later in the story, when confronted with a more distant view of an Indian woman dancing in a film, Miranda self-righteously and dutifully tries to observe the woman and “imagine” that Dev’s wife must be “beautiful too” (99); when given the opportunity to know an Indian woman, Laxmi’s cousin, and sympathize with her, Miranda ignores it, choosing instead to mystify Indian women by observing them only at the distance of a spectator:

for the present, her loyalty is implicitly to Dev, her man. The disrespect toward and mistreatment of the story's women—Miranda, Dev's wife, Laxmi's cousin—is generated not so much by arbitrarily defined “cultural” differences but by a detachment encouraged by patriarchal forms of power relations and the bourgeois family structure.

As if to stress just this point, the status of the Taj Mahal as an international monument and an icon for “love” plays a key role. Seeing Laxmi's photo of herself and her husband posed in front of this Indian landmark, Miranda asks, “What's the Taj Mahal like?” and Laxmi replies, “The most romantic spot on earth' . . . Laxmi's face brightened at the memory. ‘An everlasting monument to love’”—hastily adding that if she ever found that her own husband had “so much as looked at another women I'd change the locks. . . . Wouldn't you?” (92). Even as Laxmi becomes the gateway for imagining the Taj and eternal love, she warns about shutting doors, quite literally. Thus, the story portrays ways in which ideas about multiculturalism as well as “romance’ are illusions in a world driven by the preservation of bourgeois values, ideals, and images, as so much stardust in the mass marketing that has ensnared Miranda. Explicating this point, Steve Pile argues that monuments—and one might even draw parallels to Filene's department store here—make the official history of any space incontestable by closing off alternative readings and drawing people into the presumption that the values represented are universally shared (213). As Yi-Fu Tuan argues, “A truly rooted community may have shrines and monuments, but it is unlikely to have museums and societies for the preservation of the past”(198). The final victory of modernity, Harvey suggests, is not the disappearance of the non-modern world but its artificial preservation and reconstruction (qtd. in Tuan 12).

According to Sennett, “Modern” urban spaces—cities, architecture, roads, and other communication channels—since the eighteenth century have been built on these

premises, promoting not sociability and engagement but the dispassionate detachment of the independent flaneur which is really stagnation: “without significant experiences of self-displacement, social differences gradually harden because interest in the Other withers . . . . Under sway of the pleasure principle, people wish to disengage” (Sennett 371-72). To counter the isolation of modern urban spaces, Sennett proposes a concept of “plain sociability,” a state found not necessarily in an “erotic touch” but in a “sociable touch” (116). Sennett then explicates the idea of “displacement,” a kind of alienation that is suffered by a person when she discards the illusive bromides of culture and acknowledges her loneliness and pain; instead of seeking quick remedies to alleviate this suffering, she chooses to experience it, and is thus enabled to see the suffering of others and accordingly sympathize and empathize with them (349). Such inter-relational ways of experiencing one’s pain leads to subjectivity or agency because it is through actively, emotionally, intellectually, and politically participating in one’s social setting that individuals can achieve an emotionally, intellectually, and politically active society. By contrast, the idea of the “individual” with her privacy and distance from the external world, other people, and public life merely gives the impression of freedom and independence, when it is in fact a kind of social numbness and desensitization. The lack of genuine concern and sympathy underlines the instability of such ideas, of the spaces that monumentalize them, and of the things (photos, restaurants, dresses) that commodify them and lead Miranda on to imagine the “exotic,” “love,” and “romance” rather than encouraging a more genuine sociability.

A “place,” in Sennett’s view, does not imply a comfortable “sanctuary” where people withdraw into themselves afraid to engage in sociality “but a scene where people come alive, where they expose, acknowledge, and address the discordant parts of themselves and one another” (354). As the initial excitement of her relationship

with Dev wanes, Miranda's personal space, her apartment with its "kitchen counter no wider than a breadbox, and scratchy floors that sloped" (88), registers more and more undeniably as what Sennett characterizes as a "dead space": the dresses and lingerie that she has bought have never lived up to their promised fantasy, and in fact lie dead at the back of her closet floor, and the silence of her lonely apartment is sharply contrasted with Dev's house, full of wife, children, and relatives, the noises of life that she hears through the telephone cord when he surreptitiously calls her. As Sennett proposes, however, it is this very "empty, homeless space, a body alone with its pain . . . this . . . *unendurable condition*" (376, italics mine) that exposes one to discomfort and displacement, enables one to begin creating spaces that are meaningfully inclusive of the "other," of cultural and ethnic mixing and co-existence.

"Displacement" is necessarily painful, forcing one to leave one's own comforts, desires, and needs in order to make contact and reach out to another. But that, Sennett argues, is the only way to become social/civic subjects and begin creating truly multicultural communities. And it is this painful displacement that Miranda reaches in the last scene of the story: in her solitariness and condition of "unendurable pain" she is finally ready not only to see and assess the social system of which she is part but also to use her own pain to understand that of another woman. The circumstances that promote this growth are unlikely: Miranda simply agrees to babysit seven-year-old Rohin, the son of Laxmi's unfortunate cousin. Miranda's meeting with Rohin begins in marked similarity to her first exposure to Dev: we see his outfit, "gray herringbone trousers, a red V-necked sweater, and black leather shoes," and his strangely adult face, the dark circles under his eyes making him "look haggard, as if he smoked a great deal and slept very little" (100). In a precocious appropriation of male privilege, Rohin speaks commandingly to her, even ordering her to put on the cocktail dress he has found on the closet floor and informing her blandly that his mother

undresses in front of him so Miranda should as well. And again, Lahiri conspicuously emphasizes the multicultural implications of this seemingly trivial encounter; Rohin, we know already, “already speaks four languages” (84). Like Dev, he attempts to exert mastery over the world by abstracting it, by memorizing the names of national capitals and demanding that Miranda quiz him on them, when he does not know anything about the places themselves.

Despite these potential irritations, however, Miranda’s living space comes to life when Rohin begins to navigate it, exploring and asking questions; he even opens up her private spaces, bathrooms, closets, drawers, and cupboards. It is with the intruding stranger for whom she is caring that Miranda comes into contact with the social world. This is a significant, indeed key moment in the story because the commodity that she has bought at the beginning of the narration now acquires a new meaning and role. The eye gel—bought because, as the Filene’s saleswoman tells her, “All your wrinkles are going to form by twenty-five” (86)—now connects to Rohin’s nonchalant reference to his mother’s tears.

“What’s this for?” he asked, picking up the sample of eye gel she’d gotten the day she met Dev.  
“Puffiness.”  
“What’s puffiness?”  
“Here,” she explained, pointing.  
“After you’ve been crying?”  
“I guess so.” (103)

The eye gel is now connected not with wrinkles or reversing, by some scientific magic, the aging process, but with human suffering and social contact. Rohin’s comments take it away from the isolated cosmetic sphere of the shopping mall, an impersonal space lacking intimacy, and connects Miranda to other women, “women” who were no more than salespersons scattered through Filene’s. He brings to

her attention that puffiness of the eyes is not only caused by “wrinkles” or “aging” that reduce sex appeal (mostly for women in a patriarchal socio-cultural system), but by bodily suffering. The cream, with its newly discovered use-value, makes Miranda aware of another. Moreover, Rohin’s strangely perceptive pronouncement, that “sexy” means “loving someone you don’t know” (107), marks the climax of the story, reprising Miranda’s originary search for the exotic. Rohin’s intrusion has broken through her imaginarium that was tightly shut against the social world, other people, other women, pain and suffering, and she “cries harder,” feeling for the first time the separation between herself and others, herself and Dev. When Rohin is sleeping in her bed, she observes, “that he must be used to listening to a woman crying” (108-109). Her own tears mark her movement, bodily and otherwise, into a state of heightened awareness of the world and the people around her.

Miranda’s recognition that the boy must be used to listening to a woman cry places her squarely in the shoes of his mother—thus permitting her at last to sympathize with, to “know,” the other in ways that dissolve the distractions of exoticism and transcend categories of race or nationality once and for all. This completes her transformation from a naïve young single woman pining for adulthood, erotic and otherwise, into a mother-figure, symbolizing not exactly maternal affection but rather maturity and experience, which never come without living among other people. As Sennett says, the body comes to life when coping with difficulty, for “lived pain witnesses the body moving beyond the power of society to define” (345). Miranda is now far from trying to fit her life within categories of “love,” “family,” “mistress” as abstractly defined by bourgeois patriarchal culture; and thus she can begin to think anew, a necessary condition for finding a “place,” a socially active coexistence, in a genuinely cosmopolitan world.

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## CHAPTER 3

### “YOU COULD GO ANYWHERE”: SPACE, MODERNITY, AND SYMPATHY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI’S “MRS. SEN’S”

Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Mrs. Sen’s,” from her collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), concerns an Indian woman, the wife of a mathematics professor, who is hired to look after an eleven-year-old boy from the time the school bus drops him off until his single mother picks him up at the end of her workday. As is typical of Lahiri’s work, “Mrs. Sen’s” thus thematizes the intercultural encounter, the dialectical engagement with the “other” and, in the words of Bahareh Bahmanpour, the “process of adaptation to the new American cultural space” (46). My contention in this essay, however, is that the story’s cultural spaces derive much of their meaning from its literal, material spaces, its rooms and its roadways, and the ways that these spaces are negotiated by the story’s characters. Space is conspicuously problematized from the outset in that the boy, Eliot, must go to Mrs. Sen’s apartment, an unfamiliar and foreign interior, rather than her coming to his home—an arrangement necessitated by Mrs. Sen’s having no driver’s license. Given these circumstances, Lahiri’s story appears as well to employ the tropes of spatiality and motion to contrast the traditional, old-world wife, housebound and dependent, with the independence of the seemingly “modern,” mobile woman exemplified in Eliot’s mother, who drives every day to “an office fifty miles north” (113). Yet on closer examination these binaries of inside and outside, confinement and freedom, stasis and kinesis, collapse into each other, producing a deft and thoughtful critique of the very modernity that Lahiri’s immigrants are expected to embrace.

### *Space into place*

Lahiri highlights the importance of space first of all through her detailed description of Mrs. Sen's home:

It was a university apartment located on the fringes of the campus. The lobby was tiled with unattractive squares of tan, with a row of mailboxes marked with masking tape or white labels. Inside, intersecting shadows left by a vacuum cleaner were frozen on the surface of a plush pear-colored carpet. Mismatched remnants of other carpets were positioned in front of the sofa and chairs, like individual welcome mats anticipating where a person's feet would contact the floor. White drum-shaped lampshades flanking the sofa were still wrapped in the manufacturer's plastic. The TV and the telephone were covered by pieces of yellow fabric with scalloped edges. There was tea in a tall gray pot, along with mugs, and butter biscuits on a tray. (112)

Ideally, the apartment should be an enclosure of security, a sanctuary from the outside world: as a university-owned accommodation the Sens must rent, however, it is not strictly theirs, and it fails to give Mrs. Sen any sense of belonging or agency. As in most domestic environments, newness and oldness exist together; there are new things in the apartment, just bought and unused, but the carpet with its "remnants" is covered with "shadows" of the other people who have lived there. But instead of generating a familiar feeling of "oldness," the shadows only create a suffocating disconnectedness in the title character: in her mind, Mrs. Sen is still back in India because, as she tells Eliot's mother, "Everything is there" (113). Remembering wedding preparations in India, where women in the neighborhood gathered "in an enormous circle on the roof of our house, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night," Mrs. Sen admits that "it is impossible to fall asleep those nights, listening to their chatter." Yet it was paradoxically the sleeplessness and "chatter" that imparted comfort. Pausing to look at a pine tree framed by the living room window, Mrs. Sen adds, "Here in this place where Mr. Sen brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so

much silence” (115). She frequently fills her surroundings with the recorded voices of her family. Indeed, her tendency to live in her imagined home in India is made quite explicit in the narration as Eliot watches her read a letter from home in her own language to her husband: “Though she stood plainly before him, Eliot had the sense that Mrs. Sen was no longer in the room with the pear-colored carpet. . . . Afterward the apartment was too small to contain her” (122).

In his book *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (1994), Richard Sennett introduces the term “dead spaces,” a condition arising as people in modern urban settings lead isolated, atomistic lives with little or no fellow-feeling: “Lurking in the civic problems of a multi-cultural city is the real difficulty of arousing sympathy for those who are Other.” To make a space “alive,” Sennett explains, requires a coming together of people who have overcome the numbness imposed by modernity to become “sensible to the pain of another person” (346). Mrs. Sen remembers an India that is familial, communal, and marked by the close interaction of bodies as opposed to the blank impersonality she perceives in her current setting: when Eliot can only answer “maybe” to her question of whether anyone would come if she screamed, she counters, “At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and the whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, or help with arrangements” (116). It is no doubt crucial that the “back home” space she recalls, romanticized and glowing, is not remembered as an enclosed or confining space but an open one, the rooftops where women would gather and gossip and help each other cook.

In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), Yi-Fu Tuan explains how an abstract or unfamiliar space becomes a “place” when we gain familiarity with it, occupying it as a part of our bodies and our lives: “An object or

place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is, through all the sense as well as with the active and reflective mind” (18). Isolated in a strange country and now removed to the margins of her busy, professional husband’s life as well, Mrs. Sen must in the interest of survival employ the objects and perform the activities that will transform her “space” into a “place”: which for her means making it resemble the home she used to know—or perhaps only thinks she knows. In the words of Susan Stewart in her book *On Longing* (1984),

By the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction the present is denied and the past takes on the authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can achieve only through narrative . . . . Nostalgia is sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. . . . Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality . . . . Memory, at once impoverished and enriched, presents itself as a device for measurement, the “ruler” of narrative. (23-24)

Accordingly, throughout the story we see Mrs. Sen’s adamant energy in cooking in remembrance of and homage to “back home,” to her memory, to her commitment to recreating and rebuilding that (perhaps imagined) space: wielding a steel knife brought from India, “where apparently there was at least one in every household,” she “took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart; cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices, and shreds. She could peel a potato in seconds” (115-16). The vegetables are her mementoes of times, places, and neighborhoods lost; the knife, the *bonti* (see Mitra), takes on a symbolic function, palpably reconstituting the originary experiences to which Mrs. Sen desires to return. As Stewart comments,

[Collected objects from the past] become the vehicles of a nostalgic myth of contact and presence in which a selected view of the personal past is vaunted over the grey and difficult present. . . . Origin stories are told of a past which is not repeatable but is reportable, in narratives which spiral backwards and inwards into the interior of a life. . . . Souvenirs help to create for us our own life-histories, attaching us in material form to an unreachable past, making experience concrete and so constructible into a personal narrative which makes transparent what is obscure. (244, 251)

As part and parcel of the immigrant experience, no feature of Lahiri's work has attracted more attention than her employment of food: it is notable that in many immigrant stories, the cooking of "indigenous" food gives a homey atmosphere and imparts "placeness" to a new space. But here, instead of producing uplifting or intimate feelings, Mrs. Sen's cooking deepens her sense of isolation; the culinary ritual feels dead, misplaced, and unadaptable. To a considerable extent, the deadness of the space in her present home is generated not simply by the absence of caring others but by her consequent withdrawal into self: Mrs. Sen's not really being present in the apartment but wrapped instead in her melancholia and homesickness is largely what makes her spaces dead. In other words, this is no simplistic story of "indigenous food" evoking romantically nostalgic feelings: instead, nostalgia takes on a tragic character that deadens instead of animating the spaces Mrs. Sen inhabits. The vast amounts of food she prepares are not being consumed by her indifferent husband ("I have a meeting in twenty minutes" [126]), and Eliot's mother is loath to partake of Mrs. Sen's generous offerings of snacks ("a glass of bright pink yogurt with rose syrup, breaded mincemeat with raisins, a bowl of semolina halvah"): "Eliot knew she didn't like the tastes; she'd told him so once in the car" (118). Here in America, Mrs. Sen's cooking fails to bring people together, trapping her in an ineffectual charade.

Despite its buzzing domesticity, then, her apartment remains a dead space; when she spreads out newspapers over the carpet to do her chopping, she is literally

barricaded in the midst of the debris she creates. The blade she uses is compared in Eliot's imagination to "a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas" (114), a telling metaphor: Mrs. Sen is still on the ship and on the sea, she is always in the space between, neither here nor there. As she slices chicken, she is fully absorbed in the physical labor and pleasure of performing the task, and the scene is rendered even more visceral because it is meat, skin, and fat that she is cutting: "the bones cracked apart over the blade, her golden bangles jostled, her forearms glowed, and she exhaled audibly through her nose. At one point she paused, gripping the chicken with both hands, and stared out the window." Again, as when she stared at the pine tree outside, she gazes out the window, transported to her imagined world, the memory of her past, her home, where current time has disappeared except for the "fat and sinew [that] clung to her fingers" (116). She is not really in the present. Nor is she in the past. She is aware of her responsibility, because even from the depths of her engrossment "she kept an eye on the blade" (114); but this serves to show that the act of cutting and preparing food is so much part of her body that she becomes one with it. The point here is not so much that she is living in an imaginarium, but rather that she is enacting and performing a placeness, a homeness, a habit, in order to re-member and re-live it.

At the same time Mrs. Sen is also clearly aware of the deadness of her space: her dreams of a married life in the United States are lying dead at the back of drawers in the form of the many saris "of every imaginable texture and shade" she has never had a chance to wear since her migration. Pulling them out, she asks Eliot in anguish and anger, "When have I ever worn this one? And this? And this?" (125). Stored away in obscurity, immersed in the smell of mothballs, they reek not of preservation but of death. As Stewart writes, "The peculiar quality of objects makes it possible for us to create an active relationship with the distant or relatively distant past, which has otherwise no intrinsic relationship to us, and in so doing to achieve a sense of

community and psychic well-being” (250). Stewart also examines the role that objects play in the experience of loss:

[C]ollected material which comes from the personal past is capable of expressing and embodying profound meaning and deep feelings. After an emotional catastrophe, it is always the sight of a scarf which the absent lover used to wear which enables us to enter more profoundly into our sense of loss, showing ourselves to ourselves in ways which nothing else can do. Its characteristics are the painful pleasure and the pleasurable pain of all aspects of love, and here of the self-love which contemplates a personal history and draws other people and places into it. (243-44)

Through the saris relegated to the oubliettes of her domestic interior, Mrs. Sen sees, as we do, that in America suburban life is no romance. Confiding in Eliot, she says of her family in India, “They think I live the life of a queen . . . . They think I press a button and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace” (125). Her knowledge that her family’s fantasies have no connection with her reality reflects her own disappointments and makes her regret her failure and loneliness in the new country. None of the life she imagined has come true, and not so much because there are no magic machines but because there are no companions for her, no “home,” but just empty space. Even her husband, absorbed in his job (“Please don’t waste time,” he admonishes as she shops [126]), is rarely a source of warmth, familiarity, or comfort.

### ***Learning to drive***

The immediately obvious difference between Eliot’s mother and Mrs. Sen is that one drives and the other doesn’t. Eliot’s mother’s life is anchored in her car: not only does she drive a long distance to work, but her only significant conversations with Eliot seem to take place in her car (118), and on Labor Day she vacuums the car, while the only holiday activity Eliot can think to suggest is going to the car wash

(116). Driving seems “so simple,” Eliot reflects, “when he sat beside his mother, gliding in the evenings back to the beach house” (120-21). By contrast, the fact that Mrs. Sen cannot handle a car (“Yes, I am learning . . . but I am a slow student” [113]) is stressed at key moments in the plot: at the beginning, when Eliot’s mother first interviews her; when she urgently wants to visit a seaside fish market; and then in the concluding sequence when she runs her car off the road. Throughout the story, even her relationship with her husband turns more and more on the issue of her gaining a license: “How do you expect to pass the test if you refuse to drive on a road with other cars,” he demands, and from time to time even tricks her into taking the wheel (130). The trope of mobility in space, quite literally enabled by a car on a spacious American road, is therefore central to the story: whether it is expressed meekly (“Not today. Another day” [126]) or in anger (“I hate it. I hate driving. I won’t go on” [131]), Mrs. Sen’s unwillingness to drive is obviously a metaphor for her inability to negotiate the spaces, both literal and cultural, of her new environment.

The promise given by modern roads, easily navigable on foot or by various conveyances and technologies, is discussed at length by Sennett: in the book already cited, he examines the way Enlightenment thinkers after the French Revolution conceived the notion of openness, inclusiveness, and public involvement in urban planning, emphasizing the role of free movement, both for travel and transportation, via wide and geometrically plotted streets. Such a conception of open space as rationally designed and free of obstacles, Sennett argues, mapped contemporary ideas of political transparency, freedom from corruption at all social levels, and the unhindered social and political participation of citizens. By hindering a natural comingling and the interaction of bodies, however, these open spaces ultimately served only to pull people apart, turning them into “comfortable” individuals, disengaged and withdrawn from one another. Sennett’s insights merit quoting at length:

Having lost contact with each other, this atomization led to inaction instead of organized [political] jacquardation. . . . Individual bodies moving through urban space gradually became detached from the space in which they moved, and from the people the spaces contained. . . . As space became devalued through motion, individuals gradually lost a sense of sharing a fate with the other. . . . Nationalist ideologies assert that people share a fate . . . the city however has falsified these claims/assertions. Urban development using the technologies of motion, of public health and private comfort, the workings of the market, the planning of the streets, parks, and squares to resist the demands of crowds and privilege the claims of individuals. These individuals feel strangers to each other's destiny. . . . In withdrawing from the common life, the individual would lose life. (323, 369)

The open spaces, in other words, turned into dead ones. “Mass movement on a single-function street,” Sennett writes, “was the necessary first step in privileging individuals pursuing their own concerns in a crowd. . . . Comfort is a condition we associate with rest and passivity. The technology of the nineteenth century gradually made movement into such a passive bodily experience. The more comfortable the moving body became, the more it withdrew socially, traveling alone and silent. Comfort becomes synonymous with individual comfort”—gradually disabling the ability to feel another's pain (299, 308).

The ease and independence incorporated into modern civilization by the invention of the automobile contributed even more radically to the “comfortable” social isolation Sennett decries, the “new geographies” made possible by the experience of speed.

People travel today at speeds our forebears could not at all conceive. The technologies of motion—from automobiles to continuous, poured concrete highways—made it possible for human settlements to extend beyond tight-packed centers out into peripheral space. . . . we now measure urban spaces in terms of how easy it is to drive through them, to get out of them. The look of urban space enslaved to the powers of

motion is necessarily neutral: the driver can drive safely only with a minimum of idiosyncratic distractions . . . sheer velocity makes it hard to focus one's attention on the passing scene. . . . [A]s road become straightened and regularized, the voyager need account less and less for the people and buildings in a street in order to move . . . . The traveler, like the television viewer, experiences the world in narcotic tones; the body moves passively, desensitized in space, to destinations set in a fragmented, discontinuous urban geography. (17-18)

In tacit agreement with this premise, Mrs. Sen constantly envisions car travel as inimical to the kind of community she misses. "You need to wait until no one's coming," Eliot warns as Mrs. Sen merges into traffic, to which she retorts, "Why will not anybody slow down?" Whereas Eliot in his mother's car can dismiss other cars as "part of the scenery," Mrs. Sen retains a perception of living operators behind the wheel—operators nevertheless comfortable in their faceless anonymity. "Everyone, this people, too much in their world," she complains as the cars streak by (120-21). In adulthood, she predicts mournfully, even Eliot's resolve to visit his aged mother in her nursing home will inevitably be thwarted by the responsibilities incumbent upon him as a driver: "You will have a wife, and children of your own, and they will want to be driven to different places at the same time" (131). Her husband insists, she tells Eliot, that "once I receive my license, everything will improve"—to which Eliot responds, "You could go places. . . . You could go anywhere." "Could I drive all the way to Calcutta?" asks Mrs. Sen. "How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?" (119). While Eliot echoes his sociocultural understanding of driving as total freedom—"you could go anywhere"—Mrs. Sen sees it as freeing only when it leads to a place, a home.

In the course of the action, however, it is this very desire to call up the territories that were home to her that necessitates her taking to the road. Along with messages from her family, we are told, "the other thing that made Mrs. Sen happy was fish from the seaside." In Calcutta, she explains to Eliot. "people ate fish first thing in

the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky. They ate the tail, the eggs, even the head.” Among Mrs. Sen’s chief frustrations in her present circumstances is the difficulty of purchasing fresh fish: at the supermarket, she complains, “I can feed a cat thirty-two dinners from one of thirty-two tins, but I can never find a single fish I like, not a single.” But whereas in Calcutta an outdoor fish market was easily accessible—“All you have to do is leave the house and walk a bit, and you are there”—her current circumstances require a car to get to the “market by the beach” that she patronizes sporadically in the summer (123). The fish stands in not only for her memory of “Calcutta,” but as an edible embodiment of the sea, that which is between her “home” and this new place and, as noted earlier, where she always seems to dwell. Accompanied by Eliot, she makes the experiment of a shopping trip by bus, returning with a purchase from the fish market. But the excursion, potentially a reaffirmation of the community of travel, unravels instead into a verification of her alienation: an elderly rider, one of only a few on the bus, “kept watching them, her eyes shifting from Mrs. Sen to Eliot to the blood-lined bag between their feet.” “The smell seems to be bothering the other passengers,” the driver tells them. “Kid, maybe you should open a window or something” (133). The driver and the complaining passengers are situated as “comfortable,” according to Sennett’s definition, undisturbed or moved by the others around them; they actually curb Mrs. Sen’s freedom instead of enhancing it.

In the climax of the story, then, Mrs. Sen aggressively resolves to make her way to her destination in their car, with Eliot by her side. Predictably, an accident ensues. “After about a mile Mrs. Sen took a left before she should have, and though the oncoming car managed to swerve out of her way, she was so startled by the horn that she lost control of the car and hit a telephone pole on the opposite corner” (134). In the crash, space has collapsed and failed, dead now because it has defeated her; she

was finally unable to negotiate it, to drive through it. Though “the damage was slight,” the incident spells the end of Mrs. Sen’s willingness to take to the road; returning home, she throws “the eggplant pieces and the newspapers into the garbage pail,” leaving Eliot with only crackers and peanut butter, and shuts herself into her bedroom to cry. Her husband explains to Eliot’s mother what has happened, gives her a reimbursement check, and terminates the arrangement—leaving Eliot’s mother, as she confides to him, “relieved” (134-35).

The car accident is symbolic of Mrs. Sen’s sincere but clumsy attempt to make her way through the wall of an alien encounter, but an attempt which comes to an embarrassing end. Even its violence is muted, so that it does not attract attention or sympathy from onlookers; the blood-like vermillion the policemen notice on her scalp is not an injury, just a marker of her marriage. And perhaps Lahiri’s text does compare her migration and her marriage, her breaking away from family and home, as an open wound, and as such one stands for the other.

### *Spaces and women*

Mrs. Sen’s memories of women in India suggest her desire to be again with other women and thus find a place in the social fabric of her adopted country—a desire she tentatively acts upon by offering food to Eliot’s mother. For Mrs. Sen, as we have seen, food is not some inert material, it is meant to enact social mediation: but with Eliot’s mother’s implicit refusal, the food fails to perform its task, and it is thus Eliot’s mother who most directly blocks Mrs. Sen’s social maneuvers. Their engagement with food serves directly to set the two women apart: where Mrs. Sen carries on prodigious culinary endeavors, Eliot’s mother “didn’t eat lunch at work, because the first thing she did when they were back at the beach house was to pour herself a glass of wine and eat bread and cheese, sometimes so much that she wasn’t

hungry for the pizza they normally ordered for dinner. She sat at the table as he ate, drinking more wine and asking how his day was, but eventually she went to the deck to smoke a cigarette, leaving Eliot to wrap up the leftovers” (118). In telling contrast to Mrs. Sen, for whom fish epitomizes nostalgia and wellbeing, Eliot’s mother has broiled fish only once, a few months earlier with a man who later “slept in her bedroom” but whom Eliot never saw again (123-24).

Initially, then, the story’s two women—Mrs. Sen in her saris and the married woman’s *sindoor* parting her hair, Eliot’s divorced mother with her shorts and rope-soled sandals—seem to stand in obvious opposition to each other. But if the text thus positions Mrs. Sen and her domesticity as potentially active agents, reaching out to people who are strangers to her but in gestures that nevertheless fail, it simultaneously positions Eliot’s mother’s supposed professionalism as equally insular, disconnected, and creating dead spaces of its own: Mrs. Sen’s apartment, “warm, sometimes too warm,” contrasting with the “tiny beach house” shared by Eliot and his mother, which is cold and lacking in comfort: they “had to bring a portable heater along whenever they moved from one room to another, and to seal the windows with plastic sheets and a hair-drier” (114). Eliot’s house is cold figuratively as well, devoid of any evidence of social or creative engagement: she and Eliot are pointedly not invited to a Labor Day party going on audibly at another house on the beach. If Mrs. Sen clings to her ritualized cooking, Eliot’s mother too clings to her isolation in the name of “professionalism” and “privacy” and holds to a daily schedule that maintains a façade of ritualized organization (she interviews Mrs. Sen with a steno pad and on Labor Day balances her checkbook), which helps her present herself as a guiltlessly independent, competent, “modern” woman: “guiltless” because it is her self-protecting and ritualistic pattern of organization and independence that defends her from responding to Mrs. Sen’s explicit overtures of friendship. Although it is easy, therefore, to cast

Mrs. Sen as a failure, a passive and pathetic victim of third-world patriarchy who is barred by tradition from action in the public sphere, she has nevertheless asserted her will through her decision to drive to the fish market in the first place, an action in defiance to her husband's injunction "No more fish for a while. Cook the chicken in the freezer" (124): and her reluctance to drive may be seen as a form of resistance to the mobile but empty freedom embodied in Eliot's mother. Perhaps, after all, Mrs. Sen has resisted driving not only because it would mean letting go of her past, her nostalgia, but because, unlike Eliot, she does not see the technologies of mobility defining the modern woman as a way to "go anywhere" but as a road to an independence that proves ultimately sterile. In this analysis, Mrs. Sen does not figure as a naïve woman with "old" or "traditional" ideas of maintaining a household, but as a secret rebel who feels and regrets the deep alienation and lack of sociopolitical sociality in the avowed "freedom" of the society in which she finds herself.

In *The Gender of Modernity* (1995), Rita Felski has examined the various representations of women and femininity in the modern era and in modernist feminist movements that oppose "traditional," "feminine" values of care and domesticity and align the masculine attainments of the professional, public woman with the "modern" and "progressive":

The modern individual is assumed to be an autonomous male free of familial and communal ties. . . . The identification of modernity with masculinity is not, of course, simply an invention of the contemporary theorist. Many of the key symbols of the modern in the nineteenth century—the public sphere, the man of the crowd, the stranger, the dandy, the flâneur—were indeed explicitly gendered. There could, for example, be no direct female equivalent of the flâneur, given that any woman who loitered in the streets of the nineteenth-century metropolis was likely to be taken for a prostitute. . . . Thus a recurring identification of the modern with the public sphere was largely responsible to the belief that women were situated outside processes of

history and social change. . . . Seen to be less specialized and differentiated than man, located within the household and an intimate web of family relations, more closely linked to nature through her reproductive capacity, woman embodied a sphere of temporal authenticity seemingly untouched by the alienation and fragmentation of modern life. (2, 16)

Although Felski's concern is with the literature of Romanticism, her analysis may also be brought to bear on the predicament of Lahiri's Mrs. Sen:

One of the most striking—and for me unexpected—results of this rereading of the modern through the figure of woman has been the new prominence and visibility of cultural expressions of yearning, dissatisfaction, and restlessness . . . . Rather than reiterating a confident belief in the superiority of modern Western society, most of the texts I have examined rely on mechanisms of temporal or spatial displacement to locate meaning elsewhere, whether in an edenic past, a projected future, or a zone of cultural otherness. Such articulations of longing are of course not necessarily oppositional—on the contrary, I have tried to show how they are tied up in complicated ways with the logics of consumerism and the politics of colonialism as well as with struggles for social change. Nevertheless, they serve to underscore the fundamental ambivalences entangled with the idea of the modern. . . . The figure of woman and the idea of the feminine have emerged as a key zone for the expression of such ambivalences by both men and women. (210)

It is fruitful to compare Mrs. Sen to Miranda in Lahiri's better-known story "Sexy" in order to highlight both stories' investigation of what is really means to be mobile and free. Mrs. Sen, ostensibly a reserved, shy, and literally immobile woman, acts with surprising force in disobeying her husband in order to reach an approximation of her "home," her comfort "place"; Miranda only gradually strays from Dev, the man who is cajoling her to continue their secret meetings, in an unpremeditated way that precludes any overt decision-making proves about leaving him, let alone rebelling in an overt way. "Sexy" thus imagines its female protagonist, a

sexually aware and receptive American woman, mobile in that she enjoys the freedom of movement afforded her by the city, as uncomfortable with self-assertion.

Comparing Mrs. Sen with Miranda thus helps us see how Mrs. Sen is depicted as more willful than she, or even than Eliot's mother. By focusing on the spaces where people interact to perform "freedom," the text thus lays open to scrutiny easy dichotomies between modern professional woman and traditional, domestic wife.

### ***Displacement***

In the course of Lahiri's story, Mrs. Sen's efforts to traverse the distances between herself and others have been rebuffed: in Eliot's mother's rejection of her food and in the bus ride, where a potential incitement for sociality is immediately reprimanded. "Arousing sympathy for those who are "Other," Sennett writes, "can only occur by understanding why bodily pain"—not simply physical discomfort, but the pain experienced within the individual body—"requires a place where it can be acknowledged. . . . Such a pain has a trajectory in human experience. It disorients and makes incomplete the self, defeats the desire for coherence; the body accepting pain is ready to become a civic body, sensible to the pain of another person" (376). To make a space "alive," in other words, requires a coming together of people not simply by reason of common origin but because they have overcome the isolating numbness imposed by modernity and become "sensible to the pain of another person," what Sennett defines as a "painful displacement": "the painful movement that does not merely perform mobility but embodies a social and political shift and the embrace of difference, the Other, in thought and corporeal existence" (346). It is only in such a displacement, not in "free" movement or mobility, that a "place" is built that allows difference and strangeness to co-exist and a greater and politically active sociality to develop.

Viewed from the perspective of Sennett's concept, "Mrs. Sen" appears at first more hopeful than "Sexy," where seven-year-old Rohin simply echoes the adult male's penchant, exemplified by Dev, for seeing the world through maps and developing a desire to master and own the globe along with and as female bodies; he sleeps through Miranda's uncontrollable weeping because, she guesses, "he was used to it now, the sound of a woman crying" (109). In contrast, Mrs. Sen's sadness and loneliness penetrate Eliot. Similarly lonely and on the margins of his mother's life, he has witnessed and sympathized secretly with his caregiver, and when he hears her crying in the bathroom, the space becomes alive and finally achieves the status of a place. We have already seen his respectful consideration of Mrs. Sen in her apartment as he politely removes his shoes for her, watches her cook, retrieves her aerograms from the mailbox, even coaches her attempt to drive ("You have to turn and speed up fast" [120]); it is Eliot who can ask forthrightly, "Mrs. Sen, what's wrong?" (116). He senses that she wants his bodily proximity in the car with her because she is afraid: "when he sat with Mrs. Sen, under an autumn sun that glowed with pale warmth through the trees," he sees that cars among which his mother moves with ease make Mrs. Sen's "knuckles pale, and her English falter" (121). Different in age, different in culture, Eliot and Mrs. Sen thus achieve a sympathy derived from their common loneliness.

In another sense, however, "Mrs. Sen" ends on a more somber note than "Sexy." As Miranda at the end of "Sexy" is left alone, gazing at the "giant pillars" of the Christian Science Center in Boston "and at the clear-blue sky spread over the city" (110), Mrs. Sen is likewise left alone, shut up to cry after the crushing but silent defeat of the accident: and she can perhaps begin to see herself as having been finally displaced, as moved to a new place where there is no escape, not even through nostalgia. And when Mrs. Sen speaks of home Eliot thinks of his own home, just five

miles away, and its bleak emptiness; it has never even occurred to him to miss his mother during the long hours away from her, leading Mrs. Sen to pronounce, “You already taste the way things must be” (123). After feeling Mrs. Sen’s loneliness, Eliot feels his own, trapped in a house that is locked: and even though he has the key, symbolizing freedom of movement, of coming and going at will, of modern masculinity and self-regulation, he is not really at “home” or “free.” Perhaps it is to highlight their shared grief and alienation that we are never given Mrs. Sen’s first name or Eliot’s last name: their identities, pasts, and memories are forever destabilized, lost, and fragmented. Mrs. Sen has been abandoned in a new country, and Eliot’s past, his absent father, his “home,” are coldly nebulous in what ought to be his own country. At the end of the story we see him as alienated and lonely in his cold, gray house overlooking the gray waters of the sea.

“Mrs. Sen” seems to be asking whether true co-existence and freedom, both social and political, are possible in a space that refuses to become a place that remains essentially a still life in motion. In Mrs. Sen’s sense of alienation, loneliness, yearning, and exclusion, the fragmentariness of modernity is shown to be produced within the home as it affects the female domain and domesticity: the story skillfully depicts how the private sphere, the spaces to which Mrs. Sen is relegated by custom and inclination, is intimately tied to the public sphere, to which her husband and Eliot’s mother are ostensibly aligned. Likewise, mobility, and its concomitant promise of connecting and facilitating movement between disparate places, routes, and people, is revealed as part of the alienation produced by modernity: that is, even though Mr. Sen and Eliot’s mother can drive and are the “independent” individuals, the emblems of modernity, they too figure in Mrs. Sen’s, and indeed their own, alienation and disconnection from the rest of society. Thus, the story breaks down the easy binaries between the domestic and public, traditional and modern: the idea of the modern,

“progressive” American woman with the mobility that stands for her increase social and political power is as much a fiction as Mrs. Sen’s imagined “back home” in India. Unless, of course, our constructed boundaries between “private” and “public” spaces are blurred—to permit human care and concern to reach beyond superficial and fleeting gestures to an envisioned social system where these boundaries, these markers intended to keep human beings in their assigned spaces, will cease finally to exist.

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## CHAPTER 4

### WHAT MAKES THIS HOUSE BLESSED? SPACE, COLLECTION, AND IDENTITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "THIS BLESSED HOUSE"

In an emotionally fraught scene involving both protagonists in Jhumpa Lahiri's "This Blessed House" (1999), Twinkle cries to her husband, Sanjeev, "This is our house. We own it together. The statue is part of our property" (149). She utters these words as she stands up in the bathtub, soapy water and facial mask dripping off her, in protest against Sanjeev's threat to "throw away" the kitschy statue of the Virgin Mary found behind a forsythia bush in the front yard of their new home. Watching, Sanjeev realizes that some of the moisture on her face is in fact her tears.

The bathtub scene conveys the intensity of Twinkle's growing engagement with the Christian kitsch she has turned up in the various nooks and crannies of their house and its grounds (she has also found a 3-D postcard of St. Francis, a porcelain effigy of Christ and a "weeping Jesus" poster, a dishtowel imprinted with the Ten Commandments, a Nativity snow globe, and several other religious artifacts). As Yi-Fu Tuan explains in his classic study *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), a "space" becomes a "place" when we gain familiarity with it, occupying it as part of our bodily experience: in Lahiri's story, similarly, both Twinkle and Sanjeev are struggling to transform their "space" into a "place" by coming to terms with their home and its contents. Spatially and emotionally, the house stands for an unknown territory, for not only is the house new but the marriage, the coming together of two bodies to live in close proximity.

But the pointedly Christian associations of Twinkle's finds remind us that this couple—like most of Lahiri's characters, transplanted Indians—must feel their way as

well in a country that remains to some extent alien to them. In the bathtub scene, in fact, the visual juxtaposition of Twinkle's upright nakedness with the free-standing image of the Virgin Mary invites our consideration of the statue's potentially complex significance for Sanjeev and Twinkle as ethnic outsiders. Indeed, Twinkle's placement of the statue in the yard invokes already the long history that enfolds this couple's past along deep time, the dreams of a passage to India and the relentless colonization of the subcontinent. The zone of entry to their house, the front yard, may be taken as, in Victor Turner's term, a liminal space, a border region, and in her book *Imperial Leather* (1995) Anne McClintock stresses the establishment of "ritually feminized borders and boundaries" for European exploration:

Sailors bound wooden female figures on their ships' prows and baptized their ships—as exemplary threshold objects—with female names. Cartographers filled the blank seas of their maps with mermaids and sirens. Explorers called unknown lands "virgin" territory. . . . Women served as the boundary markers of imperialism, the ambiguous mediators. . . . A potent fetish helping colonials negotiate the perils of margins and thresholds in a world of terrifying ambiguities. (28)

In Lahiri's story too, and in this scene in particular, the liminal space is furnished with an archetypal female figure, and one that even recalls the *Santa Maria* that was Columbus's flagship. The scene is in fact the kind of moment Marc Augé invokes in *Non-Places* (1994), "an occasion on which an individual can feel his own history intersecting History, can imagine that the two are somehow connected. The individual's demands and disappointments are linked to the strengthening of this feeling" (30).

As Twinkle and Sanjeev must constantly negotiate their relationship with each other, then, they are simultaneously negotiating their place in the American space, attempting to change their status as objects, as stereotypical Indians and foreigners, to

that of subjects of their own making and regard; their ontological project is to be for their social group what they wish to be for themselves, rather than being for themselves what the group always already knows them to be. This is how stereotype operates: it deprives the subject of any inhabitable self that is not determined by others. The story charts Twinkle and Sanjeev's "progress" toward the self-made image as modern, middle-class, suburban "Americans" fully assimilated into their dominant Caucasian, Christian society.

### ***Keeping house***

The conspicuously Christian character of the objects forces recognition that the couple's contentions are not simply with each other but with their adopted culture: the geography of the house is therefore imbricated in their navigation of their sociocultural identities as immigrants or children of immigrants. The house was meant to mark a new start for Twinkle and Sanjeev, their marriage, the beginning of their lives together: but its Christian leftovers proclaim that it was once occupied by other people, strangers, and therefore does not offer a clean start, free from traces of the past. Already socialized within a predominantly white and Christian neighborhood and history ("Every other person in the neighborhood has a statue of Mary on the lawn," as Twinkle reminds Sanjeev [146]), the new house underscores the fictiveness of the American myth, of America as a "new" place to its immigrants, guaranteeing them their individuality and freedom, specifically through property ownership. Although both Twinkle and Sanjeev seem well grounded in American culture—he in line for the vice presidency of his firm in Hartford, she gaining an advanced degree from Stanford—Lahiri makes clear that both trail telltale remnants of their Indian origins: Sanjeev's parents are "still in Calcutta," and he and Twinkle (she "from a suitably high caste" [148]), were married in India and honeymooned in Jaipur.

Both Sanjeev and Twinkle, likewise, betray signs of ambivalence toward their nonwestern past: Sanjeev is methodically learning western musical history (“sending away for classical cds by mail, working his way through the major composers that the catalogue recommended” [148]) and has been tepid toward the Indian friends with whom he would eat “spiced chickpeas and shrimp cutlets” (145) before his marriage, Twinkle is studying an Irish poet and watches German films, and the two share a “dislike for the sitar” but a fondness for the novels of P. G. Wodehouse (143). Wodehouse is part of India’s colonial history in that his novels gained popularity in the decades before Independence among the more westernized, “progressive” Indians, those trained in English; the popularity of Wodehouse persists in India, along with that of contemporaries such as Somerset Maugham and Jeffrey Archer. It is therefore not only on the basis of their cheapness that Sanjeev disparages Twinkle’s preservation of the Christian objects, we gather, but because they produce anxiety about his own conflicting and competing identities as a man of Indian origin—he regrets, for example, his round cheeks and long eyelashes because they “detracted, he feared, from what he hoped was a distinguished profile” and wishes “that he were just one inch taller” (140)—but also as one who aspires to membership in a privileged class of modernized and secular Americans. Where Sanjeev’s attempts at assimilation into American society are relatively straightforward, however, Twinkle’s are complex: she is not just interested in making her space her own, but is also actively involved in gaining the position of a maker and custodian of American culture in defiance of her South Asian and possibly “foreign,” immigrant background. The story’s ambiguity and silence on the question of Twinkle’s birthplace is reflective, I argue, of its plot to complicate her relationship to the dominant American culture she currently inhabits; she is not presented as one thing or the other, as “American” or “Indian,” but rather as a subject actively engaged in marking and claiming for herself the position of an

“insider.” Thus this story shows, in its examination of the various negotiations that the couple engages in between themselves and with those around them, how a new marriage and settling into a new house is metaphorical of the processes of assimilation into a new space, society, and culture.

From the outset, Lahiri positions Twinkle and Sanjeev as opposite personalities whose divergent attitudes toward the discovered objects, and hence toward the house, incite conflict in a marriage still only a few months old. Sanjeev, from whose point of view the story unfolds, is a highly organized and pragmatic professional with an engineering degree from MIT and a high-salary job at a company in Connecticut. Meticulous to a fault (at one point we find him methodically alphabetizing his row of textbooks [137]), it is usually he who does the cleaning, purifying the house of its dust and dirt just as in his undergraduate days he would habitually make clean copies from the rough notes of his homework (138); he is constantly spotting dust and wiping it away, marking parts of the wall that need to be retouched with paint, or exerting his authority by tagging and removing—as when he tells Twinkle to “check the expiration” on the bottle of vinegar found in the kitchen (136) or replaces the switch plates decorated with scenes from the Bible (141-42). In the first half of the story he almost mathematically attempts to analyze his relationship with Twinkle, applying his ingrained problem-solving techniques to the question of whether or not his feeling for her is “love”; in seeming disinterestedness he compares her with three previous candidates, the Indian women his mother recommended, “who could sing and sew and season lentils without consulting a cookbook” (146) and whose photographs he has rank-ordered according to culturally imbibed notions of what constitutes a good wife.

Twinkle, on the other hand, is careless (she drops cigarette ashes on the floor and sometimes leaves her underwear at the foot of the bed [140, 142]), impulsive (she once “insisted that they dance a tango on the sidewalk in front of strangers”[140]),

apparently neglectful of her domestic duties, and “not terribly ambitious in the kitchen” (143); even though she is earning an MA, she now spends her days comfortably around the house, not doing much, and can on occasion be found “inexplicably in bed” (141) during the day, much to Sanjeev’s irritation. While Twinkle cheerfully accommodates the Christian articles, putting them back on display on the mantel and installing them in various parts of the house, Sanjeev is predictably repulsed by their cheapness: “We should call the Realtor. Tell him there’s all this nonsense left behind” (138). Obviously Sanjeev is driven to code objects as good or bad, valuable or worthless, acceptable or trash. In contrast, similarly, to Twinkle’s apparently blithe indifference to the opinions of others (“Why does it matter to you so much what people think?” she demands [147]), he is moreover highly aware of sociocultural status and the impression his house is likely to make: he displays a desire for a “place,” a home, where the problems of finding, making, and building are hidden or suppressed (kept backstage) in favor of a neat configuration of home (onstage) to be presented for the world’s approval. “All the neighbors will see,” he worries about the statue of Mary on the lawn, “they’ll think we’re insane” (146).

At first glance, then, the easy-going Twinkle seems far less aggressively territorial or status-conscious. But her attachment to the things she has found, and through them to the house, indicates that she is not after all as casually indifferent to her domestic space as a superficial reading might suggest: indeed, she has fetishized her discoveries as agentic armaments in an unacknowledged but evident power struggle, a campaign to mark the house’s territory as hers by valuing and re-collecting the very objects that Sanjeev deplors. According to Susan Pearce in her book *On Collecting* (1999), the collector’s constant penchant for acquisition is fueled by a desire to enlarge his or her collection because each new piece contains and imparts an experience of having found something “new” and “different.” This “state of

excitement which finding, hoping to find, an important piece,” Pearce writes, “arouses in them the pleasure of this sensation, the sense of being lifted out of oneself into a sharper, brighter, more interesting world of feeling, the central experience for many collectors, and a large part of the reason why they collect at all” (221): as Twinkle twice exclaims, “Each day is like a treasure hunt!” (141, 153). But Pearce also shows that through the power play involved in the process of acquisition and display, collections end up controlling space; the word “hunting” that most collectors use for their activity retains all the historical associations of blood sport with its concomitant prestige and pleasure, as well as “ideas of cunning, stealth, patience, prowess, competition, and ultimate success . . . collecting is an important way in which we can assert our impulses toward dominance and control. . . . The choice of collecting area and of selection within that area belongs to the collector alone, who is king of all he surveys” (195-96).

Pearce uses the term “magic,” in common parlance the designation for what is not easily explicable: “Objects embody human purposes and experiences,” she notes, “and they invite us to act towards them in ways which may give us what we desire”—because, “like all magic, objects can bring about a transformation.” This is magic, Pearce writes, “because it is essentially illusory” (237). Twinkle’s drive to salvage and preserve her discoveries does indeed seem motivated by some valence of the supernatural, as when she laughingly says, apropos of a bottle of vinegar found in a cupboard above the stove, “Face it. This house is blessed” (144). Her fetishizing of her Christian paraphernalia may brand her again as whimsical, even irrational, in contrast to Sanjeev: it is Twinkle who “cross[es] her fingers before any remotely unpredictable event (142), and she insists that “it would be bad luck” not to leave the statue of Mary in the yard (146). In *The Body and the City* (1996), however, Steve Pile exposes the superficiality of the modern individual’s idea of himself as wholly “rational” and

“reasonable,” separate from whatever is irrational, superstitious, or magical; Pile emphasizes that the historical remnants of believing through magic are indeed integral to the social formation of so-called “modern” societies, so much so that “a sense of a solid shared world (historically superstitious) and a stable sense of ourselves within that world is essential for our psychic and physical survival.” Rational and irrational, real and fantastical, the conscious and the unconscious, the sane and insane all converge and construct an individual, so that his or her mental image of surrounding space is controlled by historical forces as well as by the space itself (Pile 12-13); Sanjeev cannot grasp the appeal of the Christian kitsch for a woman of Hindu background like Twinkle—“We’re not Christian” (137)— and is more disturbed because they too are supposedly educated, enlightened people, free from the benighted superstitions that such icons represent. But however free from superstition he thinks he is, no matter how much he disregards their power and significance, he is still afraid of being confused for a Christian, which discloses his residual belief in the potency of “nonsense” things. If the Christian objects in the house were really “nonsense,” they would not threaten or irritate him. But they do.

Thus a closer look works to undo the supposed polarity in this story between rational and irrational, or the “magic” of which Pearce and Pile speak. Twinkle’s seemingly irrational impulse to collect may operate simply as an alternate way of organizing her time, her space, and the new house. And looked at from this perspective, Sanjeev’s obsession with the organized and sanitary comes across as equally fantastical rather than, as he would like to think, some empirically calculated “reason.” Though he considers his world free from superstition, irrationality, or obsession, anyone reading this story is likely to label him as an obsessive-compulsive—a category derived from twentieth-century psychological discourse to designate the not-empirically-or-mathematically explicable urge to repeated actions. Just as Twinkle

finds exceptional pleasure in her “treasures” (magic) without any ostensible reason for doing so, Sanjeev finds solace in repeatedly, compulsively, ordering and repairing the house as he imagines it in its perfection. The element of fantasy in his consideration of his upscale domicile is expounded in the text at length. Selecting the property with its “vaguely Tudor façade” in an enthusiastic hurry right before (and in anticipation of) marrying Twinkle, he permits the “elegant curved staircase with its wrought iron banister, and the dark wooden wainscoting, and the solarium overlooking rhododendron bushes” to call up a bourgeois mirage of his future family; the house, he observes, is located in a neighborhood with a fine school system” (145). The sequence exemplifies what Pile’s study shows, that the “unknown stimulates the imagination to conjure up mental images of what to look for within it” (9); in a patently superstitious reaction, Sanjeev is pleased to see that the house number is also the date of his birth. Even Sanjeev, then, fails to “see” the space of the house in neutral, objective terms, instead envisioning what he wants to see, propelled by his idiosyncratic needs and desires. As Twinkle structures her life around the serendipity of finding “treasures,” Sanjeev too structures his life around the house, his “treasure,” basing his purchase less on practical estimates of the house’s monetary value than on the imagination it arouses within him.

### ***Homeland***

Despite the ostensible differences in the ways the found objects mediate the couple’s attitudes toward each other, both Twinkle and Sanjeev employ their house in ways that are ultimately similar, as material for identity construction: and since information withheld from the self and others is what constitutes self-representation, Lahiri’s story explores the constant negotiation and renegotiation of identity presumably inherent in the early phases of a marriage and also in settling into a new

country. In his magisterial study *The Tourist* (1999), Dean MacCannell (38) invokes Michel de Certeau's insight regarding "tricks in the arts of doing" that enable individuals subjected to the global constraints of modern—especially urban—society to deflect them, to make use of them, to contrive through a sort of everyday tinkering to establish their own décor and trace their own personal itineraries," so that, we may accordingly infer, the silk paintings of elephants in Sanjeev and Twinkle's house are less simple adornments than testimonies to the couple's awareness of their status as the other, their obligation to make some sort of statement about themselves: suggesting indeed the ways that immigrants themselves may fall back on stereotypical symbols for self-representation, their supposedly proud ethnic badges themselves a submission to markers imposed from outside.

It will be useful to employ Nishitani Osamu's analysis of anthropology in his essay "Anthropos and Humanitas: Two Western Concepts of 'Human Being'" (2006). Nishitani highlights how the science of anthropology typically relegates nonwestern people and societies to the category of objects, who are then studied by "subjects," white Europeans. In this scheme, constructed by modern processes of knowledge-making, the subjects (Europeans) become the possessors of knowledge while the nonwestern peoples and cultures become the object, the data, the raw material, the analysand for the analyzing and theoretical West.

*Grasping and defining* something as an object is, literally, to capture it and, furthermore, to gain the ability to manipulate it. It is already an operation of power. Within this relationship, the subject is active while the object can only passively accept that activity. Moreover, *to grant something the status of object* is to assimilate it into the subject's world of cognition, granting it the right to exist there. Things can exist if they are left alone, but in order for them to be recognized as actually existing, they must gain the position of object within the subject's gaze. (7; italics mine)

And Twinkle is participating in exactly such “grasping” and “defining” of objects as *objects* of aesthetic value through collecting them. As such, her collecting through these remnants/left-overs of the house’s history, its past, simultaneously re-defines and manipulates it (history) within Twinkle’s narrative and presentation, an act that establishes Twinkle as the subject and the narrator of the house’s history, and by extension, that of her surrounding culture's. She positions herself as the narrator and representative of the history of the space and time that she is occupying. The terms that Nishitani uses for the two categories resulting from a distinction between subject/object are *humanitas* (roughly, “humanity”) and *anthropos* (roughly, “man”). “Humanitas” refers to that group of people or cultures who theorize, process, and evaluate information and thus actively construct “knowledge” about the rest of the world, a world of objects, “anthropos”: “anthropos” suggests merely the material to be studied, whereas “humanitas,” the European scientists and observers, are the knowledge-makers. Thus, Nishitani delineates a model where the two groups have different power-relations to knowledge-making: “humanitas” is the group that situates itself in power in that they construct and decide what is knowledge and about whom. This scheme and self-positioning leads to the production of the “object” of this knowledge (by “humanitas”), now categorized as “anthropos,” the powerless, merely occupying the space of an object under analysis by the “humanitas,” incapable and unwilling to form their own knowledge or theorize their own selves as “knowledge.” “Who then,” Nishitani demands, “establishes ‘anthropos’ as the object of cognition? Who, in this situation, occupies the space of subject? How can we categorize this subject of cognition? And to whom does this cognition belong?” (6).

The cognition of the world (or human beings) is neither objective nor universal. This is so because this cognition is oriented, in principle, from the perspective of the West. . . . Within the European languages,

the word to *orient* (orienter) overlaps with the word for the east (Orient). To orient also means to “direct,” and, like a vector sign, a function of power is contained in that act. Knowledge that is now generalized is “directed” . . . . [Westerners] . . . described and managed the world according to their conventions alone. In other words, a “new world” was defined, and along with it a discourse to describe it; the world that preceded it was relegated to the realm of “nonexistence” by this act of definition. . . . This is how unknown worlds, alien worlds are assimilated into the domain of “*humanitas*.” (5, 7).

Taking Nishitani’s model and observations about the relationship of EuroAmericans to the practices of studying, collecting, processing, and theorizing helps us to gain new insights into the differences between Sanjeev and Twinkle, as well as into the relationship between the couple and their surrounding culture, as they, outsiders, attempt to become part of middle-class, secular and suburban American culture. Twinkle’s efforts, seen as “nonsense” and “insane” by Sanjeev and characterized by the story’s readers as constituting a relaxed and careless attitude, manifest on the contrary a concerted effort on her part to gain entry into the space Nishitani refers to as “*humanitas*.” In other words, where Nishitani claims that it is mostly Western societies who objectify other cultures by making them into raw data to study or theorize, in Lahiri’s story of assimilating immigrants we see Twinkle as the one attempting to objectify Western, Christian culture. Indeed, in the story her acts of gathering ordinary, everyday, cheap Christian “kitsch” and transforming it into objects of fascination, collection, and display mimics the Euro-American penchant for collecting and displaying foreign and “exotic” objects; such practices form an integral part of the systematic academic study of “other” cultures in anthropology, ethnology, history, and other disciplines. In fact, Lahiri’s story inverts, or attempts to invert, the traditional hierarchy between subject/object, between *humanitas/anthropos*. Here, it is Twinkle who sets out to explore her new house with the aim of foraging for day-to-day

Christian-themed objects and turning them into artifacts for examination, contemplation, collection, and display.

Thus Twinkle overturns the power hierarchy and transforms Christian and European culture into exotic objects whose alterity fascinates those who gaze upon them. In other words, Twinkle tries to occupy the space of the subject, the gaze, as opposed to becoming an object of gaze and fascination that constructs her as an “object” for her American peers. Seen this way, it is in fact Twinkle who manages to alter the couple’s relationship to their culture and not Sanjeev, who in his earnest and serious endeavors to “learn” to appreciate western classical music, Mahler’s symphonies, only perpetuates his subaltern position as an “emulator” of western culture, and thus remains in what Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe* (2000) refers to as the “waiting room” of history, progress, and modernity. Chakrabarty offers a rich analysis of historicist modes of thinking and narrating history in the social sciences and the humanities. Historicism imagines a logical progression of history in which Europe is the center, or the beginning, of modernity and capitalism, while the “rest” of the world is always behind and a recipient of these ideas, modes of living, and production. Such historicist narratives thus become inadequate because they can only analyze history in “translation,” so to speak, instead of giving a “conjoined genealogy of our analytical categories,” and assume that with sufficient elapse of time, the “Third World” will “catch up” with “modern” Europe. Such a myopic and inaccurate perspective consigns regions, such as India, into the “waiting room” of history and ignores the political modernities that have emerged within the specific contexts and places such as India (20-25).

Chakrabarty calls such modes of narrativizing history, “translation / transition” narratives that inevitably, even in their most Marxist and liberal forms, figure the “Third World” in a metaphorical “waiting room,” or as “lagging behind”—that is to

say, “not yet” modernized or modernized with “differences.” Tied to this vision of the “Third World” is that over time its countries will develop into something similar to a European capitalistic society consisting of literate, educated bourgeois citizens; or that they have but with their own peculiarities. However, both these narratives fail to envision differences or peculiarities in relation to modernity. That “modernity” is not separate from or external to “peculiarities.” And in Lahiri’s story, Sanjeev exemplifies, unbeknownst to him, this historicist mode of understanding “progress” and “culture” even if it traps him in history’s waiting room. He views the process of his learning and “climbing up” the ladder in EuroAmerican culture as a process of translation and transition, a linear distance that he will cover step-by-step, methodically. He fails to grasp the trappings inherent in such historicist modes of thinking that always already cast him as “different”—assimilable, but always behind and backward. Within the story, we see how he fails at becoming any kind of a social or cultural model or leader—a role that his wife successfully wins for herself exactly because instead of “learning” western culture, she enacts the role of a EuroAmerican ethnologist/collector.

That is, Twinkle, in her seemingly happy-go-lucky way, in fact attempts to enter the category of “*humanitas*” by dictating what will constitute “aesthetic value” or certify the value of an object that embodies aesthetic or cultural value. As such, it is her mode of relating to her environment that becomes a more aggressive way of assimilating and even mastering the culture she inhabits. As such, likewise, she effectively charts her way into the “inside” of the culture, into the cadres of the “makers” of culture, rather than resting content among servile copiers exemplified in Sanjeev. Twinkle, in this story, is not only a foreigner of South Asian background, but also a woman: her attempts to define her position in relation to the dominant culture’s rationale of *humanitas* vs. *anthropos* operates in defiance not only of a predominantly

white, Christian, and Western culture but also of patriarchy itself. And if Sanjeev's, her husband's, seemingly compulsive custodial maintenance of the house and its space implies a will to dominate, Twinkle too asserts her dominance over the objects by radically decontextualizing them by emptying of their sociocultural and religious history. In "The Museum as a Way of Seeing" (1991), Svetlana Alpers explains how museums in collecting and displaying cultural objects "transform" them because they "isolate" objects from their cultural, religious, or social functions and routines and make them into "objects of visual interest" (25).

By contrast, in the exhibiting of the material culture of other peoples, in particular what used to be called "primitive" art, it is the museum effect—the tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus transform it into art like our own—that has been the subject of heated debate. . . . When objects like these are severed from the ritual site, the invitation to look attentively remains and in certain respects may even be enhanced. (25-27)

Emptying the objects of their religious content and turning them into objects with visual value, Twinkle thus exercises powers of representation over these objects and the culture they represent; she uses them not to convey the functions they are assigned by the dominant culture, but for what she wants them to do: her museumization and display of a culture she has thus made primitive, dead (history as passed), and objectified as nothing more than artifacts of her study. She becomes an ethnologist of the dominant, Western culture. Though she recognizes that the previous owners presumably considered their possessions as religiously powerful and iconic—"It would feel—I don't know—sacrilegious or something" to discard them, she observes (138)—she lightly but summarily redefines them in affectionate but patronizing terms: "It's pretty," she coos over the figurine of Christ as "she planted a kiss on top of

Christ's head" (137). Christ, in so many words, has been demoted by Twinkle to the status of "cute."

In *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, and Interesting* (2012), Sianne Ngai offers a disquisition on the aesthetics of the "cute" in postmodern capitalist culture, pointing to the need to include theoretical and philosophical taxonomies for aesthetic responses placed outside a narrowly Kantian system of appreciation, one geared only to the intense and unequivocal emotions of the "sublime," on one hand, and the "horrific/disgusting," on the other hand. Sanjeev assesses the found Christian objects as "cheap" and empty of any value whatsoever, operating within the Kantian scheme of aesthetic appreciation, whereas Twinkle refuses to gauge the objects' value within so narrow and rigid a framework of assigning value-judgment. Instead, Twinkle treats them as cute, using terms such as "pretty," showing that she finds them adorable in some inexplicable way. In Ngai's perception, "Cuteness, an adoration of the commodity in which I want to be as intimate with or physically close to as possible, thus has a certain utopian edge, speaking to a desire to inhabit a concrete, qualitative world of use as opposed to one of abstract exchange" (13).

However, to "cutify" an object or a person does not imply a system of relations that is empty of power. On the contrary, as Ngai points out, the individual designating an object or a person as "cute" positions herself as the subject in dominance, holding power, and through that position constructs and enjoys the object's "cuteness." Ngai explains, "Revolving around a desire for an ever more intimate, even sensuous relation to objects already regarded as familiar and unthreatening, 'cuteness' is not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for 'small things' but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them" (3). Thus Twinkle's cutifying the object is a will to power and assert her dominance not only over the confines of her home but through it also on the dominant, Christian culture.

“Cuteness” is therefore typically deployed by Twinkle at crucial points in the story when her dominance might seem to be in question. In the initial phase of their courtship, Twinkle—and of course her name emblazons her alignment with the cute—asked Sanjeev in a cinema if he loved her, and upon his answer placed a popcorn kernel in his mouth as a reward. Her response, in other words, is in no way romantic, impassioned, or sublime, but a trick for diminutizing any threatening scenario into a “cute,” unthreatening thing, as one might reward an infant or a puppy. She undercuts the authority of their ancestral religion, we notice, in the same way: when Sanjeev rejects the Christian objects because, as he points out, they are not Christians, she counters, “Yes, we are good *little* Hindus” (137, italics mine).

### ***Housewarming***

The party—significantly a “housewarming,” designed intentionally to celebrate a space—that Twinkle and Sanjeev organize brings to a boil the tensions brewing between them as they anticipate the intrusion of other people, both Americans and Indian Americans, into their domestic domain and its inaugural exhibition to the assessive scrutiny of their friends. Predictably, it is Sanjeev, not Twinkle, who cleans (“By five-thirty the entire household sparkled”) and prepares the food (“big trays of rice with chicken and almonds and orange peels [150]), and in keeping with his established temperament he is nervous about the impression the house will make on the guests: “They’ll want to see all the rooms. I’ve invited people from the office” (139). A potentially awkward cross-cultural interchange occurs as Sanjeev introduces Twinkle, embarrassed that she had “yet to shed a childhood endearment” (142):

“My wife. Tanima.”  
“Call me Twinkle.”

“What an unusual name,” Nora remarked.

Twinkle shrugged. “Not really. There’s an actress in Bombay named Dimple Kapadia. She even has a sister named Simple.”

Douglas and Nora raised their eyebrows simultaneously, nodding slowly, as to let the absurdity of the names settle in. (151)

While Sanjeev is ashamed of what he considers his wife’s unrepresentable nickname, perhaps wishing it could be “thrown away” along with the objectionable Christian articles, Twinkle nonchalantly parades it but through her usual method of reconfiguration by decontextualization: she removes her name from its source in an English nursery rhyme—“Is her last name Little Star,” a guest has inquired (153)—and repositions it as the name of a famous actress in India (the text does not mention that Dimple Kapadia has a daughter, also an actress, who is in fact named Twinkle.) Just as she has included excluded objects as “insiders,” she reconstitutes her cultural property not through transgression but by making an unabashed spectacle of “cheapness.” As Augé writes, “The representativeness of the chosen group [for ethnologist/historian]. . . is a matter of being able to assess what the people we see and speak to tell us about the people who[m] we do not see and speak to . . . for here, strictly speaking, the aim is not to select statistically representative samples but to establish whether what is valid for one lineage, one village, is valid for others . . .” (13). Twinkle is doing just this, choosing to represent as valid and acceptable her own analysis of her own culture to people who are strangers to it (India) in response to a value-judgment that seems “natural” because it channels the dominant culture’s norms, expectations, and beliefs. Twinkle’s repartee, even though off-hand, de-naturalizes this EuroAmerican assumption that “Twinkle” as a name is “unusual.” Here, Twinkle arrogates to herself the position of the representative, theorizer, the analysts, and destabilizes dominant culture’s presumptive opinion about what constitutes “normalcy,” namely, Twinkle is in fact *not* an unusual name—and so

effectively re-positions them (EuroAmericans) as “outsiders” and seizes from them their always-already presumed status of representatives and assessors of value.

The guests during the party are given a “tour” of the house by Twinkle for the explicit and sole reason of viewing the objects she has collected. As MacCannell writes, the sacralization of objects or spaces is accomplished in stages: first, by “marking off objects/sights from similar objects as worthy of preservation”; second, by “framing and elevating them by the putting on display of an object—placement in a case, on a pedestal or opened up for visitation”; third, by their “mechanical reproduction,” such as prints, photographs, and so on (44-45). Twinkle takes all of these steps with the found paraphernalia in her house except the last one, and so sacralizes them as object of aesthetic value and study—but not as religious day-to-day objects that are an active part of routine life. She has managed to de-sacralize them from one (religious, routine) context and sacralized them to another, as transformed, isolated, even dead artifacts. The fact it is a Hindu and an Indian American woman who thus makes these objects dead to their everyday function and makes them appear as relics of a dead past and civilization reverses the hierarchy of her dominant culture: it is not a vaguely defined “Hindu” or “African” religious object that is transformed into an aesthetic object representing and confirming the primitiveness of a dead and “unmodern” past, but Christian objects that are now seen as strangely outdated, even comical. Through this process of destabilizing the hierarchy inherent in “representing” and “displaying” “other” cultures, Lahiri’s text is also drawing attention the processes of acquisition and controlling of culture and knowledge production, while also giving the Indian woman agency within this process.

Through the characteristic sparring of its protagonists, the new Indian American couple, then, Lahiri’s text thus continues is *modus operandi* of collapsing opposites, of broaching boundaries and then blurring them. Amid the noise of

conversation and “hectic jazz records played under Twinkle’s supervision” (152), she having earlier dismissed Sanjeev’s Mahler cds as boring, the couple carry on their territorial contest: Twinkle, impervious to Sanjeev’s wish to contain her exuberance, rises conversely to a role of domination, both toward her husband, the breadwinner and owner of the house, and toward the assembled guests, mostly upper-middle class Americans. The text in fact emphasizes how the guests are crowding around Twinkle, absorbed by her narration of “anecdotes” and by her physical beauty (152-53). However, even as she is situated as the object of her guests’ gaze, admiration, and attention, she is not quite the “object” as much as the organizer of gazes. Her guests gaze on her in order to construct her as the subject, not object, of their admiration and even awe. The “gaze” thus establishes her as a subject who actively constructs her status as a focus of veneration. Her physical beauty, intentionally enhanced with a “brocaded *salwar-kameez*,” pearl and sapphire choker, and the high heels that have irritated Sanjeev by elevating her above him, is radiant in her manifest enjoyment of the evening: “Your wife’s wow,” pronounces one of the company, as Sanjeev remembers that the same man once applied the term to Sophia Loren and Audrey Hepburn (153). Twinkle has acquired, in other words, charisma—“the power, which certain people have,” as Linda Charnes notes in *Notorious Identity* (1993):

Charm and charisma in fact designate the power, which certain people have, to impose their own self-image as the objective and collective image of their body and being; to persuade others, as in love or faith, to abdicate their generic power of objectification and delegate it to the person who should be its object, which thereby becomes an absolute subject, without an exterior (being his own Other), fully justified in existing, legitimated. The charismatic leader manages to be for the group what he is for himself, instead of being for himself, like those dominated in the symbolic struggle, what he is for other. He “makes” the opinion which makes him. (33)

The text charts Twinkle's successful manipulation of her immediate society, her ability to situate herself at its center or make herself an integral component of it. MacCannell also explicates this process incisively when he observes the changes in modernized, industrial societies and their leisure activities around the production, consumption, and enjoyment of culture:

In industrial society, refinement of a "life-style" occurs through a process of emulating elites, or at least of keeping up with the Joneses. This requires designated leaders, so followers can know whom to obey, and regular meetings: church meetings, town meetings, board meetings. . . . This requisite of an internal group order, with its meetings of elites and followers, is disappearing with the coming of modernity. Life-styles are not expanded via emulation of socially important others until they have taken over an entire group. They are expanded by the reproduction of cultural models, a process that need not fit itself into existing group boundaries. (31)

Along these lines, Twinkle, without being her guests' boss or a member of the dominant racial or religious group, is able to establish herself as a leader of sorts: through her articulation and narration of objects that she turns into cultural objects and thus culture itself, she is able to achieve this position. It is through manufacturing her own cultural model and mode of cultural production that she is able to construct herself as not only an integral member of her social group, but almost as their leader: "Your friends adore the poster in my study," she mentioned to him triumphantly" (152), a reference to the "larger-than life-sized watercolor poster of Christ" (139) found behind a radiator. Here, even though the theme of cultural and especially religious difference is sustained, it has been bridged and mediated by Twinkle. As MacCannell points out regarding the condition of modern societies and the processes of intermixing of diverse socioeconomic groups,

Every society necessarily has another society inside itself and beside itself; its past epochs and eras and its less developed and more developed neighbors. Modern society, only partly disengaged from industrial structures, is especially vulnerable to overthrow from within through nostalgia, sentimentality, and other tendencies to regress to a previous state, a “Golden Age,” which retrospectively always appears to have been more orderly or normal. . . . When tradition, nature and other societies, even ‘primitive’ societies are transformed into tourist attractions, they join with the modern social attractions into a new unity, or a new universal solidarity, that includes the tourist. (82-83).

Such movement and assimilation of one group by the other that blurs boundaries of self/other, inside/outside, subordinate/dominant, can be traced in the story as well: Sanjeev’s anticipated chagrin at his guests’ reaction to the Christian clutter—“Each time he passed the mantel he winced, dreading the raised eyebrows of the guests as they viewed the flickering ceramic saints, the salt and pepper shakers designed to resemble Mary and Joseph” (150)—inverts itself as the guests express instead delight at these collected and displayed “cheap” objects, and as he retires more and more to the margins of the gathering, and as a menial, unobtrusively replenishing the “samosas that he kept warming evenly in the oven, and getting ice for people’s drinks, and opening more bottles of champagne with some difficulty, and explaining for the fortieth time that he wasn’t Christian” (152). Quite literally and pointedly, then, Sanjeev’s attempts at assimilation are characterized in the story as servile; his servility, as noted earlier, is produced and re-produced by his positioning himself on the ladder of “progress,” not realizing that the rhetoric of emulating and achieving, or “learning” “modernization,” “westernization,” and “progress” always positions non-Europeans as “behind” in its teleology, in a “waiting room.” So, in the story’s climactic scene, it is not Sanjeev, but Twinkle who stations herself as leader of a mustered army of collectors who now join her in a spontaneous treasure hunt for any remaining Christian objects: and as the guests, “giggling and swaying” (154), follow her up a

ladder to the as yet unexplored attic, she again impugns boundaries, taking possession of the attic's space and masculinizing it as a public arena (rather than private, hidden)—and in the process metaphorically assuming the role of the instigator, rather than the “native/ethnic” follower/object, of an expedition of discovery within the space of a EuroAmerican suburban house: as MacCannell points out, “It may even happen that his [the ethnologist's] intervention and curiosity restore to those among whom he is working an interest in their own origins which may have been attenuated, even completely stifled, by phenomena connected with more recent actuality; urban migrations, the arrival of new populations, the spread of industrial cultures” (43). When Twinkle descends from the house's upper regions with a large kill nestled in her arms, a thirty-pound silver bust of Christ, she stands out as an iconic figure in her own right, a priestess.

### ***Coming home***

“This Blessed House” may seem at first to assert Twinkle's salutary ideological triumph over her husband. At the story's end, we share Sanjeev's unarticulated realization that despite promises to the contrary, Twinkle will never remove the silver bust of Jesus from pride of place on the mantel; Sanjeev hates it most, we learn, because it “contained dignity, solemnity, beauty even,” disconcertingly defying his comforting boundary between high art and “nonsense.” In the final paragraph, he silently follows the exhilarated, perspiring Twinkle back into the living room (157). While the party had disappeared into the attic, Sanjeev—surveying like a weary menial the scattered disorder left by the guests—wished admittedly that he could lock everyone in the house's upper reaches and return to some premarital state of bliss where his life was undisturbed by unpredictable and unwanted objects, people, and activities: “It occurred to Sanjeev that he had the house all to himself” (155). True to

character, he sharply contrasts the imagined, idealized past of bachelorhood and independence with the messy, unregulated present as an interruption of and deviation from that past; so too there has been a violation of boundaries between public and private space as the guests, outsiders, have entered one of the innermost spaces of the house, which provokes a strong desire in Sanjeev to finally lock them all out of his space: “He could snap the ladder back on its spring into the ceiling, and they would have no way of getting down unless he were to pull the chain and let them” (155).

Ultimately, however, “This Blessed House” is not about winning or losing, victory or defeat. Much as its structure depends on opposition and polarity, Lahiri’s text is continually undermining its own boundaries—between high and low, rational and irrational, male and female, belonging and exclusion—with a transcendent heterogeneity that subsumes everything into itself: so much so that it is this very blurredness that constitutes the “blessedness” of the house, the *terra incognita*. The party thrown by Sanjeev and Twinkle was diverse from the start, its refreshments heterodox (“samosas from an Indian restaurant” but also “gallons of champagne” [150]); some of the women came dressed in “heels and sheer stocking, and short black dresses made of crepe and chiffon,” but other arrive in “their finest saris, made with gold filigree that draped in elegant pleats over their shoulders” (151-52). Outside the house, the Virgin’s blue hood is draped “over her head in the manner of an Indian bride,” and in a movement approaching the carnivalesque, the “black hat full of sharp thin feathers” (151) sported by one the American guests and recalling a Native American ceremonial headdress moves symbolically from site to site, appearing at one point on Twinkle’s head but coming to rest finally on the head of the silver Christ. So, too, MacCannell comments on the possibility of a truly “modern” and democratic society where “culture” can embody and contain difference:

Culture can continue, via its productions, to provide a basis for community even in our complex modern society. In fact, it is culture—not empirical social relations—that can provide a basis for the modern community. . . . Strangers who have the same cultural grounding can come together in a cultural production, each knowing what to expect next, and feel a closeness or solidarity, even where no empirical closeness exist. Their relationship begins before they meet. In modern society, not merely music and games but almost every aspect of life can be played at. . . . (32)

In the story, too, within a split second, Sanjeev comes back from his dream and suddenly longs for Twinkle to return. Looking at the patent-leather mules she has left on the floor, he feels a deep “pang”—a bodily sensation—in his heart: his body and mind are too used, too habituated to Twinkle for him to be able to imagine a life without her. Despite a personal chafing, he desperately wants her to come back, to “re-touch” her lipstick (just as he had previously re-touched the scratched baseboard, just as people re-touch their relationships repeatedly over the course of their acquaintance), to place her feet in her “worn” slippers, suggesting wear, tear, attachment, a deep need—and his reaction, we notice, is no longer rigidly allied with the rational and mathematical but with the organic, the intimate placement of bodies in space. What Sanjeev registers in this scene is an expanded self, a self not always held under tight control: he feels, though he does not articulate it, that Twinkle, both through the immediacy of her bodily presence and the material objects associated with her, is now an integral part of him, and he of her.

This is the moment when Sanjeev finally lets go of the desire to go back to his bachelor days of “independence” and unshared space. Identity, Sanjeev discovers, is never a being, but a becoming; as his yearning for Twinkle’s return, her physical presence in his life, adds even as it subtracts something from him, symbolizing the heterogeneity of identities and cultures that impinge on his self-perception in ways

that cannot be coded, quantified, or calculated. The lines of identity are not always frozen in their demarcation, but always being produced, rejected, and reproduced in an ever-shifting process. So this moment of longing, represented by the text as final, is in fact not final, and will continue oscillating beyond the text: as perhaps only in the constant oscillation between “here” and “there,” in the constant thinking about our identities do we constantly find a place. If “here” and “there” are always unfixed, unhinged, then it is not only the so-called immigrant who is an outsider, but everyone is always already homeless, since there is no place without the process of building, of shaping a space into the intimacy of a place: we are already exiles trying to break and enter, always being exiled and embraced. A place, which is always experienced, lived through, in time and space, is never a final, coherent, singular, or fixed space; rather, a place is a place because it is always in the process of being built, reached toward, and a constant finding—just as identity is always the process of making and unmaking, of contestation and reformulating.

Perhaps that is why, at the very beginning of the story, despite its later enumeration of various disjunctures between Twinkle and Sanjeev, they present an emblem of unison rather than disparity: “They discovered the first one together” (136). “They,” not he or she, and “discovered” rather than already known or seen. And this is exactly where the story ends too, with their having come together to discover more, beyond the space of the text itself.

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## CHAPTER 5

### IDENTITIES IN AND THROUGH SPACES

#### *Conclusion*

In the essays I have tried to show that the idea of a “homeland” or “at home” or occupying the present space or time is always problematic and never dichotomous or homogenous. The various characters in these stories feel lost and alienated despite their mobility and the promise of freedom the United States holds for them, both spatially and symbolically. There is no one thing, whether citizenship or upper-middle class status and financial affluence, that can guarantee free passage or mobility or uncontested membership in the social landscape of urban and suburban middle class America.

The female protagonists of these stories all engage in negotiating and mastering the various spaces they occupy, whether domestic (Mrs. Sen, Twinkle) or public (Miranda) in different ways; their attempts at this process are inflected by their different socioeconomic positions. For example, tellingly, unlike Miranda, Mrs. Sen (or even Sanjeev), Twinkle is not really worried about what is in her wardrobe:

They didn't bother her, these scattered, unsettled matters. She seemed content with whatever clothes she found at the front of the closet, with whatever magazine was lying around, with whatever song was on the radio—content yet curious. And now all of her curiosity centered around discovering the next treasure. (141)

Twinkle's closets and drawers do not preserve things as Miranda's and Mrs. Sen's do; they do not contain unworn things, a life imagined but un-lived. However, this is not to draw a dichotomy between Twinkle and other female protagonists of the

other two stories, but rather to emphasize how Twinkle negotiates her space and place within the house which is in fact owned by her husband. She embodies a paradox: she lives in the present but makes the space into her “place” by attempting to recover its past remnants (the Christian paraphernalia), but only after emptying them of their social significance (decontextualizing them) and then re-contextualizing them within her own present time and space. She wonders about its previous tenants and what the Christian paraphernalia meant for them. This characteristic sets her apart from the other two protagonists, Miranda and Mrs. Sen, who either live in their imagined worlds and experience an isolation from their social milieu or live in the past without succeeding in making the past connect with the present.

These stories also examine gendered social relations as they are manifested in the various negotiations with and consumption of spaces, private or public. For example, Sanjeev as well as the other two male characters, Mr. Sen in “Mrs. Sen’s” and Dev and Rohin (the boy who already assumes mastery over Miranda and through her the female body) in “Sexy,” manifest a penchant for maintaining distance from, even a slight contempt of, their female partners. Like the male characters in the other two stories, who seem to give priority to abstract facts when conceptualizing their living space (Dev, Rohin, Mr. Sen) and relationships with the social world around them, Sanjeev too at first comes across as emphasizing facticity and abstract information given in books, textbooks, information labels, and liner notes to “understand” things “properly” and as drawing boundaries and determining the limits of things (for example, expiration date; what is Christian and what is Hindu). Similarly, Dev infantilizes Miranda, by patting her head paternally with a copy of the *Economist* and remarking on how she would not understand the blank, empty, geometrical maps featured in that magazine (a symbol and an institution of patriarchal

and capitalist forms of market and exchange). Mr. Sen, too, finds his wife's insistence on cooking and getting fresh fish incomprehensible and useless.

However, Sanjeev ("This Blessed House") is unable to completely deny Twinkle's perception of the house, its pastness and history and by extension, the history of their relationship. Despite being the most "organized" of the male protagonists discussed in these stories, Sanjeev is the one who accommodates his wife's perception of the space and through her, the past, both of the house and their own personal and social histories. Eliot, the young boy, is the other male protagonist in these stories ("Mrs. Sen's") who is able to see and perceive the space as Mrs. Sen does, and in doing so he not only sympathizes with her but also acknowledges his own isolation and alienation.

As such, the relationship of the characters in these stories is quite literally bound up with the physical space of the house and the city; their attempts to turn their new "space" into a known, experienced "place" is a way for them to build an experience that will reduce their isolation and alienation from the place of their occupation and its history. And it is this quotidian process of making something strange into something familiar that embodies the process of assimilation in Lahiri's texts.

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