

From National to Transnational: Three Generations of South Asian American Women Writers

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Abstract

This article examines a representative sampling of canonical South Asian American texts – Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989), selections from Chitra Divakaruni’s short story collection *Arranged Marriage* (1986), and two short stories – “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” and “Mrs. Sen’s” – from Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000). Although all three authors are increasingly taught within American classrooms, the pedagogical approach to their texts is often framed by binary oppositions that privilege a modern America over a traditional India. By viewing these localised US texts from a transnational perspective, my article disrupts their pre-occupation with an idealised American national identity. As my reading illustrates, it is imperative to foreground the transnational elements in these writers in order to show how each of their narratives can be read as counter to the hegemony of the overtly national paradigm it appears to uphold.

Keywords

Transnational, South Asian American, critical multiculturalism, *Jasmine*, *Arranged Marriage*, *Interpreter of Maladies*

In recent years it is more and more evident that the globalising impulse defining world markets and international relations is also leaving its mark on university curricula. The last couple of decades, for instance, has seen Asian American Studies shift from an “intensely nationalistic” emphasis to a more “transnational” one (Espiritu 198) as more and more universities across the US begin to develop global studies programmes. Describing his vision for Asian American Studies today, Johnathon Okamura suggests that it should “still maintain a primary emphasis on the community and its economic and political status and concerns” but should examine it “from a

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transnational framework rather than primarily as a localized and socially and culturally bonded entity within the geographical confines of the United States” (180).

It is possible to understand the move from national to transnational in literary and cultural studies by looking at recent changes in the field of multiculturalism. The concept of liberal multiculturalism that continues to define much of the academy today is embedded in a “national paradigm [which] can be traced to the late 1960s and the early 1970s when proponents of cultural pluralism challenged the melting pot hypothesis. They claimed that, instead of melding into an undifferentiated nation, social groups maintained distinct ethnic identities to form a ‘Nation of nations’” (Sharpe 187). Although the promoters of “liberal multiculturalism” were themselves driven by the idealism fueling the civil liberties movements of the sixties and seventies, the concept ultimately floundered on an essentialised notion of difference that approximated the idea of cultural relativism (Chicago Cultural Studies Group 552) or pluralism (Palumbo-Liu 4-5). This concept of multiculturalism did not critically engage with issues of power and equity within and between different minority groups or between different ethnic groups and the dominant Caucasian culture. More recently, scholars and activists have been calling for a critical multiculturalism which refuses any kind of monolithic identity and embraces “a more international model of cultural studies than the dominant Anglo-American version” (Chicago Cultural Studies Group 552). In the words of David Palumbo-Liu, “A critical multiculturalism would focus on the way multiple social positions are generated, stabilized, and displaced, and how culture must be read as a *complex sign*” (18).

Thus, for instance, a study of South Asians in the US must take into consideration the fact of colonialism that helped create, “a subcontinental bourgeoisie... through nationalism,” which was then “fractured” “through partition of the subcontinent into India, Pakistan, and later Bangladesh, necessitating its internationalisation through diaspora” (Visveswaran 12). In her path breaking essay “Asian American Studies and Asian Studies: Rethinking Roots” Suchetra Mazumder writes, for instance, that:

The existing textbook of American immigration history, which would have us believe that the first phase of mass immigration to the United States (1880-1920) was a matter of the huddled masses seeking ‘change and choice,’ who then lived happily ever after as new comer and nation were transformed by assimilation (e.g., Kraut 1982), is clearly inadequate. But the need is not for a simple revision of American history that would accommodate those who were excluded in the first writing of this history, such as Asian Americans. The need is to define a new paradigm which contextualizes the history of Asian Americans within the twentieth-century global history of imperialism, of colonialism, and of capitalism. To isolate Asian American history from its international underpinnings, to abstract it from the global context of capital and labor migration, is to distort this history. (41)

However, despite the publication of this essay in 1991, academic programmes in the US continue to be defined by a “corporate multiculturalism” that seeks to answer

the question, “how are we to sell our products in a global economy when we are yet to learn the language of its customers?” (Spivak 7). The economic neo-liberalism that defines this agenda reinforces static notions of ethnic or national difference and systematically disenfranchises those writers, scholars, and activists who examine local and national identities within a global framework. This becomes all the more dangerous in a post-9/11 US where civil liberties are under attack, immigration policies are being tightened, employers are hostile towards South Asian and Middle Eastern minority groups, and South Asians, particularly Sikh men and boys are continually targeted and detained (Blue Triangle Network; SMART). As Johnathon Okamura points out, in the post-9/11 period, “Sikh Americans and other South Asians have been subject to transnational racism through their racialization as possible terrorists with links to the Al Qaeda networks despite their not being of Arab descent” (179). The impact on Sikh taxi drivers in cities like New York has been particularly bad with passengers feeling entitled to abuse them physically and verbally (Das Gupta).

It is within the context of this post-9/11 America that I believe the politics of reading presented in my article is particularly significant. I examine a representative sampling of canonical South Asian American texts – Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989), selections from Chitra Divakaruni’s short story collection *Arranged Marriage* (1986), and two short stories – “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” and “Mrs. Sen’s” – from Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000) from a transnational or critical multiculturalist perspective. Although the three authors examined are increasingly taught within Asian American classrooms, the pedagogical approach to these texts continues to be framed by Orientalist oppositions that privilege a modern America over a traditional India. This approach takes its cues from the blurbs at the back of each book that call out invitingly to the prospective reader. Thus, the Fawcett edition of *Jasmine* carries a blurb from its *Baltimore Sun* review, which celebrates the protagonist’s transformation from “an Indian village girl, whose grandmother wants to marry her off at eleven, into an American woman who finally thinks for herself.” On a similar note, the blurb at the back of *Arranged Marriage* reads, “Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s exquisitely wrought debut collection of stories subtly chronicles the accommodations – and the rebellion – Indian-born girls and women in America undergo as they balance old treasured beliefs and surprising new desires.” However, South Asian reviewers have often tended to be more critical of these works. For instance, “[Indian reviews] of *Jasmine* have been [more] sporadic and critical and especially have questioned the terms of its American success” (Koshy 122). Lavina Shankar points out that, “South Asian American female writers such as Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have... glorified the white male as the liberator of the repressed Asian female” (295). And critics like Husne Jahan have accused Divakaruni of Orientalism in *Arranged Marriage* because she presents a negative binary of a traditional India (or non-West) against a modern US (or West) (149-69). It is no accident that the blurbs at the back of Jhumpa Lahiri’s Pulitzer prize winning collection *Interpreter of Maladies* are from Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra

Divakaruni fitting the author into a similar Orientalist paradigm of reading for the Western reader (Lau “Re-Orientalism”).

It consequently needs an informed audience to read against the Orientalist packaging of the books and to foreground and critique the selective representations found in them. In this context, Anindyo Roy points out that:

Jasmine’s world is peopled by warring, superstitious women, by fortune-tellers, by victims of social justice and religious factionalism, by a nostalgia-ridden father who still dreams of returning to a colonial Lahore, by aspiring young men who waste their lives learning to be trained technicians, by a young man who instills in his young bride the dream of emigrating to America.... The politics of Mukherjee’s aesthetics of immigration are evident in these selected representations; they are clearly deployed to highlight Jasmine’s difference so that she can be constructed as the perfect agent of immigration. The lonely girl who seeks liberty *and* loves English fails to realize her desires in her own society – she has no other option but to emigrate. (134)

As Roy suggests, there are obvious reasons for the selective representation of India found in *Jasmine*. The negative images of India help endorse the idea of Jasmine’s individuality that makes her worthy to be an American. The Punjabi women in Mukherjee’s novel are, for the most part, “slow” and “happy” in contrast to Jasmine who constantly challenges the patriarchal status quo maintained by her grandmother. Jasmine’s mother is the exception to the rule, but after her husband’s death she gives in to a life of suffering and victimhood.

As critics like Koshy, Shankar, Jahan, and Roy point out, these writers often find popularity with American audiences because they do not overtly challenge idealistic notions of American exceptionalism or colonial binaries of West and East. However, in my reading I suggest that there are transnational elements within the stories themselves, which complicate their dominant master narratives of assimilation. By viewing these localised US texts from a transnational perspective, my article disrupts their pre-occupation with an idealised American national identity. As my reading illustrates, it is possible and necessary to foreground the transnational elements in these writers in order to show how each of these narratives can be read as counter to the hegemony of the overtly national paradigm it appears to uphold.

A transnational reading, thus, places Jasmine’s journey alongside the travels of her historical counterparts; Jasmine’s journey to the US appears less original when we remember the Sikhs who emigrated from the Punjab to California in the early part of the twentieth century. Her feistiness also appears less unusual when she is compared with real instead of fictional counterparts. Punjabi women’s extensive participation in nationalist movements in the early part of the twentieth century and their agitation against dowry-related crimes in post-independence years defy the stereotype of the passive Indian woman.² Jasmine’s life also appears less extraordinary when placed

² See Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing*.

against Sikh immigrant Kartar Dhillon³ who played an active role in trying to expel the British from India or the women writers from ancient, medieval, and modern India that make up the pages of Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's two-volume anthology *Women Writing in India* (600 BC to the Present) (1993). Significantly, these women are not present in Jasmine's story forcing the protagonist to look to Anglo-American women like Lillian Gordon and Mother Ripplemayer for role models (197).

However, there are several moments of discrepancy between the voice of the village protagonist and her more sophisticated counterpart, which question Jasmine's "validation of the official bourgeois authorization of America as the supreme melting pot" (Ray 230). For instance, Jasmine repeats over and over again that her husband Prakash is a good man who does not hit her. Yet, when Prakash gets drunk, "There was a slurred, nasty edge to his voice, nothing playful, and his eyes were red" (83). Jasmine's claim to hero-worship Prakash is undercut by her decision not to tell him about her savings and by her dismissive comment that, "he was basically an old-fashioned Indian patriot, with a lot of Gandhi and a lot of Nehru in him" (88). These moments that question Prakash's credibility are, however, subsumed by her willingness to live out his dream and go to the US.

Similarly, despite Jasmine's infatuation with her Manhattan employers Taylor and Wylie Hayes, it is impossible to ignore the subtle thread of social commentary present in her comments about them. When she falls in love with Taylor, she reflects, "I fell in love with his world, its ease, its careless confidence and graceful self-absorption" (151). Coming "home" to America for Jasmine can thus be equated with falling in love with a class-based Anglo-American experience. Later, she disarmingly says, "I fell in love with what [Taylor] represented to me, a professor who served biscuits to a servant, smiled at her, and admitted her to the broad democracy of his joking, even when she didn't understand it. It seemed entirely American" (167). It is difficult to ignore the subtle thread of social commentary implicated in the reference to a democracy that unselfconsciously speaks in a language that not everyone can understand. However, this bit of social criticism is forgotten almost as soon as it is noted just as Jasmine mentions but does not elaborate on the racist pictures and artifacts she finds in Taylor and Wylie's New York home. She refers to Taylor's observation about the "ancient American custom" of "dark skinned mammies" in the same noncommittal way she describes the Iowa farmer Gene Lutz choking to death on a piece of Mexican food in California and "the waiters" who "were all illegals" going into hiding as soon as the police were called (8). Her refusal to develop these observations into full fledged critiques helps maintain the mythic structure of an egalitarian unracialized America.

Her description of her marriage to Midwestern farmer Bud suffers from similar limitations. Despite Jasmine's insistence that she loved her husband Bud, she describes their marriage in almost cynical terms. She writes, "He's a small town

³ Kartar Dhillon (1915-2008) is a good example of an early transnational feminist. She was a writer and political activist, a child of Indian immigrants in California, who played an important role in fighting for India's political independence from England.

banker, he's not allowed to do impulsive things. I'm less than half his age, and very foreign. We're the kind who marry. Going for me is this: he wasn't in a wheelchair when we met. I didn't leave him after it happened" (7). At this point the narrative voice takes on a neutrality as if Jasmine has stepped outside of her character and can see their relationship through the eyes of an objective third person. The reference to the age differences between them, to Jasmine's obvious foreignness, and the comment "we're the kind who marry" brings to mind the popularity of mail order brides from the Philippines in the US. Their relationship almost appears to be a mutually convenient contract, and despite Jasmine's observation that she stuck by Bud when he was shot and paralysed, the fact remains that she abandons him for Taylor and Duff and the California frontier at the end of the novel.

The disjuncture between Jasmine's naïve and cosmopolitan voices is complemented by other narrative incongruities. Mukherjee's description of illegal immigration in the US calls for a willing suspension of disbelief on the part of any immigrant reader familiar with the complexities and absurdities of INS law. However, just as the reader is about to protest against Mukherjee's descriptions of immigrant life in America, Jasmine anticipates their reaction with her comment that times were changing and, "People were getting a little scared of immigrants and positively hostile to illegals" (137). She also makes a point of noting that when she "was a child, born in a mud hut without water or electricity, the Green revolution had just struck Punjab. Bicycles were giving way to scooters and to cars, radios to television. [She] was the last to be born to that kind of submission, that expectation of ignorance. When the old astrologer swatted [her] under a banyan tree, [they] were both acting out a final phase of a social order that had gone on untouched for thousands of years" (229). Thus, even as Mukherjee upholds a static version of history, she tries to anticipate the complaints of critics by pointing out that Jasmine's India is not typical of the country at large. Yet, despite their marginal and non-representative nature, both descriptions are necessary for the mythic nature of the American dream that the novel promotes. Had India not been so unbearable, there would have been no motivation for Jasmine to escape to the West. Had INS regulations been more stringent, she would not have been able to come to the US. The America she does come to is far from perfect; a black man spits at her in New York, a white man propositions her in a Midwestern bar, and she often reiterates that she wished she had come to America before it got "perverted." However, the idea of a pure America appears mythic and unreal when we recall the genocide of the American Indians, which was part and parcel of the creation of the American Frontier. But these moments of disjuncture are not pursued. Instead, they are quickly forgotten as Jasmine scrambles to fulfil her American Dream.

The character of Du, Jasmine's adopted Vietnamese son provides an unexplored alternative to her assimilationist narrative. Jasmine observes, "My transformation has been genetic; Du's was hyphenated. We were so full of wonder at how fast he became American, but he's a hybrid like the fantasy appliances he wants to build" (222). While Jasmine's individuality is what makes her American and not Indian, Du's hyphenated existence allows him to be both Vietnamese and American. Jasmine has only contempt for the Indians in Flushing, New York, and does not bother to seek out

Indians in Iowa; Du, however, is capable of being with both Americans and Vietnamese. While Jasmine's transformation involves the loss of an Indian identity and the assimilation of an American one, Du presents the possibility of occupying more than one position at a time. Alpanna Knippling complains that Mukherjee "homogenizes the Other (Jasmine-Du)" and discounts "heterogeneity as a viable condition of ethnic minorities in the United States" (154), but as Jasmine's comments reveal, there are obvious differences between her and her adopted son. Despite Jasmine's desire to conflate Du's experiences with her own, he remains inviolate in his refusal to confide or share with her. However, it is easy to discount his presence at the margins of Jasmine's story for Jasmine's celebration of the American dream.

Ultimately the subversive moments within *Jasmine* are co-opted by the overall assimilationist thrust of the novel. In an interview with Bill Moyers ("Bharati Mukherjee: Conquering America") Mukherjee brings in an often ignored aspect of American national history when she stresses that Americans were hustlers, wresting the land from its owners and surviving against all odds. The hustler metaphor permits Mukherjee to forge connections between old pioneers and new immigrants like Jasmine who is both a survivor and a hustler. This, in turn, allows her the authorial right to dream the American dream, and, like her protagonist, Jasmine, wrest the country from its Anglo-American citizenry. By reminding the public of its problematic immigrant past, Mukherjee silences those who would complain about new waves of third-world immigration. Consequently, it might be said that the fact that Jasmine is not an ideal immigrant indicates the flawed nature of the American dream. Certainly, as the novel reveals, the dream fails for certain Iowa farmers whose unheroic deaths are overshadowed by Jasmine's success. However, Mukherjee and Jasmine are both too invested in the American dream to permit such an ironic subtext to threaten their dominant narrative of assimilation for very long.

Like *Jasmine*, Chitra Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* is another South Asian American text often taught in Asian American classrooms. It too adopts a conventionally formulaic tradition/modernity binary; however, when read against each other, some stories contradict the representations found in others thereby undermining homogenous national representations of either India or the US.

Divakaruni's description of Indian widows is a case in point. Widows play crucial roles in four of her short stories: "Clothes," "The Word Love," "The Ultrasound," and "The Maid Servant's Story." "Clothes" adopts the most stereotypical representation of widows as the recently widowed narrator elects to stay on in the US rather than return to India "because all over India, at this very moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut-off wings" (33). However, the other three stories counter this Orientalist representation of Indian widowhood in interesting ways. In "The Word Love" the widowed mother, far from fitting the traditional concept of the widow as social outcast, gets reconfigured into the guardian of national culture who sacrifices her own relationship with her daughter for the good of the nation. After her husband dies, she follows orthodox Hindu conventions by taking off her jewelry and wearing widow's white, but she also maintains complete autonomy over her household and her daughter going so far as to

disown the latter when she stays out late with friends and later when she moves in with her American boyfriend.

Her adoption of the dual role of mother and daughter finds historical parallels in the lives of the late Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, and her daughter-in-law Sonia Gandhi. Widowed at a relatively young age, Indira Gandhi quickly adopted the public persona of Mother of the Nation, while popular sympathy for Sonia Gandhi after her husband Rajiv Gandhi's 1991 assassination helped the Congress Party come back to power and win the elections of 2004. Indeed, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan points out, "In the familial/dynastic aspects of identity that many third-world women leaders have embraced, as daughters, wives/widows, or mothers, gender is an inevitable component. It is invested with considerable affect (especially in populist appeals to the masses)" (110). It is consequently possible to read Divakaruni's widow's control over her household as a metonymy for the control other widows exert over the nation-state. This is particularly important given how badly widows, especially lower-class ones, continue to be treated in India. However, it is also necessary to remember that the political symbolism invested in women leaders limit their personal freedom. For instance, in the midst of all her popularity Indira Gandhi is said to have bemoaned the absence of a private life (Sunder Rajan 107). So too in Divakaruni's stories the widow's role of guardian of national culture comes at the cost of her sexual autonomy.

In "The Maid Servant's Story" the widowed mother always appears removed from her daughter and rumor has it that with the death of her husband and son in a cholera epidemic in Calcutta, a part of her had died too. However, as the story unfolds it turns out that instead of mourning their deaths, she is grieving the friendship that developed between her and her maid servant, which was forced to end when her husband began to sexually exploit the latter. What the widowed mother had desired was a gender-based alliance across class lines and the inclusion of the maid servant into her family. However, their friendship and solidarity threatens middle-class patriarchal family values that privilege her husband's needs over his wife's or her servant's, and is consequently destroyed. The reader/daughter's insight into the widow's grief does however point the way to a more meaningful understanding of gender and class based relations than that presented in the first story.

"The Ultrasound" also breaks with the patriarchal depiction of home found in "The Word Love" to create a space for female solidarity. The narrator who now lives with her husband in the US comments on the differences between her widowed mother and her best friend Runu's mother. While the narrator's mother deviates from social norms in order to become economically sufficient, Runu's mother clings to traditions that imprison her. Later when Runu's in-laws find out that she is pregnant with a girl child, they pressure her to have an abortion. Runu's mother sides with her in-laws and it is left to the narrator to advise Runu to leave her home and go and stay with the narrator's mother. The story ends before we know what happens to Runu, but the subversive widow's home remains a possible place of refuge for Runu should she need one.

Divakaruni's stories about life in the US also share the same tension between assimilation and social critique that is found in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. In "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs," the narrator's uncle-by-marriage lives in a run down, racially conflicted neighbourhood in Chicago. His shop is broken into several times and he has to pawn his wife's wedding jewelry to continue to live in the country. The narrator's middle-class fantasies about America are threatened when she and her aunt are spat upon and called "niggers"⁴ by a group of young white boys: "The word arcs through the empty street like a rock, an impossible word which belongs to another place and time. In the mouth of a red-faced gin-and-tonic British official perhaps, in his colonial bungalow, or a sneering overseer out of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as he plies his whip in the cotton fields" (51). As the quote implies, the narrator can only relate to racism through literary and colonial references and is confounded by the immediate reality of the racism she experiences. She tries to neutralise the threat of this racism by focusing on the obvious youth of the perpetrators, but is forced to realise that her class-based privilege in India cannot shelter her from racism in the US. Consequently, she longs to return to her home in Calcutta "where things were so much simpler" (55).

In his essay "The Fact of Blackness" Martinique psychiatrist Frantz Fanon describes the psychological effects of colonialism that are made manifest in the self-hatred he feels when he encounters the gaze of the dominant white Other who defines him as black and inferior. Faced with this racist gaze, Fanon says the black (wo)man has no option but to turn white or disappear (109-40). Having been confronted with the fact of her blackness, the narrator of Divakaruni's story similarly aspires to escape into the beauty of whiteness. Her desire to distance herself from the wretchedness of her uncle and aunt's condition is paralleled by the desire she shares with Jasmine to escape into an Anglo-American middle-class world of class and privilege. The white professor of the narrator's dreams would confer an honorary whiteness on her, but in his absence she is willing to undergo the pain of transformation in order to achieve the privilege of whiteness. At the end of the story as she stands on the balcony watching the snow fall, she notices "the snow has covered my own hands so they are no longer brown but white, white, white. And now it makes sense that the beauty and the pain should be part of each other. I continue holding them out in front of me, gazing at them, until they're completely covered. Until they do not hurt at all" (56). The closure realised at the end of the story suggests the narrator is expressing a very "Fanonian" desire to turn white.

However, despite this desire, she cannot rid herself of the violent reality of her uncle hitting her aunt when he finds out that she has disobeyed his wishes and left the house. The narrator attempts to mediate the violence of the act by emphasising her uncle's anxiety about his wife's safety and his frustration at his inability to give her a good life. The image of "Aunt's hand, stroking that angry pink scar (on her uncle's

⁴ Vijay Prashad points out that during British rule the word "nigger" was often used for Indians. See Vijay Prashad. *The Karma of Brown Folk*.

hand). Threading her long elegant fingers (the fingers, still, of a Bengali aristocrat's daughter) through his graying hair to pull him to her" (56) and the narrator's comment "how little I understood" of their relationship suggest that the extenuating circumstances of racism as well as the affection between her uncle and aunt somehow reduces and explains the fact of violence.

In this way the narrative's conciliatory tone suggests that it condones violence under extenuating circumstances. Thus, it strikes a tone, similar to that adopted by the Chicago-based South Asian immigrant community, which considers abuse to be caused by immigration-related problems rather than by gendered inequities in the culture (Lynch 425-37). The fact remains, however, that faced with the violence of racism outside and the violence of battery inside, the narrator's aunt is literally trapped in her make shift home in the new world. Unlike the mother in Divakaruni's story "Bats," who has a relative's home that she can escape to, the narrator's aunt is completely isolated by her immigrant condition. Faced with the racism of the United States, she accepts her husband's excuses at the cost of losing her voice and her life. The narrator, in turn, seeks to escape her aunt's fate by embracing dreams of white middle-class Anglo-America.

The narrator's dreams are typical of those of other Divakaruni immigrant heroines who abandon the stultifying rituals of the old home/country only to remain suspended in a dream world of hopes and desires. In the story "Clothes" when her husband is killed in an armed robbery in the 7/11 store he works at, the narrator opts to stay on in the US. In India clothes serve to define the narrator in socially normative ways; she is familiar enough with her own cultural traditions to know that her new pink sari will "dazzle Somesh and his parents and they [will] choose [her] to be his bride" (20), and later the ritual breaking of bangles, her purification bath, and the wearing of her white sari define her status as widow.

Consequently, she assumes that clothes will function in the same way in the US. But even though the jeans, T-shirt, and panty hose that Somesh buys her allow her to "[marvel] at the curves of [her] hips and thighs" (25), there is no guarantee, particularly in the face of the racism that kills her husband, that the cream blouse and long brown skirt that he gives her will magically provide her with a professional life. The narrator pictures herself "in front of a classroom of girls with blond pigtailed and blue uniforms, like a scene out of an English movie [she] saw long ago in Calcutta. They raise their hands respectfully when [she] asks a question" (27). The story ends with the narrator looking into the mirror and seeing "a woman [hold her] gaze, her eyes apprehensive yet steady. She wears a blouse and skirt the color of almonds" (33). Clothes in the US thus function as a simulacrum or a distorted version of reality,⁵ a mythical happy ending predicated on a desired image rather than an actual reality. Even in a postmodern America where style *is* substance, clothes cannot disguise racial difference and it is disingenuous of Divakaruni or her narrator to pretend that this is possible.

⁵ See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulacrum*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser.

The end of “Clothes” is remarkably similar to the end of Bharati Mukherjee’s “A Wife’s Story” when after her husband has returned to India, the narrator looks at herself “in the mirror... free, afloat, watching somebody else” (41). The illusory nature of both narrators’ dreams emphasises their desire for an idealised unmarked body presented in canonical feminist texts like Helene Cixous’ “Laugh of the Medusa.” Cixous advises women to recover their *jouissance* by writing their bodies into history but “the body” that she universalises is a white, middle-class one. Despite moments of critical disjuncture both *Jasmine* and *Arranged Marriage* ultimately endorse Cixous’ idea of an imaginary self waiting, in their case, to be reborn into an idealised American identity.

While most of the stories in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* also perpetrate Orientalist notions of essentialised cultural differences, two of her stories, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” and “Mrs. Sen’s,” do more overtly emphasise the need for the transformation of local US identities into globalised transnational ones. The stories share certain similarities: Mr. Pirzada is in the US on a temporary visa as a visiting scholar and Mrs. Sen is the spouse of a tenure-track professor from India who has only recently arrived in the country. More importantly though, the stories explore the perspectives of two children: Lilia, a second-generation Bengali American girl, and Eliot, a white American boy living with his divorced mother. Lilia is the narrator of “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” while “Mrs. Sen’s” is told from the perspective of the growing bond between Mrs. Sen and the little boy, Eliot, she babysits. Both Lilia and Eliot are mature beyond their years and are, consequently, sensitive to the complicated lives of the adults that surround them. It is in them that we see a double consciousness – a sense of being both global and local – developing.

“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” takes place during the Bangladesh war of 1971 when the people of East Pakistan rose up against their oppressors in West Pakistan to eventually win freedom as a separate country, Bangladesh. The rebellion was initially firmly subdued and thousands of refugees fled across the border into the state of West Bengal in India. The bond between Mr. Pirzada who is from East Pakistan and Lilia’s parents who are from West Bengal is articulated by Lilia who says the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, “made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same” (25).

Lahiri’s social commentary about the absurdity of partition is reinforced by her comment about Lilia’s parochial education. Lilia studies only American history and geography, and her schoolteacher, Mrs. Kenyon, chastises her for reading a book on Pakistan because it has nothing to do with her school report on the American Revolution (33). Although her father does try to give Lilia history lessons about South Asia, it is Mr. Pirzada who makes them real for her. “[T]he superb ease of his gestures, which made [her] feel, for an instant, like a stranger in [her] own home” (29) reinforces transnational Bengali community ties that Lilia has no experience of. At the dinner table as she watches Mr. Pirzada, “an uneasiness possessed [her]; life, [she] realized, was being lived in Dacca first” (31).

As the war progresses, the late night phone calls to India, the manufactured images on US television sets, and the adult conversations, all force Lilia to redefine her sense of family and home. After going trick or treating with her best friend Dora, Lilia compares Dora's home and "her father... lying on the couch, reading a magazine, with a glass of wine on the coffee table, [with] saxophone music playing on the stereo" (39) in her own living room, with "Mr. Pirzada, my father, and mother... sitting side by side on the sofa [with] the television... turned off, and Mr. Pirzada [with] his head in his hands" (40). The normality of a Halloween evening has been shattered as news from across the world reinforces the different realities that make up immigrant lives.

Lahiri's casual references to the mysterious shattering of Lilia's pumpkin and to the friendly comments about her being an "Indian witch" suggest that Lilia is slowly beginning to become aware of her racial difference. Thus, she is able to empathise with Mr. Pirzada's anxiety about his daughters and she even tries to explain that anxiety to Dora (39). However, her role as intermediary between two cultures is limited because she does not have the language or knowledge to translate the events of partition and civil war into a frame of reference familiar to her friend who can only liken Mr. Pirzada's anxieties to a suburban parent's fear of their child being kidnapped (39).

On a personal level though, Lilia's relationship with Mr. Pirzada introduces a transnational dimension into the rituals that make up her domestic space. She puts the candies he gives her in her grandmother's sandalwood box by her bedside table and every night she prays for the safety of his daughters in East Pakistan as she chews a piece of chocolate and goes to sleep without brushing her teeth for fear that toothpaste will wipe away her prayer (32). Lilia's actions mimic those of Hindu priests who distribute the "prasad" that has been blessed by the gods to the worshippers at their temples. Her actions also anticipate her mother's decision not to serve anything but hardboiled eggs and white rice for dinner for the duration of the war in sharp contrast to the delicious meals she would make before (44). Lilia's act of mimicry suggests that unlike Mukherjee and Divakaruni heroines who use their bodies as filters for a uniquely American consciousness, Lilia is re-making her body and by extension her self in order to be receptive to the other histories and lives that constitute her being. At the end of the story, Mr. Pirzada returns to his new country (Bangladesh) and is reunited with his real family. When Lilia and her parents receive his postcard from Bangladesh, Lilia recognises that a chapter of her life is over and she throws away her candies and stops her ritual. However, despite the narrative closure accomplished at the end of the story, the "process" of the story itself clearly charts Lilia's movement towards the incorporation of alternative histories and worlds into her self-fashioning of home and nation.

In "Mrs. Sen's," it is the American Eliot rather than the Bengali Mrs. Sen who opens up to a more hybrid perspective. Mrs. Sen is a recently arrived faculty wife whose husband teaches in the mathematics department at a university campus. Her inability to drive, which is typical of many Indian housewives, increases her sense of alienation in the US where she finds herself completely restricted to her apartment.

She especially misses the comfort of the neighbourhood women in India and often romanticises about life back “home” (115). In an attempt to duplicate this life, she concentrates on cooking foods from home, but Mr. Sen is too preoccupied with his work and Eliot’s mother is too provincial to appreciate her efforts. Even the outside world is hostile. When she takes the bus to the fishmarket, other passengers complain about the smell of the fish in her parcel and when she drives on the highway, she meets with an accident.

Significantly enough, it is Eliot’s own position as the child of a single parent who gives him little or no attention, which makes him sensitive to Mrs. Sen’s loneliness. Alone in her apartment with only Eliot for company, she plays audio-cassettes of her family’s voices, shows Eliot her saris, and re-reads old letters from home. In his role of intermediary between East and West, Eliot notices that: Mr. and Mrs. Sen do not touch each other even when they pose for photographs together (130); Mrs. Sen comes alive when Mr. Sen gives her a little attention (129); Mrs. Sen laughs and chats with the fish salesman (127); his mother lies to Mrs. Sen in order to avoid eating her food (118); Mrs. Sen takes him with her in the car because she is afraid to drive on her own (119), and she cries in the bedroom after her accident even though Mr. Sen tells Eliot’s mother that she is resting (135). Significantly enough, the story ends with Eliot and not with Mrs. Sen. After the accident, Eliot’s mother decides that he is too old for babysitters and so he becomes a “latch key kid.” When his mother, on his first day home alone, calls to ask if he is alright, “Eliot looked out the kitchen window, at gray waves receding from the shore, and said that he was fine” (135). Silence speaks louder than words and the last line of the story suggests Eliot’s integration into a global and even cosmic consciousness that is beyond language.

Moreover, his refusal to pass judgment on Mrs. Sen for endangering his life or on his mother for her narrow selfishness suggests that he is more open to the hybridity of experience than any of the other characters in the story. As Mrs. Sen tells him, “When I was your age I was without knowing that one day I would be so far. You are wiser than that, Eliot. You already taste the way things must be” (123). Like Lilia in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” Eliot can redefine his sense of home and nation in an inclusive and pluralistic way. Both children, thus, serve as intermediaries and translators between East and West as they begin to embody a global consciousness that moves beyond essentialised cultural differences.

In conclusion, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” and “Mrs. Sen’s” bring to fruition the subtle critique of a utopic American national identity presented in the works of Mukherjee and Divakaruni paving the way for a more contemporary transnational America. Not only does this literary development mirror theoretical changes within the field of Asian American studies since the eighties, it is also more appropriate to the needs of a post-9/11 world where even middle-class immigrants are not immune from racism or protected from terrorist attacks and US maneuvers in the Middle East continue to destabilise much of South Asia.

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