From Hybrids to Tourists: Children of Immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri’s 
*The Namesake*

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**ABSTRACT:** Lahiri’s *The Namesake* is an example of the contemporary immigrant narrative, which does not place the idea of an “American Dream” at the center of the story, but rather positions the immigrant ethnic family within a community of cosmopolitan travelers. Examining the experience of upper-class South Asian immigration through the eyes of American-born children, Lahiri’s novel contains moments and tropes that resemble those of the travel narrative genre, particularly in its detached tone and digressive, pluralist narration.

**Keywords:** cosmopolitanism, immigrant novel, Indian Americans, Jhumpa Lahiri, travel narrative

Children, Cosmopolitanism, and the New Immigrant Novel

When Jhumpa Lahiri’s first novel, *The Namesake*, appeared in 2003, critics such as David Kipen, Gail Caldwell, and Stephen Metcalf hailed it as a richly detailed exploration of the immigrant family. Lahiri’s work is still relatively new, and the corpus of criticism about it still small (a search for Lahiri in the *MLA International Bibliography* yields only sixteen articles); the majority of writing on Lahiri has focused on her first collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*, and scholars and critics have dubbed her a documentalist of the immigrant experience (see Goldblatt; Dubey). *Interpreter* does include a few short stories about immigrants who travel from India to America, and the last story in particular, “The Third and Final Continent,” is based loosely on the experiences of Lahiri’s parents.
Her novel, although it does revisit the themes of immigration and acculturation that she introduced in her collection, cannot be called only an immigrant narrative. Michiko Kakutani said that Lahiri’s novel is “[. . .] about exile and its discontents, a novel that is as affecting in its Chekhovian exploration of fathers and sons, parents and children, as it is resonant in its exploration of what is acquired and lost by immigrants and their children in pursuit of the American Dream” (E1). The first part of Kakutani’s quotation is correct—the novel is an exploration of intergenerational differences as well as the losses and acquisitions of an immigrant American family. But she oversimplifies the idea that the book is an immigrant narrative about the pursuit of the “American Dream”—a cliché of immigration on par with that of “the melting pot.” This dream has its roots in Western Christian models of pilgrims seeking a “beacon on a hill,” a “New Jerusalem”; as Cynthia Sau-ling Wong says in writing about Asian American literature—non-European, non-Christian immigrant autobiographies are “indifferent” to the concept of a “dream” that is saturated with Christian symbolism of seeking and finding Eden. I claim that Lahiri, as part of this growing Asian American author group, is less interested in the pursuit of the American Dream as it was traditionally rendered in older immigrant narratives than she is in focusing on what happens once that dream (in its variety of incarnations) is achieved, not only by the generation of immigrants but also by its children.

This difference between the immigrant generation and its children is important in understanding how the immigrant novel has changed. Lahiri is part of a vanguard of young, contemporary ethnic American writers whose novels, short fiction, and memoirs suggest that assimilation—cleaving to the hope of an “American Dream”—is no longer at the heart of the immigrant story. Instead of shedding the trappings of the home culture and throwing himself headlong into the work of Americanizing, the protagonist of the contemporary immigrant novel—whether an immigrant or a child born to immigrants—is more concerned with his or her dual identity as it manifests itself in America and in the shrinking global community. Lahiri’s depictions of the elite class of Western-educated Indians and their children’s relationship to both India and America dismantle the stereotype of brown-skinned immigrant families that are always outsiders to American culture and recasts them as cosmopolites, members of a shifting network of global travelers whose national loyalties are flexible. In so doing, she correctly depicts the new generation of immigrants in literature as moving beyond the cliché of the “American Dream,” and she takes her place among contemporary novelists such as Gish Jen and Bharati Mukherjee from Asia, but also European and Caribbean authors who challenge the Western Christian notion of the search for edenic America, such as Gary Shteyngart and Julia Alvarez. Lahiri, in her attempt to portray an immigrant family that is not beset by poverty or persecution, blatant racism, or a punishing quest for economic success, remains true to the complexities of earlier immigrant novels while also differentiating herself from that literary precedent and aligning herself with other contemporary immigrant authors.
In *The Namesake*, Lahiri’s immigrant family challenges the stereotypes of the disenfranchised immigrant who remains in one place once he or she reaches America’s shores, trapped by poverty or political and legal restrictions. As Zygmunt Bauman writes (89), immigrants and their children have ceased to be “locally tied” and have entered what Arjun Appadurai calls the world of “global flows” (30), or what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls “cosmopolitanism” in the book of the same name. Today’s immigrant characters, particularly the children of immigrants, like their creators, belong to a world of cosmopolites that Tim Brennan described as “exempt from national belonging” and who are perennial migrants “valorized by a rhetoric of wandering” (2).

This rhetoric of wandering pervades Lahiri’s novel and is evident in the novel’s recursive structure, third-person narration, and character development. The novel’s narration opens from the perspective of Ashima Ganguli, the mother of the protagonist Gogol, the “namesake” of the novel’s title. The novel eventually breaks off from Ashima’s perspective to follow the life, travails, and innermost thoughts of Gogol, Ashima’s child, but then transfers briefly to the interests of Gogol’s wife, Moushoumi, an Indian American woman who was born, like Lahiri herself, in London. The novel then returns to Ashima and ends with her widowhood and her plans to return to India, where she will spend part of each year in her retirement. This wandering narrative structure, which allows the reader access to the emotional lives of several characters while still focusing mainly on Gogol, reflects the unfixed sensibility shared by all of the characters, whether immigrant or native-born American.

The narration, shared by two generations of Gangulis, also speaks to the contemporary fact that even the older generation of immigrants is beginning to see America not as a newly adopted homeland, but as an option—Ashima does not feel bound to stay in America, nor does she feel nostalgically driven to return to India, but rather, seeks to divide her time between the two countries. Conventional wisdom seems to suggest that immigrants are just as Emma Lazarus’s 1883 poem “The New Colossus” describes them: “the huddled masses” who are “yearning to breathe free” and who, once they reach “the golden door,” will have been fulfilled (203). Immigrant literature often represents immigrant characters as such: poor, disenfranchised people coming to America in search of opportunity, seen in novels such as Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers* (1925), and O. E. Rolvaag’s *Giants in the Earth* (1927). These novels focus on a central immigrant character whose trials and tribulations are often rewarded by economic or educational success. Rolvaag’s characters find their piece of the American Dream in the parcels of land available to homesteaders out west at the close of the nineteenth century; in the case of Cahan, David Levinsky becomes a rich businessman, while in Yezierska’s novel, the protagonist Sara Smolinsky achieves her dream of becoming an English teacher.

These immigrant characters are typical of many novels about immigration, across ethnicities and nationalities. In fact, most immigrant narratives share themes and tropes, and Lahiri’s novel bears many marks of earlier immigrant narratives. William Boelhower, in writing about Italian immigrant narratives, attempted to codify the
narratological devices of immigrant writings. He found that immigrant autobiographies had three narrative constants: anticipation, contact, and contrast (14, 15). I mention Boelhower here because his troika of tropes is present not only in autobiography but also in immigrant fiction, which is often at least semi-autobiographical (as in the case of, for example, Yezierska).

Lahiri’s novel also describes the anticipation of the parental immigrant generation to make a new life in America (which is bound up, for mother figure Ashima Ganguli, in the birth of her child on American soil); her novel also describes the awkwardness of the contact with America (in terms of linguistic and cultural mistakes that Ashima makes), and she explores the contrasts between the old and new worlds. One thing that Boelhower elides, however, is the more complex themes within immigrant novels, which often center on the disillusionment that immigrants experienced once they landed on American soil: that America was not a land ready to accept them (as in Rolvaag’s novel, where the Norwegian immigrants encounter xenophobia, but also face a literal rejection by the land as they struggle to farm it); that America required hard labor of its newest residents (as in Yezierska’s novel, where the heroine must work in a sweatshop to pay for her education); that assimilation asked the immigrant to shed his or her ethnic particularities (as in Cahan’s novel, where the protagonist divests himself of the garb of Orthodox European Judaism). Despite their disillusionment, these older immigrant characters did not, or could not, leave their adopted home or return to their native lands; in contrast, the disillusioned or disappointed ethnic Americans in Lahiri’s novel and the novels of her multicultural contemporaries can and do leave America—some return to their countries of origin, while others divide their time between countries. Lahiri’s novel also suggests another possibility, one that she does not share with some of her contemporaries: that the immigrant or child of immigrants does not become disillusioned with America because America is not the endpoint of his or her travels. America becomes a stop on the voyage to discover a better life, a more fulfilling career, or a more interesting lover; and this voyage is no longer unidirectional, or even bidirectional, but is continuous and global.

**Lahiri’s Rhetoric of Wandering and the Travel Narrative**

In *The Namesake*, Gogol, the child of immigrants, does not feel dislocated, because he is at home in America. Nevertheless, the constant flux of travel in his life and the unsettled feeling that accompanies his parents’ immigration creates, out of necessity, a desire to travel, to discover a place from which to leave and to which to return. For the immigrant generation, the return is always to India: Gogol’s parents go back to their home again and again for funerals, vacations, and other family functions. America, for them, is not entirely a new adopted home, and India is never completely forsaken. For the children (namely, Gogol, his sister, and his wife), it is not India to which they turn for comfort or to reinforce any nascent
nationalist impulse; for them, the return must be to their parental home in America, a place where India is re-created, albeit in a diluted form. These children do not see India as their country of origin or as a putative homeland, and they can only define home as the place where their two cultures merge—the literal and metaphysical location is in their parents’ house.

Gogol, whose life resembles that of other American children of a certain class—he eats hamburgers instead of traditional Indian foods, grows up to attend Yale, and acquires multiple girlfriends before marriage—spends most of his life traveling away from his Cambridge home, either to India with his parents or to less “exotic” locales such as New Haven and New York. But he desires a “return” to his Indian-inflected parental home and his Indian community in Massachusetts after the death of his father, which awakens in him a sudden need to reconnect with lost Bengali rituals; this desire to return culminates in marriage to an Indian American woman, who is an immigrant born in London but feels that her spiritual home is Paris. The novel, therefore, suggests that to the American-born second generation from India, the idea of a “home country”—a desh, as Lahiri calls it—is fallacious; but the idea of a community of conationals or ethnically and religiously bound expatriates is a reality that permeates their experience, and that inspires in them a sense of pluralist identity.

The perspective of the child of immigrants in Lahiri’s novel illustrates the position in American culture that he occupies. It is a unique position: on one hand, the child born in America is unequivocally American; on the other hand, he is visibly different from his Caucasian conationals. Lahiri herself has articulated this notion in an interview:

I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants—those with strong ties to their country of origin—is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. (Readers 2003)

Lahiri’s novel examines this existential confusion, but it also complicates it: children of immigrants do not always feel closely tied to their country of origin, but rather, they feel American. They move fluidly between the private sphere of their Indian home life and the public sphere of their American experience. Their behavior is akin to that of tourists in their home countries; tourism, therefore, becomes a useful way of examining the psychic condition of the cosmopolitan children of immigrants in Lahiri’s novel. In fusing two closely related literary traditions—the immigrant narrative and the travel narrative—Lahiri enables readers to understand that a novel about an immigrant family can also focus on how the children of immigrants have gained a certain kind of power. Their power comes from economic and class ease, not from a sense of ethnic identity that is part of some mythic melting pot. Lahiri values the entitlement that American-born children feel to the goods and experiences that surround them.
Michael W. Cox states that Lahiri’s youngest characters provide her readers with “a more probing insight, perhaps, than her adult characters might allow into cultural difference and cultural accommodation, and in particular, into the not uncommon impulse to exaggerate or exoticize distinctions” (120). According to Cox, children do not come with the same emotional or cultural baggage as their adult counterparts and therefore are “largely judgment-free” (121), allowing them to act as translators between American culture and Indian culture (or Indian American culture). To expand on Cox’s notion, children in Lahiri’s novel are not only observers and translators of two worlds that encounter each other on American soil but also are conduits of change, importing American culture into their Indian homes and creating a kind of métissage that does not threaten their ethnic or cultural identity, but that enriches their experience.

Like his mother’s, Gogol’s sense of tourism emerges from his navigation of multiple cultures at once: his parental home, his American public sphere, his distant land of origin, the upper class he ascends to as he moves from his Ivy League school to his adult life. Lahiri deliberately plays up the idea of Gogol-as-tourist by combining her contemporary take on the immigrant-ethnic narrative with some of the tropes and themes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century travel writing. Gogol is constantly traveling, whether it be from his home to college, from Boston to New York, or from America to India; he also “travels” the terrain of a few failed romances and one doomed marriage, reinforcing the notion that travel and return are metaphors as much as physical realities in the lives of contemporary ethnic cosmopolites.

The term travel narrative covers an immense literary field, and there are hundreds of variations of the genre, including utopic meditations, such as Sir Thomas More’s Utopia, and empirical explorations, such as the writings of Richard Hakluyt (Hulme and Youngs 3). James Buzard writes that the history of “traveling” in Europe corresponds roughly to the period of the Restoration in Britain in 1660 to the accession of Queen Victoria to the throne in 1837 (38); with the growth of mass tourism, the tourist-as-writer inaugurated a new travel-writing paradigm that Buzard calls “the picturesque” (38). Nigel Leask expands on the notion of the “picturesque,” explaining that it rejected British “georgic conventions of prosperous husbandry” in favor of an exotic landscape that gave the reader a sense of arrest in history and in narrative (169).

As a young boy navigating his native Massachusetts, Gogol sees his surroundings as might a tourist seeking the picturesque—the language of the narrator, written in the present tense and in the third person, lends an air of detachment and neutrality to the narrative, as if Gogol is not experiencing his own life, but is watching himself travel through it. Part of his detachment might be a result of his youth; the novel follows Gogol from birth through the age of thirty-two, and it is not until he reaches adulthood that his perspective on his Indian family and his own ethnic difference changes. The majority of the novel focuses on his feelings as a child and teenager, thereby lending Gogol an air of immaturity, even into adulthood.
The narration emphasizes this notion when Gogol—who has visited India three times by the age of ten (67)—travels to Calcutta with his family for an extended stay. When Gogol is fourteen, his father earns a sabbatical from his job and decides to move the family to Calcutta. Gogol’s eight-month trip with his parents feels like a forced exile; he “dreads the thought of eight months without a room of his own, without his records, his stereo, without friends” (79). Gogol, like any American boy, feels the lack of his middle-class accessories, and Lahiri gently mocks his love of these objects, but eventually takes Gogol’s side, as if to say that American life is indeed more comfortable than Indian life.

Gogol indulges in the pastimes of a colonial-era traveler, visiting the famous sites, such as the Taj Mahal, and looking for the “picturesque.” As if to underscore Gogol’s role as a tourist, the narrator describes him participating in one of his favorite hobbies: sketching. Like a young John Ruskin in Italy, Gogol attempts to sketch the facade of the grand edifice, but “the building’s grace eludes him and he throws his attempt away. Instead, he immerses himself in the guidebook” (85). Like characters in E. M. Forster’s *A Room with a View*, Gogol increasingly relies on his guidebook to tell him about his country’s history; after all, he is not really of that country, as he was born in America.

As if to underscore Gogol’s status as tourist in India, Lahiri abandons the picturesque mode and writes what Mary Louise Pratt calls “sentimental plot lines of hard luck and victimization” (85). According to Pratt, several British imperialist travel narratives contain such plot lines to emphasize the ruggedness and shortcomings of the exotic locale and to prove the hardiness and pluckiness of the traveler, thereby assuring the British reader safe at home of his or her own physical and moral superiority (85). Gogol and his family encounter a series of unfortunate events on their way back from their excursion to Agra: Gogol’s sister has an allergic reaction to jackfruit; someone is stabbed in a compartment of their train; and after their return to Calcutta, Gogol and his sister become ill with a stomach ailment (Lahiri, *Namesake* 85–86). None of these experiences is life threatening to Gogol, but they increase his desire to return home. His stay in India becomes a mere sojourn in his life as a traveler, and he remains firm in his belief that the cultural goods available to him in America are superior to those of India, the grandeur of the Taj Mahal notwithstanding. He would trade in the Taj Mahal for the relief he finds when he returns home to his cupboards filled with familiar labels: Skippy, Hood, Bumble Bee, Land O’Lakes (87).

Such cultural relativism was common to colonial travel narratives. Gogol’s participation in such relativism, as well as his view of his parents’ homeland and his own presumed land of origin as lacking in comforts and corporeally rejecting him, signifies his own desire to be what he is: a slightly spoiled, middle-class American boy. His desire for the consumer goods of America, however, also marks him as a contemporary cosmopolite—someone who can claim to have lived in at least two countries and who has an appreciation for the goods that both can offer. His slight preference for American foods is, in fact, prescient—it is a sign of the “Coca-Colonization” of South Asia and the blend of Asian and American
cultures that Gogol’s peers will enjoy. Lahiri writes of Gogol’s childhood in the 1970s and 1980s with the advantage of hindsight; her description of Gogol’s love of peanut butter is her way of saying that Gogol’s behavior—that is to say, his appreciation of American goods over Indian goods—heralds the change in tastes that will sweep India in the twenty-first century, when young Indians in Kolkata will eat paneer tikka masala wraps as well as fried chicken at the local Kentucky Fried Chicken (see Roy).

Lahiri, however, resists the desire to attach the label *hybrid* to her characters. Had this novel been published ten years ago, it may have been read as an examination of hybridity, an exploration of what Homi Bhabha saw as the outcome of global diaspora and migration: “Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition” (114). Bhabha’s words—“disavowal,” “denied,” “estrange”—suggest a kind of violence and dislocation, as if the blending of cultures needs to be attended by attack, war, and domination.

Appiah offers an alternative; he writes that globalization can produce homogeneity through the proliferation of similar products, but that the erasure of distinctions among certain cultures can be beneficial these days:

> It’s true that the enclaves of homogeneity you find these days—in Asante as in Pennsylvania—are less distinctive than they were a century ago, but mostly in good ways. More of them have access to effective medicines. More of them have access to clean drinking water, and more of them have schools. Where, as is still too common, they don’t have these things, it’s something not to celebrate but to deplore. And whatever loss of difference there has been, they are constantly inventing new forms of difference: new hairstyles, new slang, even, from time to time, new religions. No one could say that the world’s villages are becoming anything like the same. (“Contamination”)

Appiah’s description of capitalism-induced global changes is largely positive, and he argues that they have less to do with people’s cultural or national identity (or loss thereof) but rather with individual demands for a better moral and physical lifestyle. His arguments also suggest that the kinds of hybridization brought on by economic growth and the spreading of global capital are not threatening to traditional cultures, but rather inaugurate changes that are progressive.

Appiah’s description of the discernment among consumers is a refreshing departure from the image of hybridization that Bhabha suggested, in which hybridity is the outcome of the violence of colonization: Appiah gives credit and agency to the traditional cultures that are experiencing a nonviolent “invasion” by Western products. He also suggests that America, as representative of the West, is not the dominating and invading nation that is spreading its capitalist power all over, but that America is itself not immune to the effects of global capital flows.

Lahiri’s story is really one of Appiah-style cosmopolitanism, in which Indian and American cultures bleed into one another when they encounter each other on
American soil and Indian immigrants are open to Americanization and cosmopolitanism because of the postcolonial, and therefore necessarily cosmopolitan, history of India itself. Lahiri’s novel, in its digressions into the past that feature an India prior to Gogol’s birth, underscores the idea that internal Indian class differences conferred an almost predetermined elitism on the children of the upper classes. In other words, those Indians of privilege migrated to America under auspicious conditions, which in turn enabled their children to succeed quickly in America. Ashima and Ashoke do not come to America to escape penury or persecution, as do so many immigrant protagonists from the early period; their journey to America is enabled by Ashoke’s middle-class upbringing in Calcutta.

The Ganguli men occupy a long-standing position of privilege in India, one that allows them the pleasures of reading foreign literatures, travel across India and to points abroad, and foreign study. Gogol’s great-grandfather is described as a great lover of Russian literature, who passes on his love for Nikolai Gogol to Gogol’s father, Ashoke (Lahiri, *Namesake* 12); this love of foreign literatures is a legacy of British colonial rule, and as a functionary in the British government, Ashoke’s grandfather benefited from this literary import. Ashoke nicknames his son Gogol, partly out of a sense of filial love and partly because of a specific incident that leads him to invest the name with superstitious power (21, 24, 28). Ashoke had traveled to America to study fiber optics at MIT (9). Clearly, the idea of a fixed, poor, disenfranchised Indian who comes to America to better his life through the discovery of some ineffable “dream” does not apply to Lahiri’s characters; the history of colonization in India creates a cosmopolitan culture and a “rhetoric of wandering” that even the immigrant generation recognizes. Gogol’s tourism, therefore, although particular to his Indian American experience, is somewhat inherited; the legacy of colonization cannot be seen as only violent, coercive, and destructive, but also, for the Gangulis, positive, in that it enables them—as members of an elite class—to acquire a Western education and to travel abroad. Gogol’s love for all things American and his tourist sensibility can be read in multiple ways: as a result of Americanization, as a legacy of colonialism, or as evidence of what Appiah would call a healthy “cross-contamination” of cultures that reaches back in history and continues today.

**The Cosmopolitanism of Love and Sex**

Gogol is not only a tourist in that he approaches the flavors and sights of his native America and his motherland of India with the dispassionate gaze and cultural relativism of the world-weary traveler—he is also a tourist in his approach to love. Gogol’s taste in women becomes another metaphor in the novel linked to tourism; Gogol “samples” several women from varied ethnic backgrounds in the novel, with the catholic appreciation of a gourmand on a gastronomic tour of France or Italy. Gogol has three major love affairs in the novel, and their arcs follow his own developing sense of identity.
The “rhetoric of wandering” that is crystallized early in the novel in actual scenes of tourism becomes implicit in Gogol’s “tour” of love and sex in Connecticut and New York. In his youth, he has affairs with Caucasian American women; his attraction to Caucasian women is not only similar to his attraction to the familiar commodities of his youth (like Skippy peanut butter) but also underscores Gogol’s sense of privilege: he does not see himself as different from these girls and does not see them as off-limits. The last love affair described in the novel, with another Indian American, culminates in marriage and divorce, and follows the narrative arc of “return”—after a brief “tour” through American romance, Gogol returns to the bosom of his ethnic community by marrying an Indian American woman in a traditional ceremony, returning again to his home and family after his divorce.

Gogol’s first stop on his tour of American women takes place at Yale with a student named Ruth. Part of Gogol’s attraction to Ruth is her heritage. Ruth tells him that she is the “child of hippies” and that she was raised on a commune in Vermont until she was seven (110). Although the reader might think that Ruth’s story is a rather unremarkable tale of hippie American parents and that Gogol’s personal story is far more “exotic,” it is Ruth who is painted in exotic terms by the detached language of the narrator: “[Gogol] cannot imagine coming from such parents, such a background, and when he describes his own upbringing it feels bland by comparison” (111). That Gogol should feel bland is a striking detail—he does not see himself as an American outsider, one who has a unique immigrant background and who is an ethnic minority in America, but rather, he sees himself as a “bland” American suburbanite, while the Yankee Ruth is rendered as the “minority.” Gogol’s romance with Ruth—an exogamous love affair—underscores his sense of himself as an American among a multitude of Americans, a dark-skinned man whose ethnicity does not set him apart from other Americans.

Gogol’s next major love affair is with Maxine, another American-born Caucasian woman. Maxine’s parents are wealthy Manhattanites; they all live together in an expensive townhouse in a chic part of New York City. Like his sexual relationship with Ruth, his love affair with Maxine is not fraught with notions of exogamy or miscegenation; once again, Gogol is not the brown-skinned exotic, but the rather bland and naive suburbanite who is suddenly thrust into the enticing land of the wealthy urbanite. He does not consider his attraction to a Caucasian woman problematic. Rather, class trumps race or ethnicity in this section of the book; instead of identifying as an ethnic minority who sexually desires the representative of the Western dominant culture, Gogol simply identifies as an American of slightly lesser means who is thoroughly enjoying his “vacation” with Maxine. While living with Maxine, he indulges in a cross-cultural orgy of shopping:

He goes shopping with her on Madison Avenue at stores they must be buzzed into, for cashmere cardigans and outrageously expensive English colognes that Maxine buys without deliberation or guilt [. . .]. Quickly, simultaneously, he falls in love with Maxine, the house, and Gerald and Lydia’s manner of living [. . .]. He loves the mess that surrounds Maxine, her hundreds of
things always covering the floor [. . .]. He learns to love the food she and her parents eat, the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat bakes in parchment [. . .]. He learns that one does not grate Parmesan cheese over pasta dishes containing seafood [. . .]. He learns not to put the wooden spoons in the dishwasher [. . .]. He learns to anticipate, every evening, the sound of a cork emerging from a fresh bottle of wine. (137)

Gogol desires Maxine’s mode of living, her utensils, and her food, and his curiosity verges on the voyeuristic, while the narrator’s descriptions verge on the orgiastic. Besides sexual pleasure with Maxine, he is seeking a fantasy of upper-middle-class American life. In this fantastic realm, Gogol “learns” to embrace Maxine’s customs; the repetition of the word learns points to his desire to adopt Maxine’s rituals, to make them his own.

In keeping with Appiah’s claims regarding capitalism and cultural exchange, Lahiri’s novel suggests that class is what truly connects people across national or ethnic boundaries. Gogol’s rise in class status, enabled by his parents’ economic success, results in his ability to take a sexual and consumerist tour through Maxine’s life.

Eventually, Lahiri does crush the lovely fantasy of life with Maxine by introducing an element of cultural and ethnic difference into the couple’s life together: when Gogol’s father dies, he returns home to Cambridge, where he and his mother and sister engage in traditional Bengali mourning rituals. At this point, Gogol recognizes his romance with Maxine for what it was: a temporary experience, a diversion. The return to his family and to Bengali rituals serves to reinstate for Gogol the importance of his ethnic difference, and he loses interest in Maxine.

In light of his return to his Indian-inflected Massachusetts home, it seems only natural that his next romantic conquest is an Indian American woman who is somewhat like himself. Moushoumi, unlike Gogol, emigrates to America from London at the age of seven; born to Indian parents, she is, like Gogol, not accustomed to seeing India as her homeland. Moushoumi is truly cosmopolitan, rejecting any claims to an Indian or American nationality. In fact, against her parents’ wishes, she majors in French, studies in Paris, and longs to return there.

When Moushoumi enters the novel, the narration shifts briefly away from Gogol to Moushoumi, and her subjectivity offers yet another perspective on the ways in which the child in Lahiri’s stories functions as a translator among cultures. Moushoumi is herself an immigrant, but she is also raised in America from a young age; she therefore occupies the same position of privilege and entitlement that Gogol does, and she feels that she is entitled to bourgeois accoutrements. When Gogol and Moushoumi begin dating, their affair is as lushly described and accessorized as Gogol’s affair with Maxine. This time, however, the romance is a “return” for both Gogol and Moushoumi; Gogol ends his affair with Maxine, and Moushoumi
breaks an engagement to a Caucasian American named Graham. Their love affair is, therefore, a metaphysical return to their expected cultural norms.

Gogol and Moushoumi’s marriage is the first real sign in the novel that Lahiri is not entirely ready to submit that her characters are fully entitled Americans; Lahiri seems to retract her initial endorsement of the idea that an Indian American has every right to feel wholly American only because he has ascended to the upper-middle class. It is ethnic identity, not class, that brings them together; ironically, it is also ethnic identity that drives them apart. Their affair is the first time that either of them finds a likeness in the image of an Indian person. When a stranger asks Gogol if Moushoumi is his sister, because of their physical similarities (203), the reader is aware that indeed, Moushoumi is something of a sister to Gogol: she is his compatriot and his coethnic. Whereas endogamous marriage is often the goal of traditional cultures, even those that live in diasporic communities, Lahiri’s narration of Moushoumi’s perspective on their lovemaking has a tinge of the incestuous about it; for this reason, perhaps, the union cannot last. After a year of marriage, Moushoumi begins to think that her love for Gogol is a rejection of the cosmopolitan life she imagined for herself:

After years of clandestine relationships, it felt refreshing to court in a fish-bowl, to have the support of her parents [. . .]. And yet the familiarity that had once drawn her to him [Gogol] has begun to keep her at bay. Though she knows it’s not his fault, she can’t help but associate him, at times, with a sense of resignation, with the very life she had resisted, had struggled so mightily to leave behind. He was not who she saw herself ending up with, he had never been that person. Perhaps for those very reasons, in those early months, being with him, falling in love with him, doing precisely what had been expected of her for her entire life, had felt forbidden, wildly transgressive, a breach of her own instinctive will. (250)

Moushoumi’s innermost thoughts, as related by the narrator, reveal a complexity in the way she thinks of herself and her identity in relation to Gogol. Moushoumi imagines herself as ending up with someone other than Gogol, and we can assume that she literally means an other: someone of a different ethnic background or nationality. In her self-fashioning, an Indian mate is something that would reaffirm her identity as an Indian American, not as an international cosmopolite, and so she calls her marital choice “transgressive” because it conflicts with her own expectations, even though it is entirely in keeping with her family’s cultural expectations. In the character of Moushoumi, therefore, Lahiri creates a foil to the comfortably American Gogol; although he feels at times like a tourist in his own country, he is a happy tourist, one who is content to savor the privileges and pleasures of his native country. In contrast, Moushoumi becomes deeply unhappy as her section of the novel progresses, and finally, in a truly transgressive act, she commits adultery and leaves Gogol to move to Paris, thereby fulfilling her desire to be a true cosmopolite. Not content to assimilate to any cultural norm, she breaks with the normative romantic tradition within which her family operates and changes the paradigm of India-to-America emigration. She also challenges the notion of “return”—after her marital voyage with Gogol, she chooses not to return
to her family or ethnic community, and she rejects American pluralism for European urbanity, exile, and expatriate life.

The Privilege of Banality: Intergenerational Differences

The insertion of Moushumi’s story into the larger story of Gogol and the Ganguli family’s experience somewhat undermines the idea that Lahiri believes the Indian born in America is truly an American; but Moushumi, after all, is technically an immigrant, and perhaps her insecurities and feelings of alienation stem from this fact. Gogol, on the other hand, is one of many children born to immigrant Americans and is therefore privileged to indulge in romantic and consumerist tourism, as well as in banal, touristy observations about his family’s experiences. At the end of the novel, in contrast to the global migrant Moushumi, Gogol is rendered in melancholy tones as a person who is unable to travel all that far from the familiar.

In the final section of the novel, the narrative circles back to the two characters who opened the novel with an intense scene of childbirth: mother and son, Ashima and Gogol. After her husband’s death, Ashima decides to return to India, living part of the year there and part of the year in America; in a sense, she does not perform a reverse immigration, but rather, becomes part of the shifting ethnoscapes of global sojourners: a true cosmopolitan traveler, one who is, as Lahiri writes, true to her name, which means “she who is limitless, without borders” (26). In an act that mirrors Ashima’s decision to divide her time between her two home countries, Gogol returns to his parents’ house in Cambridge for a farewell Christmas celebration—the narrator implies, at this point, that Gogol has been dividing his time between New York (his adopted home) and Cambridge, his parental home, but that with Ashima’s retirement to India, Gogol will be, effectively, without a home. His return is figured not as a homecoming as much as a recognition that he has, indeed, never left his home and that in his adult life, he now must encounter the unsettled and unfixed feeling that his parents felt on their arrival in America:

Gogol knows now that his parents had lived their lives in America in spite of what was missing, with a stamina he fears he does not possess himself. He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins; his parents, in bridging that distance as best they could. And yet, for all his aloofness toward his family in the past, his years at college and then in New York, he has always hovered close to this quiet, ordinary town that had remained, for his mother and father, stubbornly exotic. (281)

Gogol’s admission that he is not capable of the act his parents performed—crossing the world to build a new life in America—is the narrator’s most obvious moment of nostalgia for the immigrant generation’s bravery and of a certain disdain for the comfortable resignation of the children. Looking back on his deceased father’s peripatetic journeys between India and America, the protagonist
summons the following commonplace thought: “In so many ways, his family’s life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended, one incident begetting another” (287). This notion is so broad that it could apply to anyone’s family experience. The facileness of this observation illustrates not only a son’s romanticization of his parents’ immigration but also his own banality. He is so distanced from his parents’ sense of deracination and dislocation that he can afford to be banal. In a sense, Lahiri consigns this child of immigrants to the bin of triviality, because he sees himself as a “bland” American, whereas she elevates the immigrant as the person who deserves respect and admiration not only for making the voyage to America but also for struggling to maintain cultural ties to a faraway homeland.

Lahiri’s admiration for the bravery of the immigrant generation was made clear in the collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, in which the children of immigrants appear spoiled (as in the short story “Interpreter of Maladies”), whereas the immigrants are elevated to the status of heroes (“The Third and Final Continent”). In fact, the narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” compares his immigration to America in 1968 to the 1969 landing of Neil Armstrong on the moon; he finds that the space odyssey and the immigrant’s travels are both remarkable:

> While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (198)

The comparison of the narrator’s journey to a moon shot belies the seemingly modest and self-effacing statement “my achievement is quite ordinary.” In fact, the repetition of the word *ordinary* serves to highlight the extraordinary act of moving away from one’s homeland and making a new life for one’s family in a foreign country. To have lived on three continents is, Lahiri suggests, to have made a remarkable voyage. In fact, the notion of a “third continent” suggests that the voyage is continuous—the central character could have very easily gone on to a fourth or fifth, but his sojourn on the third continent is “final” only because he grows older and senses that he will die there. The immigrants of an older generation were formidable because they undertook the act of crossing the ocean and making a new life here; the contemporary immigrant in Lahiri’s fictional universe is different, but no less admirable, for undertaking the act of moving about in a new global economy of travelers. In an increasingly shrinking world, the immigrant’s voyage is, perhaps, not so extraordinary, but it is for this very reason that Lahiri’s novel and short stories seem to celebrate their journeys.

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NOTES

1. See Lahiri, Interview, Off the Page. In the interview, Lahiri says that “The Third and Final Continent,” the last story in Interpreter of Maladies, was inspired by an anecdote her father told about his arrival in the United States shortly after the moon landing.

2. Wong, complicating Boelhower’s arguments by looking at differences among ethnicities in America, asserts that Asian American literature is marked by a “matter-of-fact attitude toward the idea of going to America” that is devoid of the concept of the New World as a new Jerusalem or beacon on a hill (135).

3. By “older,” I mean pre-World War II, or narratives that can be considered part of the “first generation” of immigrant writers, who came to the United States during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. For more information on the “first generation” of immigrant writers, see Knippling xi–xix.

4. Cox examines, for instance, the example of “Mrs. Sen’s,” a story about an Indian immigrant woman who babysits Eliot, an eleven-year-old American boy. Eliot’s observations of his mother and his babysitter both “defamiliarize” the two cultures he encounters and also create “a mode of heightened awareness” (121). Eliot’s presence in the text allows for a comparison of both women, but also a comparison of how both women function within the American cultural context; Lahiri’s narrator and Eliot find both women somehow wanting, as Mrs. Sen is not comfortable assimilating into East Coast suburban culture (for example, refusing to drive or order pizza) and as his mother is uncomfortable in Mrs. Sen’s sari-clad presence.

5. As Leask writes, the “picturesque” travel narrative, usually written by a British colonial traveler, sought to give the reader “a sense of arrest in history and in narrative (169). This sense of arrest is linked to temporalization, for “the picturesque landscape is also a past landscape,” which contemplates the ruins of a past age “in the spirit of nostalgic detachment” (173).

6. For more information on the elite colonial and postcolonial middle class in India, see Teltser. Teltser discusses the rise of the bhadrolok, or elite class of Bengali bureaucrats who worked for the British, whose growing power helped spur the independence movement (191–206). Lahiri hints in the novel that the Ganguli family is part of this Bengali bhadralok class, even saying that the last name Ganguli is a British corruption of the surname Gangopadyay (Lahiri, Namesake 67).

7. For a discussion of the relative ease with which middle-class, educated Indians could immigrate to the United States, especially after 1965, see Bhardwaj and Rao 197–98; Helweg and Helweg; Assayag and Benei.

8. I borrow the term ethnoscope from Appadurai.

WORKS CITED

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