Ethnicity and Ethnic Grouping in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999)

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Abstract

This article investigates the impact of ethnic affiliation and grouping on Bengali immigrants to USA as reflected by the characters' development in Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). The comparative analysis will primarily tackle the cultural values and practices ensuring the distinctiveness of the ethnic group and the alternative means by which different representatives of the group struggle to cope with their marginal position and their sense of alienation and displacement. The most important question to be answered is if their ethnicity turns into either an insurmountable obstacle in their development or an indestructible bond which makes them stronger and guarantees their survival and triumph.

Keywords: Cultural shock, alienation, ambivalence, ethnic bond, in-between identity.

Introduction:

A key concept in postcolonial studies, ethnicity carries the challenge of a variety of definitions and interpretations. In their attempt to clarify the terminological problem, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin offer the alternative of a general understanding of the concept specifying that "Ethnicity is a term that has been used increasingly since the 1960s to account for human variation in terms of culture, tradition, language, social patterns and ancestry [...]" (2007, p. 75). On the same wavelength, closely related to the concept of ethnicity is the concept of ethnic group which basically comprises those individuals who share a common identity. Again in general terms, the simplest definition of an ethnic group focuses on the idea of distinctiveness: "A group that is socially distinguished or set apart, by others and/or by itself, primarily on the basis of cultural or national characteristics" (Ashcroft et al. 2007, p. 76). Throughout this article, we will refer to the concept of ethnic group reflected in Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories included in her 1999 volume *Interpreter of Maladies* in

relationship with the Bengali minority who immigrated to the USA in the aftermath of India's British colonization.

The Ethnic Bond – Building and Breaking Bridges

Born in London, England and raised in Rhode Island, America, Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to a family of Bengali Indian immigrants therefore her fictional work reflects the in-between position of ethnic identity, more precisely the condition of the ethnic writer "conscious of a between-worlds position" which "involves an intense re-working of issues such as oppositionality, marginality, boundaries, displacement, alienation and authenticity [...]" (Davis, 2000, p. XVI). In the following pages we shall tackle those short stories in her 2000 Pulitzer prize winning collection which feature characters who are Indian immigrants to America and are confronted with the ethnic ambivalence such an experience entails. For some of the immigrants described in these short stories, the burden is too heavy to carry consequently sooner or later they give up and return to the land they have initially chosen to abandon. As an illustration, Shukumar's mother in *A Temporary Matter*, the first short story of the collection, could not face living in America by herself after her husband's death, so she moved back to Calcutta leaving Shukumar to settle things with their old house. She has chosen to return to her homeland, probably not being able to adjust to the minority Bengali ethnic group in America or the larger majority American group claiming her and asking her to change in order to be integrated.

When Shoba and Shukumar dine together at the light of the candles the first time after the pain of Shoba's miscarriage, Shukumar cooks a typical Kashmiri dish called *rogan josh* (Lahiri, 1999, p. 11). Similarly, Shoba and Shukumar's use of their common ethnic background in their attempt to rebuild their broken relationship could not be a mere coincidence: " 'It's like India,' Shoba said, watching him tend his makeshift candelabra. 'Sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch. I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark. The baby just cried and cried. It must have been so hot' " (Lahiri, 1999, p. 12).

The Indian ritual of feeding the child its first solid meal by one of the mother's brothers is one of the things Shoba in *A Temporary Matter* had dreamt of for her future child and this is the reason why her disappointment is now beyond words: "Their baby would never have a rice ceremony, even though Shoba had already made the guest list, and decided on which of her three brothers she was going to ask to feed the child its first taste of solid food, at six months if it was a boy, seven if it was a girl" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 12).

The ethnic element seems to be affecting Shoba much more than Shukumar: while she remembers the holidays she used to spend at her grandmother's house in Calcutta, he admits that "he preferred sailing camp or

scooping ice cream during the summers to going to Calcutta" (Lahiri 1999, p. 13).

Ethnicity brings Shoba and Shukumar together since the first time they met was at a lecture hall in Cambridge where a group of Bengali poets were giving a recital. Ironically, they are both bored at the respective meeting perhaps because they do not understand the poems that are being recited. Their ambivalent status makes them share both a nostalgia for their Indian past and a predisposition to assimilate the cultural values of the dominant group to which they now belong. The end of the short story is concomitantly the end of their marriage; agreeing with Park, Stoican considers that "their baby's death stands for the dissolution of their common ethnic and cultural history, which would have been invoked for his upbringing" (2005, p. 76).

Balance between Ethnic Conservation and Assimilation

On the same lines, their common geographic origin brings together Mr. Pirzada and the family of the girl storyteller in *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*. On American ground, they are more likely to coalesce in the name of shared customs and practices although back home the ethnic conflicts might have separated them. Mr. Pirzada came from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, but at the time of the story (the autumn of 1971), a part of East Pakistan fighting for autonomy from the ruling regime in the west; married for twenty years and father of seven daughters, Mr. Pirzada was a lecturer in botany at the university in Dacca and had been awarded a grant from the government of Pakistan to study the foliage of New England.

The ten-year-old girl telling the story is not surprised by the fact that her Indian parents took Mr. Pirzada under their protective wing and shared their evenings with him at their house in Boston. The difference in cultural customs and practices made them long for compatriots for a potentially spiritually rewarding ethnic grouping:

The supermarket did not carry mustard oil, doctors did not make house calls, neighbours never dropped by without an invitation, and of these things, every so often, my parents complained. In search of compatriots, they used to trail their fingers, at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory circling surnames familiar to their part of the world. It was in this manner that they discovered Mr. Pirzada, and phoned him, and invited him to our home. (Lahiri, 1999, pp. 26-27)

In spite of their alliance abroad and of their shared customs, Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family can no longer enjoy the same nationality as her father explains to her in their rather ironic interchange: " 'What is it?' 'A glass for the Indian man. 'Mr. Pirzada won't be coming today. More importantly, Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian,' my father announced, brushing salt from the cashews out of his trim black beard. 'Not since Partition. Our

country was divided. 1947.' " (Lahiri, 1999, p. 27). Irrespective of her father's efforts to make her understand the ethnic differences between them and Mr. Pirzada, Lilia is witness to the reality of the everyday relationships they are engaged into therefore she perceives the artificial nature of the differentiation and prefers to rely on the authentic ethnic similarities that keep them together day after day:

It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. Nevertheless my father insisted that I understand the difference. [...] 'Mr. Pirzada is Bengali, but he is a Muslim,' my father informed me. 'Therefore he lives in East Pakistan, not India.'" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 28)

To her father's outrage at Lilia's lack of knowledge about her ethnic background, she candidly notes: "I had been there only once and had no memory of the trip" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 28). Having escaped from a politically troublesome region, Lilia's mother is willing to embrace a new ethnicity that would provide security and educational opportunities for her daughter:

'We live here now, she was born here.' She seemed genuinely proud of the fact, as if it were a reflection of my character. In her estimation, I knew, I was assured a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity. I would never have to eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from my rooftop, or hide neighbours in water tanks to prevent them from being shot, as she and my father had. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 29)

What Lilia's father has difficulties in accepting is that she grows up getting accustomed with a different ethnic group than that of her parents: "'But what does she learn about the world?' My father rattled the cashew can in his hand. 'What is she learning?' We learned American history, of course, and American geography. That year, and every year, it seemed, we began by studying the Revolutionary War" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 29). As Sinha notices, the child observer becomes an alter-ego of the ethnic writer herself inevitably reminding the readers of "Lahiri's own experiences of growing up as an immigrants' child" (2008, p. 189). For Lilia's sake, her parents "clearly make efforts to adapt, like their celebration of Halloween" (Maini, 2007, p. 162); nevertheless, the oscillation between the two cultures is perpetual as their preference for the Indian food and the interest in the news about that part of the world continue to indicate.

Food is a culturally-specific element drawing Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family together every evening for dinner; in a veritable ritual reiterating their ethnicity, Lilia's mother brings forth "the succession of dishes: lentils with

fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in a yoghurt sauce" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 33). Under the circumstances, food is used to hide and soothe their anxiety with respect to the ongoing war in India.

Worried for his family back home in Dacca, Mr. Pirzada uses his silver watch to keep track of the local time there as if this simple gesture would preserve his connection with his own ethnicity intact: "Unlike the watch on his wrist, the pocket watch, he had explained to me, was set to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 33).

What Lilia discovers with surprise and learns to accept in time is that her American colleagues at school are completely unaware of the political turmoil troubling both Mr. Pirzada and her parents so much: "No one at school talked about the war followed so faithfully in my living room. We continued to study the American Revolution, and learned about the injustices of taxation without representation, and memorized passages from the Declaration of Independence" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 36). Triggered by the curiosity to learn more about her ethnic heritage, Lilia goes to the library to work for a project at school, but shows interest to a book entitled *Pakistan: A Land and Its People*; with indifference and lack of understanding for the girl's desire to come to terms with her identity, her teacher Mrs. Kenyon dismisses Lilia's gesture as completely unnecessary and potentially problematic:

Mrs. Kenyon emerged, the aroma of her perfume filling up the tiny aisle, and lifted the book by the tip of its spine as if it were a hair clinging to my sweater. She glanced at the cover, then at me. 'Is this book a part of your report, Lilia?' 'No, Mrs. Kenyon.' 'Then I see no reason to consult it,' she said, replacing it in the slim gap on the shelf. 'Do you?' (Lahiri, 1999, p. 37)

The burden of a repressive political regime makes it even more difficult for Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family to have access to the information regarding India and Pakistan:

As weeks passed it grew more and more rare to see any footage from Dacca on the news. The report came after the first set of commercials, sometimes the second. The press had been censored, removed, restricted, rerouted. Some days, many days, only a death toll was announced, prefaced by a reiteration of the general situation. More poets were executed, more villages set ablaze. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 37)

The 12-day war between West Pakistan and India over the territory that was soon to become Bangladesh is reflected through the eyes of little Lilia who senses her parents' and Mr. Pirzada's despair and concern for their relatives caught in the struggle for power: "Most of all I remember the three of them operating during that time as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 45). When the war ends and Mr. Pirzada is able to go back and luckily be reunited with his wife and children, Lilia deeply feels not only Mr. Pirzada's

absence but also the bond of ethnicity: "[...] it was only then that I felt Mr. Pirzada's absence. It was only then, raising my water glass in his name, that I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 46).

The Impact of Ethnic Misrepresentation

The ethnic ambiguity surrounding the Das family confuses Mr. Kapasi, the tourist guide in *Interpreter of Maladies* who is struck by the Indian appearance and The American habits of the Das couple: "The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly coloured clothing, and caps with translucent visors. [...] When he'd introduced himself, Mr. Kapasi had pressed his palms together in greeting, but Mr. Das squeezed hands like an American so that Mr. Kapasi felt it in his elbow." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 49). Despite their Indian origins, Mr. and Mrs. Das behave like foreign tourists in their own country with Mr. Das dutifully studying a "paperback tour book, which said 'INDIA' in yellow letters and looked as if it had been published abroad." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 49). As they proudly confess to Mr. Kapasi, both Mr. and Mrs. Das were born and raised in America; what brings them back to India are their parents who have returned to spend their old age in Assansol in spite of supposedly having spent so many years in America. The implication would be that the attraction of the ethnic group that they had left behind was strong enough to lure them back to their motherland. On the other hand, the American-born and raised Mrs. Das completely belongs to a different ethnic group therefore she does not react in any way to the inappropriate words of a Hindi love song one of the workers at a tea stall is singing to her: "Mr. Kapasi heard one of the shirtless men sing a phrase from a popular Hindi love song as Mrs. Das walked back to the car, but she did not appear to understand the words of the song, for she did not express irritation, or embarrassment, or react in any other way to the man's declarations." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 51).

Hired by the local doctor to translate into Gujarati the symptoms of people's maladies, Mr. Kapasi triggers Mrs. Das's curiosity with respect to such a strange profession and he misinterprets her interest in romantic terms. The interesting aspect is that Mr. Kapasi sees their possible future romantic involvement as a communion between two people belonging to two different ethnic groups: "He would explain things to her, things about India, and she would explain things to him about America. In its own way this correspondence would fulfil his dream, of serving as an interpreter between nations." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 66). In fact, both Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das are wrong in their assumptions about each other: while Mr. Kapasi dreams of building bridges between nations, Mrs. Das is seeking penance and

forgiveness for her affair that led to the birth of her son Bobby, an affair Mr. Das has never been aware of. They are both disappointed in their expectations therefore Mr. Kapasi is aware that at the end of their one-day trip their paths will never cross again.

The Fear of and Fascination with the Other

In *Sexy*, Miranda is drawn into an affair with Dev not merely because of her loneliness, but also because of his representation of the other: "Dev was Bengali, too. At first Miranda thought it was a religion. But then he pointed it out to her, a place in India called Bengal, in a map printed in an issue of The Economist." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 93). Her fear of the other has its roots in the prejudices her family and neighbours shared with respect to the Indian family living close to their house; when nine-year-old Miranda was invited to the birthday party of the Dixit girl, she is overwhelmed by everything that represents the other: "a heavy aroma of incense and onions," "a pile of shoes heaped by the front word" and especially the terrifying painting of goddess Kali. As Shankar rightfully notices, "Lahiri's restrained narrator diplomatically translates and 'American' child's internalized and socialized fear of the strange, the alien, the repulsive, barbaric, hence demonized 'Other' " (2009, p. 40). During her affair with Dev, she thinks back of her childhood and she feels ashamed for her previous ignorance.

Out of love for Dev, she is willing to learn more about Indian customs so she goes to an Indian restaurant to try Indian food and buys a Teach Yourself book to study the Bengali alphabet. When she more or less manages to write down her name in Bengali, she passes through the cultural shock of realising that "somewhere in the world [...] it meant something." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 107). At the end of the story, Miranda understands that her fascination with the other is not enough to support a relationship based on lies and deceit and that Dev does not truly love her, but perhaps only the other in her and the temptation that the other entails.

The Alienating Consequences of the Lack of Adaptation

If in *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* little Lilia is the one who recounts the ethnic closeness between Mr. Pirzada and her family, in *Mrs. Sen's* it is eleven-year-old Eliot who witnesses the adaptation problems experienced by thirty-year-old Mrs. Sen, the Indian wife of a mathematics professor who left his native country for a teaching position in America. Mrs. Sen's inability to learn how to drive is in fact nothing else but an expression of her refusal to fit in her new environment and her persistence in comparing everything with her true home:

'Yes, I am learning,' Mrs. Sen said. 'But I am a slow student. At home, you know, we have a driver.' 'You mean a chauffeur?' Mrs. Sen glanced at Mr.

Sen, who nodded. Eliot's mother nodded, too, looking around the room. 'And that's all... in India?' 'Yes,' Mrs. Sen replied. The mention of the word seemed to release something in her. She neated the border of her sari where it rose diagonally across her chest. She, too, looked around the room, as if she noticed in the lampshades, in the teapot, in the shadows frozen on the carpet, something the rest of them could not. 'Everything is there.' (Lahiri, 1999, p. 126)

In the confinement of her apartment, Mrs. Sen is trying to preserve the customs she got used to while living in India; she loves chopping the vegetables with a special blade on newspapers on the living room floor as it reminds her of the happy gatherings back home when women met and laughed and gossiped while slicing the vegetables in preparation for some wedding ceremony. She cannot resist comparing the pleasant chatter at home with the overwhelming silence that keeps her awake all night long here. Moreover, she misses the sense of companionship and security that made her feel so safe in India:

'Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?' 'Mrs. Sen, what's wrong?' 'Nothing. I am only asking if someone would come.' Eliot shrugged. 'Maybe.' '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 one whole neighbourhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements.' (Lahiri, 1999, p. 128)

The only two things that make Mrs. Sen happy are the arrival of a letter from her family and getting fresh fish from the seaside, both of them things related to her ethnic background. Whenever she receives some news from her family in India, Mrs. Eliot has the sensation that "Mrs. Sen was no longer present in the room with the pear-coloured carpet." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 133). She expresses regret for not being able to see her sister's baby girl or to attend her grandfather's funeral.

Instead of feeling content with her uniqueness in America, Mrs. Sen is disappointed that there is only one Sen in the telephone book whereas in Calcutta her family name is one in many. The longer she stays in America, the higher her sense of alienation and ultimately her depression grow; the only silent witness to her despondency and grief is little Eliot who chooses not to tell the truth to his mother: "He didn't tell her that Mrs. Sen paced the apartment, staring at the plastic-covered lampshades as if noticing them for the first time. He didn't tell her she switched on the television but never watched it, or that she made herself tea but let it grow cold on the coffee table." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 139). Extremely sad and touching are the moments when she listens to the cassette her family had made for her on the day of her departure: one speaker sings a song, another recites a poem and her mother enumerates the things that happened the day she left India: "The price of goat rose two

rupees. The mangoes at the market are not very sweet. College Street is flooded." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 140). The attachment to her homeland is so strong that she feels completely helpless whenever she considers she is under threat of adopting any invasive new custom. Her fear of driving reflects her fear of the new culture to the extent that she even becomes insecure in using the English language that she otherwise masters: "[...] he saw how that same stream of cars made her knuckles pale, her wrists tremble, and her English falter. 'Everyone, this people, too much in their world.'" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 132). She denies the possibility that their world is or could become her world; in the end, her misery and recklessness make her act on impulse and even endanger Eliot's life by taking the car without having a driving license and having a car accident with no one seriously getting hurt, yet determining Eliot's mother as well as Mr. Sen to consider that the child is not safe within her care. Mrs. Sen's failure does not come as a surprise as it has been gradually prepared throughout the entire story by means of Eliot's observations concerning her "ever-aggravating forms of alienation and isolation" (Munos, 2013, p. XVII) and her inability to comply with the norms and unwritten regulations of her new surroundings.

Ethnic Integration

Similarly to Mrs. Sen, Mala in *The Third and Final Continent* will follow her husband who manages to get a job at Dewey Library in Cambridge. Because the narrator is in this case precisely her husband, we can only guess between the lines the untold drama of this woman whose parents forced her into an arranged marriage as they "had begun to fear that she would never marry, and so they were willing to ship their only child halfway across the world in order to save her from spinsterhood" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 198). This comment is more likely an expression of Lahiri's voice rather than that of Mala's husband who in previous comments does not seem to mind the arranged marriage and matter-of-factly enumerates the so-called talents of his would-be wife considering that he even does her a favour by taking her into marriage since she had reached 27 years old and other men had already rejected her because of her looks: "I was told that she could cook, knit, embroider, sketch landscapes, and recite poems by Tagore, but these talents could not make up for the fact that she did not possess a fair complexion, and so a string of men had rejected her to her face." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 198).

Both *Mrs. Sen's* and *The Third and Final Continent* explore the difficulties of integration into a new ethnic environment and at the same time shed some light on the relationships between men and women highlighting the reasons beyond the discrepancy in their level of adaptability to totally different circumstances. While Mr. Sen's and Mala's husband go to work all day long, their wives are confined to the restricted area of their household; it is true that

they are accustomed with such a position from their Indian background, but the difference is that in America they represent a minority since the other women go to work the same as their husbands. All of a sudden, they are left on their own with no other companions to share their emotions and feelings; through Eliot's eyes, in *Mrs. Sen's* the readers have a glimpse of the depression such a woman must pass through and they may assume that Mala must experience the same things, but they are not brought into prominence by her busy husband who is much more concerned with his own adaptation problems than those of his wife.

In *The Third and Final Continent*, the narrator is 36 years old when he decides to accept the wife his older brother and wife have chosen for him; he has left India for England in 1964 and then he moved to America where he now earned a decent salary that allowed him to support a wife. Paradoxically, this man who seems to have no problems in practically purchasing a wife and is not too concerned with his wife's thoughts or feelings does not hesitate in acting submissively to his 103-year-old landlady Mrs. Croft whose behaviour is reminiscent of the Indian colonial past: " 'Sit down, boy!' She slapped the space beside her." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 199). What at first sight may look like tenderness and respect for her old age, it may also be translated in the habit of obeying the voice of colonial authority.

Although the narrator's detachment and indifferent attitude to Mala may be difficult to understand, his behaviour is excusable if seen from the perspective of his ethnic background. As Jhumpa Lahiri often notices in her short stories or novels, Indian men are not taught to publicly express their affection and besides, in this particular short story the narrator clearly admits that his was an arranged marriage and that he and his wife were nothing but strangers at the beginning. Gradually, they grow accustomed to each other to the extent that they explore the city together and they meet other Bengalis some of whom remain their friends over the years. Finding other people belonging to the same ethnic group gives them the necessary tranquillity and peace of mind to accommodate better to the new world. Once they become American citizens and they have a son in America, they decide to grow old in their new home; as a tribute to their former ethnic background, they try to teach their son to speak in Bengali or to eat rice with his hands, but they worry that he will never do that after their death. The final lines of the short story emphasize the narrator's pride in his achievements and especially in his capacity to overcome the ethnic barriers that seemed insurmountable at beginning of his journey:

Whenever he is discouraged I tell him that if I can survive on three continents than there is no obstacle he cannot conquer. 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 travelled, 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. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 216)

From *A Temporary Matter* to *The Third and Final Continent*, Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories included in her 1999 collection *Interpreter of Maladies* reveal the common characteristics of the Bengali ethnic group to which the characters in the short stories belong and at the same time confer the group its distinctiveness and keep it apart from the majority group.

Conclusions

The characters' immersion into the new environment leads to various confusing situations from which they may liberate themselves in three major ways: totally rejecting the new culture in favour of the old customs and values; completely embracing the new culture with its adjacent cultural forms and practices or oscillating in-between ethnic identities in a continuous process of transformation and search for a new identity.

Each of the short stories under analysis highlights the characters' choice of either one or the other of the three different ways as far as their positioning in terms of ethnicity and ethnic grouping is concerned. Ethnicity is practically the cornerstone first binding the Bengali couples in many of these short stories, but the way they consolidate or crush down in time depends on the solidity of their ethnic bound and on its permeability to new cultural influences. In *A Temporary Matter* the birth of the stillborn child dissolves Shoba and Shukumar's ethnic bond and paves the way for Shoba's emancipation; *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* praises the strength of the Indian couple formed by Lilia's parents who preserve their ethnic habits and customs and find a way to assimilate the new customs as well for the sake of their little daughter; *Interpreter of Maladies* rather pejoratively looks at the over-Americanization of Mr. and Mrs. Das seen through Mr. Kapasi's mystified eyes; the couple in *Sexy* is the only one between an American and a Bengali, but the fact that Miranda and Dev's relationship is an extra-marital one only enhances the idea that the typical ethnic bond of Dev's marriage is somewhere in the background and too strong to be broken by any temporary side-slip; Mrs. Sen's obstinate refusal and subsequent inability to interiorize and enjoy her new American life has tragic effects on her mental stability and her husband's attempts to understand and help her are too sporadic and feeble to really count or change the situation; last but not least, the couple in *The Third and Final Continent* seems to successfully survive the challenges of an Indian arranged marriage and the cultural shock of life in the New World, yet

the male narrator's subjective rendering of the events throws a shed of doubt and uncertainty over the credibility of his claims of happiness.

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