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THE LANGUAGE OF DIASPORA IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *UNACCUSTOMED*  
*EARTH*

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at the

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This thesis has been approved  
for the Department of ENGLISH  
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**ABSTRACT**

This study combines Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony with the study of diaspora because it allows for an inclusive study of the reciprocating relationships between culture, language, and the representation and acculturation of identity. Polyphony can not only address the present and future sense of self of characters, it can also keep diasporic studies from becoming too limiting by exploring the different voices at work in the characters' construction of self.

Jhumpa Lahiri's short fiction is appropriate for this study because of her stories' simultaneous autonomy and interconnectedness, a key component to polyphony. As Lahiri's characters remember back to earlier generations and look ahead to future ones, and as they constantly struggle to construct an identity in their interactions with diverse and traditional characters, Lahiri's stories emphasize the transience not only of a sense of self dependent upon locale, but also of how a sense of self is always contingent upon a character's ability to cope with and communicate with an ever-changing world. In general, the characters who rely too heavily on homeland nostalgia and the characters who look only toward progressing in diasporic space are unsuccessful in finding a space for their own identity. To truly construct self revolves around the ability to transcend these oppositions as either-or scenarios and accept and navigate them as personal options or beliefs.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

According to M.M. Bakhtin, “Verbal discourse is a social phenomenon” (259). The connection between language and society is not a new revelation; even common sense can unveil the inherently interconnected relationship the two have. However, since the significance language plays in the construction and formation of society is so natural, it can often be overlooked. The continually rising studies of diasporas, of how societies are constantly interconnecting and changing, can benefit from a more stylized approach to the role language plays in how newly formed diasporas fare. One author who consistently emphasizes the considerable role language plays in the formation of diasporas is Jhumpa Lahiri. Her narratives, which always intertwine elements of “Indian” and “American” life, abound in the type of verbal discourse that emanates with social implications.

## CHAPTER II

### DEFINING DIASPORA

The term diaspora comes from the Greek word *diaspeirein*, meaning scattering or dispersal. Sudesh Mishra explains how the term was originally “used to account for the botanical phenomenon of seed dispersal” (vi). However, the etymology of the word is now archaic when compared to how multiple fields currently use the term to refer to people and their movement across countries. The once literal meaning of seed dispersal has now become metaphoric, as people either flourish or wither in their new lands depending on their ability to adapt to the foreign social climates. As the world changes through processes of globalization and technology, the movement of people across geographical land becomes more common, and people more easily become the seeds that blow from land to land. By its very nature, diaspora is a term inclined toward transience. As the physical movement and intangible connections of people across the globe shift, so does the scholarly use of the term to describe such movement. Khachig Tololyan describes how “an even larger amount of authors working in various disciplines and non-scholarly genres [have] been using the word, giving it an ever larger variety of meanings”

(309). The term diaspora has therefore become a handy, if ambiguous, catch phrase in several academic fields as well as in popular media. The heightened popularity of the term and its ever-broadening connotations has led to even more analyses of diasporas as well as of the term itself. Tololyan explains that the fact diaspora is so widely used reveals “scholars in one discipline, or even all concerned scholars together, would not fully control or determine the meaning of the key term” (309). It is not beneficial, then, to control and define an ever-changing concept, especially when the concept itself is relative to ever-changing people and identities. It can be beneficial, though, to address the criticized limitations of diasporas and attempt to clarify the significance of their use in literature. The following argument is but an attempt to make meaning of a large, ambiguous, and controversial concept in one specific scenario. Scholars in multiple fields have used diaspora to refer to a constantly changing, unsettled concept of cultural identity. Waltraud Kokot, Khachig Tololyan and Carolin Alfonso, for example, explore how the concept of culture and diaspora are now related to a “vast field of meaning, including global processes of de-territorialization, transnational migration and cultural hybridity” in their literary theoretical studies (1). As the reasons for people’s relocations across continents continuously, if even subtly, change, so will the definition of diaspora.

While it can be problematic to let the use of a word broaden too greatly, to the point that it cannot be discussed with a level of basic co-understanding, for a term based in the element of change, too much limitation and stability can ruin its productivity in literary analysis. As is the trend with most forms of literary analysis, many scholars have searched to define and locate, and therefore stabilize, the essence of the diaspora. Critic Ruediger Heinze explains that such limiting of diasporas as a unifying “explanatory



framework” actually neglect “the manifold, relational, and potentially conflicting dimensions of difference in cultural groups, as well as intercultural and transcultural differences and processes of differentiation” (191). Therefore, it is my intention to use diasporic studies as a tool of cultural analysis in a compilation of short fiction by an Indian-American author, with a constant awareness and allocation for the inherent changes constantly taking place in the real-life diasporic movement of people and their sense of identity. This analysis of Lahiri’s short fiction collection *Unaccustomed Earth* will be accomplished by analyzing the presentation of diaspora in a set of specific multi-cultural narratives, and discussing how the depicted diasporas have individual and societal effects.

Regardless of the ambiguity of the term, diaspora may continue to be a useful tool to analyze the ever-changing concept of culture, as long as it is allowed to change and grow with culture as it changes. Edward Said comments that “No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind” (Said, *Culture* 336). Even hyphenated terms like Indian-American are too limiting in a globalized world where ethnic or national labels do not even begin to attest to the multiple influences existing in an individual’s life. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has warned us to be cautious of the “hegemonic false cartography” of terms such as American Indian (154), so this analysis will do its best to look at the role of diaspora in the construction of individual’s selves without limiting it to a mere analysis of two divergent cultures existing within the same household. Rather, the term diaspora will be open for scholarly change as it notes the constant change and shifts in the culture of

literature. It will not only be analyzed for its effects on the first-generation immigrant, for example, but also for subsequent generations and the natives (individuals and communities) whom the migrants come in contact with.

To clarify the intended use of diaspora for the purposes of this analysis, I look to the ethnographic scholar Sunil Bhatia, who defines diasporas as “the transnational communities created out of the migrants’ back-and forth movement across societies, nations, the transportation of goods, labor, and commodities; and the contact between cultural rituals and the technology instantly connecting them to their home society” (34). This definition is helpful because it asserts the fact that diaspora cannot refer only to people, as people are constantly connected through different and increasing types of mediums. It also acknowledges that diasporas do not refer merely to immigrants who are forced to assimilate into a new culture; rather, they are newly formed communities that come to existence out of a conglomeration of various peoples and backgrounds. Therefore, the study of more recent diasporas can fulfill Gayatri Chakracorty Spivak’s hopes to put a “curb on ... superpower triumphalism” (xii). What is problematic about this definition, though, is the reference to the “home society.” The very implication of this term is that regardless of where a person moves and for how long she stays in the new locale, she will always be a foreigner, with a home elsewhere. In a world of plurality and technological connection, literature is beginning to reveal that people are not always limited to only one sense of home. In fact, many characters in diasporic literature suffer with their own construction of identity due in part to their multiple senses of home. Jhumpa Lahiri’s characters specifically resist polarizing notions of home: many

learn that they cannot cling to a sense of home in their native homeland nor leave it so can they fully assimilate into the new land.

Since all cultures are involved and hybrid (Said, *Culture* xxv), it is natural to use diasporas to analyze the role of culture and its role in changes in characters who become personally connected with a variety of backgrounds. Also since “The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored” (Spivak 113), this analysis will look at the role diasporas plays in cultural and individual representations. Kokot explains that anthropologists see identity “as the content of an ongoing process of boundary construction, being constantly reinvented and shifted according to the requirements of the situation” (Kokot, et al. 4). This connection begins to reveal the fruitfulness of analyzing the role diaspora plays for characters who constantly try to establish a sense of identity in lives that are rife with cultural, geographical, and personal change. As for the actual use of diaspora in the analysis of cultural change, I refer once again to ethnographer Sunil Bhatia, who uses diaspora “as an interpretive and heuristic device for analyzing concepts of identity, self, community, and belonging in the Indian migrant community” (75). I agree with Bhatia that diaspora should be a tool that is used as a way to open the analysis of the role culture plays in the formation of self, but I believe in the changing world of diaspora, it should be opened beyond only the first-generation migrants who must make new lives for themselves to include an analysis of the effects of diaspora on identity, nation, and the sense of community as well.

## CHAPTER III

### NATURAL PAIRS: DIASPORA AND POLYPHONY

In order to avoid letting the term diaspora become too limiting in the analysis of characters who must work through the troubles of moving across continents, it is helpful to join it with another form of literary analysis that naturally looks at the plurality at work within a character's sense of identity. Since diasporic study looks at the role different cultures play in the formation of a character's sense of self, it is natural to pair it with Mikhail Bakhtin's study of polyphony, which can refer to how a character expresses the different voices, and therefore cultures, at work within his sense of identity. Bakhtin states that a "novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (262) and therefore works as an effective way to analyze the role culture and diaspora play in establishing those different voices. Sunil Bhatia claims, "the polyphony of the dialogical self suggests that acculturation is a dynamic, plural, and infinite process resulting in new cultural meanings and definitions, many of which are contradictory and are always interminable" (39). Just as it is impossible to determine a specific and limiting definition of diaspora, analyzing texts

only for their representation of multi-cultural struggles is insufficient because identity construction involves more than cultural biases and traditions. It is helpful, then to combine Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony to the study of diaspora because it allows for a more inclusive study of the reciprocating relationships between cultures, language, and representation and acculturation of identity. Instead of looking at characters only via binary cultural contexts, scholars must also look at age, gender, social status, and so on. Diasporic studies has been controversial because it often focuses on the past, while characters in diasporic literature must also look to their future and constantly construct a new sense of identity. Polyphony can not only address the present and future sense of self of characters, but it can also keep diasporic studies from becoming too limiting and insufficient, as critics such as Ruediger Heinze have claimed it to be (Heinze 191).

Exploring the different voices at work in the characters' construction of self can allow diasporic studies from becoming too narrow. Polyphonic study, by looking at the multiple voices at work within a character, naturally incorporates more than just the past culture versus the present culture a character must incorporate into a sense of identity, as all diasporic characters must do. Himadri Lahiri explains that this is an important process because the "immigrant experience is a series of reincarnations, deaths of earlier experiences followed by rebirths of promise" ("Individual-Family Interface" 1). While looking at the diasporic nature of characters reveals this significant role in their sense of identity, it is limiting to the characters' pasts. Just as many immigrant characters struggle to maintain a confident sense of self in a new land due in part to the reluctance of "giving up" their past life and identity, diasporic studies often focus too much on the past cultural

identity as it conflicts with the present cultural identity. Polyphony, though, consists of a “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses,” and Bakhtin states it is a “plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world” (Vice 123). Since polyphony relies more on characters’ perceptions of each other rather than the author’s perceptions of the characters (Vice 118), the didactic and possibly biased role of the author is minimized and a study of the potentially equal voices at work in characters’ senses of identity are fore-fronted.

The pairing between diasporic studies and Bakhtin’s discourse of the novel form are so subtle and nuanced that it is surprising the pairing has not arisen in literary studies more often. Characters in diasporic texts constantly struggle to create or find a sense of stability through their conflicting environments. This archetype is directly addressed through Bakhtin’s concept of stratification, or the idea that “characters in a novel exist in order to find, reject, redefine, a stratum of their own” (433). Once these diasporic characters enter into the struggle of diasporic identity, they often find that they cannot simply “copy and paste” a new life out of their old; they have to navigate between the extremes. Similarly, Bakhtin explores the same topic in application to literary genres when he explains, “new images in literature are very often created through a re-accentuating of old images, by translating them from one accentual register to another” (421). This process of re-accentuation that Bakhtin claims has “great and seminal importance for the history of literature” (422) is also important to the history of diaspora because it emphasizes the need not to transpose language into new orders, but to completely translate (or rewrite) it. The inherent trend in diasporas and polyphony to

create and adjust to new methods of communication, rather than rearranging the old methods, proves to make an effective pair.

## CHAPTER IV

### LAHIRI, DIASPORA, AND POLYPHONY

Born in London to Bengali parents, raised in Rhode Island, and author of several Indian-American based publications, Jhumpa Lahiri is an obvious candidate for the study of diaspora. Critics such as Bonnie Zare have credited Lahiri for making new contributions to South Asian American Literature (99) and Judith Caesar commends Lahiri's ability to construct images, metaphors, themes, and ideas [that] run both with and counter to the American grain" ("American Spaces" 57). While it has been pointed out that Lahiri often does not invent new metaphors for cultural identity, she is careful to avoid creating a "villain" in the role of joining a new culture. She circumvents creating characters that fill cliché archetypes such as the dominating, rich white man and the traditional Indian who won't accept the ways of his new country by creating characters who transcend typical cultural roles. Many of her characters struggle with identity within a diasporic community, but the struggles are all unique to their individual experiences. Her narratives extend beyond the American versus Indian struggle, as evidenced by her inclusion of such short stories as "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" and "A Real Durwan"



in her collection *The Interpreter of Maladies*, which do not include any overt evidence of American society. Stories such as these evidence the fact that Lahiri delves into the experiences of the oppressed and excluded, and not just in cultural, but societal terms.

Most of the critical analysis of Lahiri's stories focus either on one small sampling of a story or two or are limited to a narrow criticism or theme. For example, Madhuparna Mitra has elucidated symbolic cultural clashes in "Border Crossings in Lahiri's 'A Real Durwan,'" and Judith Caesar has explored metaphors of space in "American Spaces in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri." While these critics and others have been successful in exploring the literary dynamics within a selection of Lahiri's stories, I feel that a true diasporic analysis of her short fiction and its use of polyphony and diaspora is missing.

While Jhumpa Lahiri's short fiction may not be overtly or traditionally polyphonic, it is appropriate for this study because of her stories' simultaneous autonomy and interconnectedness, a key component to polyphony according to Sue Vice (123). Noelle Brada-Williams has explained this inherent cyclicity of the stories within *Interpreter of Maladies* is due to their unifying themes surrounding marked rituals, care, and neglect (455), and the same interdependence is apparent throughout the stories included in *Unaccustomed Earth*. These connections are also dialogic and diasporic in nature. While Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* also follows the same thematic path, I find it more useful to keep with the analysis of the short stories, as their interdependence, individuality, cohesion, and confusion are symbolic for the larger debate and role diaspora and polyphony have in the construction of self identity. Also since Lahiri's debut collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies* has been analyzed via its multicultural themes, I prefer to look at her lesser-known collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, in hopes to

reveal that a study of its diasporic content connects thematically and developmentally with her earlier work.

In general, Lahiri's characters who rely too heavily on homeland nostalgia and the characters who look only toward progressing in diasporic space are unsuccessful in finding a space for their own identity. Just as Brada-Williams points out how Lahiri is careful to balance notions of the US and India (453), she is also careful to emphasize the point that characters must work equally within the contexts of their diasporic space. However, this does not mean that Lahiri's stories are simplified or too optimistic. In fact, her mixture of third and first person narrations reveal a complicated process of self-construction: it is inherently personal, yet characters cannot avoid interacting with others during the process. The majority of her stories are written in third person, with subtle shifts in perspective between characters, a tendency that empowers certain characters at crucial thematic moments. The less used first-person narratives always reveal the learning process of a character attempting to situate the self within a social context. The switching perspectives within and between Lahiri's stories do not necessarily emphasize a clash *between* voices about the home and diaspora, but rather a clash *within* voices about home and diaspora. The multiplicity of the voices, even within singular characters, emphasizes the personal process of identity construction within a populated, diasporic space.

I find it useful to break down the analysis of polyphony in Lahiri's diasporic stories via the different ways in which dialogism influences a character's ability to construct a cohesive sense of self within his or her diasporic space. I plan to approach my analysis in the following format. First, I will explore the multi-vocality and dialogism in the

characters' (dis)ability to construct and accept self identity. These conflicts with dialogism and polyphony are often due to issues of culture, age, gender, technology, and self-awareness. The stories which best show the "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (Vice 123) are "A Temporary Matter," "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," "The Interpreter of Maladies," "The Third and Final Continent," "Unaccustomed Earth," and "Hell-Heaven." I will then move on to show how power in characters' relationships is received or denied dialogically. For Lahiri, this can lead to the break-down of stereotypically empowered archetypes, which links back to both Bhatia's points on diaspora and Spivak's post-colonial goals. This confusion of (cultural) power is evident in "Sexy," "This Blessed House," "A Choice of Accomodations," and "Nobody's Business." The next component of diaspora in Lahiri's fiction is the role of silence and mis-communication in characters' ability to negotiate culture and life in order to create a solid sense of self. "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar," "A Temporary Matter," and "Only Goodness" best exemplify this claim. Finally, many of Lahiri's characters are unable to consolidate their sense of self through their conflicting cultural, personal, and societal expectations. Sue Vice explains, "among the features of the polyphonic novel are the depiction of how the hero sees the world and how he sees himself, not how the world and he objectively appear; the absence of anything perceptible to a third-person observer, or obtrusive narratorial comment" (133). This lack of objectivity is exaggerated in Lahiri's characters whose own view of the world is imaginary and/or metaphorical because they cannot or will not accept "reality." Several of her characters live by the mantra "This you will not believe," because they cannot believe themselves. Such characters are in "The Real Durwan," "Mrs. Sens," "This Blessed House," "Third

and Final Continent,” “Interpreter of Maladies,” “Sexy,” “Hell-Heaven,” and “Nobody’s Business.” The large number of characters who cannot consolidate the divergent elements of their diaspora are indicative of the imminent struggles with the construction of self.

## CHAPTER V

### MONOLOGISM AND POLYPHONY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF

While Lahiri's stories may not appear overtly polyphonic on the surface level, polyphony exists among and within each of the stories in the collection *Unaccustomed Earth*. There are moments in all of her stories when the narrator, sometimes a character, interjects his or her voice and provides a monologic, subjective view of the characters. However, each story also has subtle shifts into polyphony, when the reader learns about the characters through a different lens. The reader learns about the narrative world not through the narrator, but the characters themselves. Sue Vice clarifies that a polyphonic text will provide details, such as a character's adornments, only as far as it reveals what those adornments mean to another character (118). The very fact that Lahiri's tales shift between monologic and polyphonic portrayal encourages an analysis of the multivocality of the stories.

In diasporic stories, it is only natural for the different voices of the character's new environment to have a significant impact on his construction of a new self. Diaspora involves (at least) two countries and two cultures, "Which are imbedded in the mind of

the migrant, side-by side” (H. Lahiri 1). As migrants, and even succeeding generations, have to battle with the plurality of voices in their consciousness, they have to find a way to manage themselves within the multitude of voices. However, those involved in diasporas are often criticized for being too nostalgic. Himadri Lahiri also points out that in diasporic stories, “The past is invoked to indicate a certain contrast, which must be incorporated and controlled in the present life in order to negotiate the network of social relations in the immediate world” (“Individual - Family Interface” 1). In fact, many critics have complimented Jhumpa Lahiri’s apparent progressive perspective on traditions and stagnancy. Judith Caesar claims, however, “While she admires progress, there is much about modern America [Lahiri] wants to shut out” (“American Spaces” 53). An analysis of Lahiri’s use of monologism and polyphony in her short stories can perhaps clarify her text’s thematic stance on tradition and nostalgia in the diasporic self. Polyphony allows for a more inclusive study of the reciprocating relationships between cultures, language, and representation and acculturation of identity. Through a reading of the incorporation of polyphonic voices in her short story “Unaccustomed Earth,” it becomes apparent that the shifts in third-person focus reveals the disjointedness of characters and their ability or disability to join the voices of their past with the voices of the present. “Unaccustomed Earth” was chosen for this analysis because it reveals that it is not only nostalgia in terms of cultural, geographical location that can hinder a character’s ability to cope with the voices of his or her past.

In “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma is a young woman who proves to be more reticent toward change than her widower, old-world father. In the story, the use of monologic and polyphonic narration is often symbolic of the characters’ level of

willingness to access and understand their own self in conjunction with others. The story begins with a monologic narration of the family's situation. The first sentence identifies the significance of the family's situation, and leads the reader into identifying with the daughter: "After her mother's death, Ruma's father retired from the pharmaceutical company where he had worked for many decades and began traveling in Europe" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 3). The emotionless distancing of the monologic narration reveals not only the ever-present and indirect voice of the mother, but also reveals the accustomed physical and emotional distancing between father and daughter.

Ruma's sections of the story continue to depict her mother in a monologic fashion, and her father in a self-conscious, polyphonic fashion. The style of description reveals Ruma's unquestioning acceptance of her mother and her constant turmoil when thinking about and interacting with her father. Considering the associations Ruma has with her mother's strong connections with India (6) and her father, who "resembled an American in his old age" (11), her constant connections with monologic narration emphasizes how much Lahiri thematically empowers the characters who are open to polyphony. While Ruma's character is the only one who actively seeks "the perfect balance," her inability to disengage the nostalgia of her mother with her traditional, old-world ways, leaves her incapable of achieving such a state. The narrator takes over Ruma's portions of the story in a way that reveals her inability to deal with trauma and to blend her voice with others. The blunt description of her mother's death declares that "she had died on the operating table, of heart failure; anesthesia for routine gallstone surgery had triggered anaphylactic shock" (5). Readers learn only of the facts of the death, and the lack of emotional effect it has on Ruma reveals it is a moment in the past

she is either not capable of handling or toward which she no longer has feeling. Also, since Ruma constantly identifies her self with her mother (and against her Americanized father), there is the subconscious problem of both women's hearts: neither women seem capable of letting go of the past and therefore have trouble opening their hearts to the voices of the present, even in small, everyday scenarios. This concentration on the past (India) reveals why Ruma is unable to connect to not only her father, but her husband and son as well (America).

While the monologic memories of her mother reveal Ruma's reticence to view her mother or the world in any other light, her polyphonic views of her father reemphasize her unwillingness to change and such reluctance's connection to her unhappiness. Any time her father is described, the narration becomes polyphonic by incorporating Ruma's own self-conscious, emotional connections to his actions. Bakhtin explains that "the real task of stylistic analysis consists in uncovering all the available orchestrating languages in the composition of the novel and their relationships" (416) and Ruma's character reveals how one utterance can be home to several languages or voices at once. Therefore, in the sections dedicated to describing the father, readers actually learn more about Ruma: emotional trappings that she is unaware of in her monologic view of the world. Ruma is too engaged in the loss of her mother, and the stable world of Indian tradition that she represents, to realize that the criticisms she subconsciously holds against her father are actually more reflective of her own flaws. This polyphonic condemnation is first seen when her father arrives at her house:

He was wearing a baseball cap that said POMPEII, brown cotton pants and a sky-blue polo shirt, and a pair of white leather sneakers. She was struck by the degree to which her father resembled an American in his old age. With his gray hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere. It was her mother who



would have stuck out in this wet Northern landscape, in her brightly colored saris, her dime-sized maroon bindi, her jewels. (11)

In reading this excerpt, it is helpful to apply Sunil Bhatia's ethnographic view of dialogue: "Dialogue provides the means by which a person's self is created or revealed: it is the ground on which the self is constructed" (Bhatia 115). With this application, it is apparent that Ruma's editorial commentary that seeps into her father's description reveals much about her own character. It is her eyes that notice the Americanized, tourist-like banality of her father's attire and contrasts it with the vivid, exotic description of her mother. Ruma's denigration of her father's vague sense of ethnicity reveals how important it is for her to be clearly identified as Indian. Even the father's hat, the commonplace tourist souvenir, reminds her of the trip he just took, which was originally planned for her and her mother to take. Instead of noticing the placid earth-and-sky outfit that represents his newfound sense of happiness and connection to earth (rather than just one culture), she notices that he *resembles* an American, and therefore, in her eyes, can never truly *be* one. Regardless of the fact that her father has lived and worked in America her entire life, it is she, not him, who decides he cannot fulfill what it takes to be an American. However, as the story ensues, it becomes apparent that she finds more difficulty in connecting to other Americans than her father does. Therefore, in one description of the father, readers are made aware of the conflicting voices within Ruma: she cannot mediate between the Indian traditions of her mother's nostalgia and the acceptance of traditionally Americanized customs in her father. With both parents representing the oppositions on Ruma's diasporic spectrum, she does not know where to fall in between.

When describing how her father teaches his grandson Bengali, Ruma's compounded guilt and insecurities reveal themselves in the statement "Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 12). Her revelation of guilt toward not being (nor wanting to be) the strong and traditional mother her own mother was, and the guilt for not continuing the traditions her own mother held so dearly are more important to her than the spoken language. When Ruma first shows her father her house when he comes to visit, "she felt self-conscious of her successful life with Adam, and at the same time she felt a quiet slap of rejection, gathering, from his continued silence, that none of it impressed him" (15-16). Readers have the benefit from knowing from the father's section that this thought had not crossed his mind, so the polyphonic nature of the comment reveals Ruma's own problems with her own perceived inadequacies, without her even recognizing the fact. In Ruma's portions of the story, she spends more time thinking about others, but in return revealing more about herself and her inability to join the two dominant voices (mother/tradition and father/change) in her life.

In contrast to Ruma, the father's first section begins with an uplifting polyphonic narration: "How freeing it was, these days, to travel alone, with only a single suitcase to check" (7). In one utterance, the father reveals an excited connection to stereotypical American freedom, but only at the cost of dutiful ties to his Indian family. The father's ability to relinquish the past, to step away from the nostalgia of his wife and her admittedly stronger ties to their homeland empowers him to actively obtain happiness. However, coming in real contact with his daughter reminds him that while it may be

beneficial to alleviate the pressure of the past on the present, he cannot avoid the fact that it still weighs on him as an individual.

Unlike Ruma's first portion of the story, he freely remembers his wife in a polyphonic manner, revealing how what was felt as a loss to the daughter actually brought a sense of freedom to the father. Not traumatized by the death of his wife, he freely comments on her loss and the pleasure of solitude as "the responsibility of his family [was] absent" (8). He even becomes involved with a random woman, Mrs. Bagchi, because he knows he does not have to commit due to the fact that "she was adamant about not marrying" (9). However, the father's polyphonic freedom is at the cost of ignoring his past. He cannot fully ignore it, though, considering the only reason he met his new love is because they were the only two Bengalis on a tour group, so "naturally they'd struck up a conversation" (9). The term "naturally" comes from the father himself, revealing his inherent ties to his Bengali ethnicity. While strangers immediately label him via his cultural affinity, he also cannot escape the language and race he was born with. The fact that this character remains labeled only "her father" throughout the rest of the story also reveals that he cannot escape his inherent ties to his family and Bengali ethnicity. While Ruma's polyphonic sections revealed a reluctance to let go of the past, or rather, to accept new voice of the present, the father's polyphonic sections reveal the ineffectuality of completely letting it go in favor of whatever voices are at present.

Ruma's utterances reveal the voice of a young woman struggling to mediate her personal life and the voice of her cultural past, while her father's utterances do the opposite. The disjointedness between and within these related characters emphasizes the

need for others to participate in the construction of self. The monologic sections of the story reveal a character that is disconnected, nostalgic, and unhappy. The polyphonic sections reveal characters that attempt to access the voices of others in the process of understanding themselves. Indian traditions are not portrayed as simple, stagnant, and outdated, and American traditions are not merely progressive, exciting, and innovative: rather, it is the correct combination of the two, along with the many other voices represented (emotional, familial, and personal symbols abound), that provides characters with empowerment. Human “coming to consciousness,” as Bakhtin says, “is a constant struggle between these two types of discourse: an attempt to assimilate more into one’s own system, and the simultaneous freeing of one’s own discourse from the authoritative word” (424). In the diaspora, as Ruma reveals, it is not only an assimilation into one’s own system, but to actually create one’s own as well. Characters who empower one voice over another, those who cling to voices of nostalgia, suffer. However, voices who are only progressive, and do not incorporate those elements of the past, only become confused.

## CHAPTER VI

### DIALOGISM AND THE TRANSFERENCE OF POWER

While the characters in “Unaccustomed Earth” reveal their struggles to accommodate disparate voices through polyphonic descriptions, the characters in “Nobody’s Business” reveal that the struggle to construct a sense of identity relies just as heavily on dialogic interaction with others. The story is largely polyphonic, especially since the main character, a white graduate student named Paul, is a quiet, introverted personality: it is natural for his commentary to be revealed through an internal critique of others, rather than expressing them verbally. However, also due to Paul’s introversion, most of the polyphonic narration is from his perspective. Since this essay aims at analyzing the role of polyphony in diasporic contexts, the analysis of “Nobody’s Business” is better served to encompass the vocal interactions between Paul and his Indian-born roommate Sang. Lahiri shows through these multicultural characters that relationships between individuals are often received or denied dialogically, and this transference of spoken words, both monologically and polyphonically, can often lead to a breakdown in power archetypes and a confusion of cultural power.

“Nobody’s Business” lends itself toward an analysis of dialogic interactions largely because there is a significant amount of dialogue failure in the story. The protagonist Paul especially struggles with this type of interaction, and his failure to speak in his graduate oral examination, despite his dedication, preparation and sufficient knowledge (182) becomes symbolic of his overall communicative shortcomings. Bonnie Zare explains that male characters are usually selfish from a female diasporic perspective, and that Lahiri leads “readers to admire men who questions traditional precepts” (99). While Paul proves himself emotionally selfish, this trait is portrayed as due to loneliness and an inability to interact with others. Paul does, as Zare claims, “highlight the costs to men of striving to appear competent at all times” (100). Paul’s struggle to appear dialogically competent with the detached Sang reveals a level of disconnect that has more weight than that of their divergent cultural backgrounds.

The story itself begins with a telephone call from India. “Every so often a man called for Sang, wanting to marry her. Sang usually didn’t know these men” (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 174). As indicative of her style, Lahiri establishes significant information about her characters’ shortcomings from the onset. Paul is the main character, and his first thoughts are about Sang, revealing a level of obsession he may not even be aware of and his unbeknownst tendency to live vicariously through others. Paul is not the only one to desire Sang either, for distant men also try to contact her. In a way, they are more successful than Paul because at least each of them wins a few minutes on the phone with Sang. More importantly, however, is the level of dialogic distancing established from the fact that the first vocal interaction between characters takes place through the interface of technology rather than between actual people. The phone itself

reminds its users of the constant distance between them. While the single phone jack in the house centralizes conversations, its long cord reveals how the characters did not want to share dialogue with others physically (and therefore emotionally as well). The “persistent crackle” heard over the line (178) is also symbolic of the distancing between Sang and her unknown suitors who lived thousands of miles away as well as between her and her housemates. Paul’s inability to speak restricts him from forming multicultural connections, and Sang purposefully distances herself from her Indian heritage and American surroundings. The story continues to show disconnected dialogue through problems of conversational hearsay and dialogue summaries.

Before an analysis of the conversational failures can be performed, however, it must be pointed out how not only Paul, but the story structure itself, is also relevant to a dialogic analysis of the characters. Bakhtin’s construction of polyphony is based off of his central concept, dialogism. This section is not only looking at the multiple voices within a single utterance (polyphony), but also the “ceaselessly shifting power relations between words, their sensitivity to each other, and the relativizing force of their historically motivated clashes and temporary resolutions” (dialogism) (Vice 5). For through Lahiri’s use of dialogue, it becomes apparent that the diasporic nature of a character is not always the most significant influence on whether or not the character is able to interact and find identification with the surrounding community. In fact, the story reveals that it is the use of language itself that enables a character’s agency. The men who called Sang from other states or countries “were interested in a mythical creature created by an intricate chain of gossip, a web of wishful Indian-community thinking in which she was an aging, overlooked poster child for years of bharat natyam classes,

perfect SATs” (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 176). The fact that the verbal myth is sadly divergent from the real Sang reveals the power of words to contradict and overlay the narrative reality. The commentary about the Indian-community thinking is a polyphonic description on the part of Paul, who apparently doesn’t understand Sang’s cultural heritage. Sang, on the other hand, has no problems intermixing or ignoring her two backgrounds. The description of the house’s stairs which follows foreshadows the trouble Paul and Sang will have: the stairs were “a false promise” (177). Paul sincerely and passionately desires a dialogic relationship with Sang, but just as the stairs promise beauty but lead to bland bedrooms, Paul’s attempts to enter into discourse with Sang ultimately ends disappointingly.

Paul is not alone in his polyphonic descriptions that reveal how he views the world, culture, and other characters. He is also not alone in the fact that his spoken words themselves reveal worldviews and diasporic beliefs that he himself may not fully understand. An analysis into what a character’s spoken words reveal is an important step in understanding the connection or disconnection between people, regardless of cultural heritage: Is this person able to convey his inner thoughts, feelings, and beliefs effectively to another? If so, what does that conveyance construct in a relationship, and how does that relationship affect a character’s understanding of himself?

In his ethnographic studies, Sunil Bhatia quotes Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon’s description of the dialogical self: it “is conceived as social; not in the sense that a self-contained individual enters into social interactions with other outside people, but in the sense that other people occupy positions in the multivoiced self” (Bhatia 37). Cultural critics often explore how diasporic character must sift through and construct an



identity within a widely discrepant, multivoiced self. However, Paul's character actually destabilizes the role of cultural difference in the construction of the dialogic self. He holds the position of the stereotypically empowered: white, upper-middle class, male. Unfortunately for Paul, even these aspects neglect to provide him agency because he cannot interact healthily with others. Even though he holds the stereotypical power in a diasporic setting, he continuously fails to effectively use "ennobled language," language that "presumes some privilege and exercises some social control" (Bakhtin 427). Paul's life reveals that several aspects of life and interaction can transcend barriers of culture and race, but only through his inability to have them do so. Even when he speaks he does so through allusions, not his own thoughts. He "ventures" into conversation with Sang by comparing her to the *Odyssey's* Penelope (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 176). However, he misses the social cues of Sang's disinterest in his allusion, and only focuses on impressing her with more literary factoids. His interactions with Sang continue to be just as painful as the first: he speaks to her in allusive language that she neither understands nor cares about. Readers learn of his inability to express himself because he has survived in a world where he has not *had* to interact. When his last girlfriend broke up with him because she didn't like the way Paul kissed, he "became strangely efficient and agreeable with her, with everyone" (187). Paul's very complacency, and aversion to verbal conflict, rendered him incapable of truly connecting with others. His complacency, and subsequent unintentional detachment, contradicts with the apparent intimacy Sang creates with others such as her sister, whom she talks to at great lengths on the phone.

Judith Caesar has pointed out that in Lahiri's works, "The interior barriers – emotionally, the conventions of behavior that separate and connect [her characters], and physically, the walls and stairs between them, make connection possible (Caesar "American Spaces" 53). While Caesar focused more on the tangible barriers in Lahiri's stories and their metaphoric meanings, the concept of behavioral conventions applies to the dialogue in Lahiri's narratives as well. Paul fails to interact dialogically with Sang because he does not understand the etiquette of privacy. He learns about Sang's beliefs and personality by eavesdropping on her conversations with her boyfriend, Farouk, and her friend, Charles (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 179). At one point, when he overhears Farouk giving Sang orders of where to stand in her bedroom so as not to be seen through her window, Paul polyphonically describes Farouk as "command[ing] admiration without being imposing," which made Paul "uncomfortably aware that he was shabbily dressed" (184). Paul envies Farouk's ability to not only naturally partake in normal discourse with Sang, but also to command her attention and give orders: something that Paul's social incompetence would never allow him. Paul learns the hard way that "who speaks and under what condition he speaks [is] what determines [a] word's actual meaning" (Bakhtin 401). Words have the power to undermine stereotypical cultural empowerment, but only if used in the right context. Paul's lack of dialogic agency is often expressed by Sang in ways that he doesn't fully comprehend. When one evening Paul answers a question Sang asked much earlier in the day, she says, "It's just a little funny the way you picked up a conversation we had, like, six hours ago, and expected me to remember what you were talking about" (180). Because Paul has become so detached from the dialogue of society, he has become incapable of gaining any agency in it, and has failed to construct a

cohesive sense of self, as he is constantly pondering over what his answers to personal questions *should* be, rather than what they naturally *are*.

In contrast to Paul, Sang often appears to be dialogically empowered. She fully embodies the description of diasporic characters as “cosmopolites, members of a shifting network of global travelers whose national loyalties are flexible” (Friedman 112). In fact, Sang never seems troubled by her migrant status. Regardless of the numerous other literary characters who struggle to find a place in American society while still maintaining allegiance to their native homeland, Sang always appears comfortable, whether talking on the phone in her American home, speaking Bengali to her nephew, or visiting her sister in London. Sang is able to transcend some of her diasporic troubles because of her natural ability to fit in dialogically with the community surrounding her. In fact, Sang seems to reveal a shift in modern diasporas. Several critics agree that diaspora “has been related to a vast field of meaning, including global processes of de-territorialization, transnational migration and cultural hybridity. These notions, as opposed to more ‘rooted’ forms of identification such as ‘regions’ or ‘nations,’ seem to imply a decline of ‘locality” (Kokot, et al 1). However, Sang’s character puts to question the very necessity of a need for locality.

Sang does not fully deny the multiple levels of complexity involved in the construction of a dialogic sense of self. While she is talented at discourse with others, and especially at getting others to desire discourse with her, she fails at full communion of discourse. While she is a true cosmopolite, she ultimately loses her dialogic agency when she chooses to ignore what she is told by others. While she has a strong relationship with her sister, Sang fails to maintain healthy discourse with her parents.

When she dropped out of Harvard, “her mother locked herself up in her bedroom for a week and her father refused to speak to her” (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 181). The denial of dialogue as a chosen form of punishment reveals the power words have within this narrative structure.

The diasporic connection is a minor contribution in Sang’s life: if anything, Sang’s difference just makes her more exotic, mysterious, and therefore attractive to Paul. However, Lahiri underlines the disillusionment of objectifying culture as a rare gem by never allowing Paul to fulfill his fantasies about Sang. Her phone suitors are symbolic of the traditions she has left behind during her American acculturation. Perhaps her failed discourse comes from the aspects of American life that she accepts. When she is enamored with being the perfect “wife” for Farouk, her “big tubs of yogurt and the crackers and the tabouli, sat untouched” and “eventually sported a mantle of green fuzz” (185). The molding of her homeland’s cultural symbols coincides with her growing discomfort in her life’s relationships. Sudesh Mishra associates the “elusive law of diaspora criticism” with terms such as hybridity, decalage, discontinuity, multi-locality, but prominently transnationalism, globalization, and modernity (Mishra 131). It is when Sang begins to neglect parts of her past and herself that comes across dialogic failure. One of the few polyphonic descriptions from Sang’s perspective reveals the positive role tradition can have. When her new nephew calls her Sang Mashi (aunt), “the word sounded strange on her lips. She spoke Bengali infrequently- never to her sister, never to her suitors, only a word here and there to her parents, in Michigan, to whom she spoke on weekends” (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 191). Her distancing from and consequent disuse of the language of her original nationality causes her pain. Sang’s excitement

about being called Mashi reveals that while culture is not the dominant factor in Sang's dialogic self, it is a factor that she cannot ignore.

The characters in "Nobody's Business" exemplify Bakhtin's central concept of dialogism, which refers to the "ceaselessly shifting power relations between words, their sensitivity to each other, and the relativising force of their historically motivated clashes and temporary resolutions" (Vice 5). Paul and Sang both experience the upper hand of dialogic power and both experience the difficulties of having dialogic power denied. Paul fails miserably to impress Sang in the beginning but eventually has the power to withhold power dialogically. When Sang pleads for him to tell her the truth about Diedre's phone call, he casually remarks, "Don't know. I guess I'd ask Farouk" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 201). When Paul is finally confident in his communication skills, it is at the cost of his original goal of communicating *with* Sang. Bakhtin states "All direct meanings and direct expressions are false and this is especially true of emotional meanings and expressions" (Vice 134). Because Paul and Sang are never able to consciously realize their sense of self in conjunction with dialogic communion with others, their level of obscurity in dialogue is heightened. They prove through and through Allison White's claim that "Languages are socially unequal" (qtd. in Vice 19).

CHAPTER VII  
SILENCE, MISCOMMUNICATION, AND THE SELF

What both “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Nobody’s Business” reveal in their characters is that the role of diaspora in characters’ lives has changed over the past generation or so. Almost twenty years ago, the view of Asian American literature was that “Domicile and ethnicity do not alone determine [Indo-American] identities: geographical, lexical, political, and cultural differences are the signifying tropes of Indo-American ethnic literatures” (Tapping 287). While these factors are still major determinants in the construction of a migrant’s life, Lahiri’s work reminds critics that the past decades have brought change, as immigrants give birth to second-generation Indian-Americans who prove to struggle not only with the afore-mentioned topics, but also with a miscommunication and misidentification with earlier generations and within their own generation. This confusion of dialogue is perhaps rooted in Edward Said’s claim that “The capacity to represent, portray, characterize, and depict is not easily available to just any member of any society, moreover, the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ in the representation of ‘thing,’ while allowing for considerable individual freedom, are circumscribed and

socially regulated” (*Culture* 80). As individuals struggle to understand the representations of who and what they are “meant” to be, they struggle between the many freedoms available in America in contradiction with the many social stipulations that determine how one should act. These inherently diasporic struggles of self-understanding and creation are often portrayed through the dialogic interactions between Lahiri’s characters.

As individuals suffer between who they feel they are and how they feel they should act, their individual struggles often affect their relationships with others. In Lahiri’s works, these very individualized struggles are represented in the inability of characters to enter into productive dialogue with other characters. The examples in this section work to prove Bakhtin’s claims that “there are no words with meanings shared by all, no words belonging to no one” (401) through the character’s inability to communicate in a language that effectively crosses cultural and personal barriers. As Paul in “Nobody’s Business” reveals effects of miscommunication on the construction of self in a diasporic context through polyphony, other characters in Lahiri’s fiction also reveal its effects through silences: a total denial or avoidance of meaningful dialogue, in which all levels of polyphony remain within a character’s private consciousness. Judith Caesar has pointed out Lahiri’s characters who are “lonely isolated people both seek connection and deliberately avoid it” (“American Spaces” 58). Lahiri’s short story “Only Goodness” reveals that such struggles breed miscommunication or chosen silence between characters, and this disconnection between individuals reveals a deeper inability to negotiate culture and life in the diasporic community. Perhaps even more so than her other stories in *Unaccustomed Earth*, “Only Goodness” outlines the struggles of family in

conjunction with its generations of immigrants. While it, like much of Lahiri's short fiction, is not overtly concerned with the role of diaspora in basic plot progression, an analysis of the lead character and her interactions, silences and miscommunications with her multi-generational, diasporic family prove that cultural differences in the characters' lives breed interpersonal problems between the individuals who compose the once tight-knit unit.

The story begins with a description of a family laden with secrets, judgmental perspectives, and an overall inability to consolidate its individual views and opinions. Not only does the older generation have trouble identifying with their newly diasporic environment, but the younger generation also has trouble accommodating their cultural heritage. A nostalgic memory recalled through the sympathy of the protagonist, Sudha's, polyphonous voice fondly recalls when she and her brother first became close. However, the sibling closeness is only achieved through the subversive and illegal hoarding of alcohol in their adolescent rooms, all at the freeing risk of disappointing their hyper-traditional parents (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 129). In fact, the act's clandestine implications are underlined by the ensuing description that Sudha's parents were "prudish about alcohol to the point of seeming Puritanical, frowning upon the members of their Bengali circle – the men, that was to say, who liked to sip whiskey at gatherings" (129). While the commentary on the parents emphasizes their tendencies to adhere to the most extremes of Indian traditions, it also points out how inherently different Sudha is from them. Since the story begins "It was Sudha" (128), it is apparent that the polyphonic judgments of the descriptions come from her perspective. And in explaining her parents' tendency toward everything Indian, as well as her conviction that they are constantly



judging others including her, she unwittingly reveals her own tendency toward everything American through her Americanized comparison of Puritans. Sudha is so intent on degrading her parents' unwillingness to change in regards to their diasporic environment, she is blind to the fact that she is as well. Even without the direct statements of distressed communication between parents and offspring, Lahiri establishes the lack of communication between the generations through many such subtle descriptions. As it will be proved, though, it is not only cross-generational means that the characters lack the ability to functional dialogue.

As the narrative looks to Sudha's earliest memories, it becomes apparent why the family is prone to secrets and miscommunication. In fact, Sudha's first sustained memory was at the age of six when her mother hurt her emotionally by telling her to go away as she went into labor with Sudha's brother, Rahul (133-134). Such a memory establishes a precedent for a family that does not discuss significant and life-changing events. It also reminds readers that while many of the difficulties struggled over by the family members are diasporic in nature, cultural heritage is not the only explanation for individuals who suffer to truly converse. However, it is Sudha who is quick to blame cultural background for her feelings of difference. She was glad to have a sibling, not only for the companionship, but also for the "swelling and disorder" of a baby's paraphernalia that made the house feel more like her American friends' (134). It is also Sudha who is embarrassed remembering the photo as a baby in which she wore a white dress "intended for a christening but that her mother had simply thought pretty" (135). From the onset, the parents' lack of concern with maintaining an Americanized way of life does not seem to hinder their own contentment, but significantly worries their

daughter, who is creating a life in a land different than their own. Sudha apparently realizes that “we communicate by crossing barriers” (Bakhtin 424), and those barriers in the diaspora are cultural in nature. She becomes easily frustrated when her parents simply ignore the barriers. However, her utterance reveals that at the same time, they may be already transcending the barriers (by, for example, not requiring the understood purpose of the dress be its only purpose).

In fact, the parents’ inability and lack of desire to assimilate their lives to the ways of their neighboring Americans seems to be the root of Sudha’s polyphonic insecurities. Even the transition from England to America was shocking to the elder Indian couple, because in “Wayland they became passive, wary, the rituals of small town New England more confounding than negotiating two of the world’s largest cities” (138). Sudha’s parents relied on her for translations of everyday tasks, such as the autumnal leaf gathering etiquette for their new suburban home (138), while her brother Rahul chose not to help in what he considered his parents’ weaknesses. Sudha is most worried and burdened by her parents’ lack of motivation to be able to enter into the dialogue of the existing community into which they move. In her discontent, though, she also loses desire to maintain dialogic order with her parents. Sudha’s tasked, mundane translations quickly morph into larger responsibilities, and soon her mother asks her to talk to Rahul over his failing college grades (139). Sudha is no longer a simple translator *for* her family; she is now a translator *within* her family. And her role of translator of language represents a much larger scope as role of cultural translation. Such a position proves problematic because Sudha often does not want to face her family’s problems head on (138). She was in the troubling role of American leader in an Indian family: a position

that is bestowed upon her without her consent and a position both she and her brother will regret. Sudha's translator role reveals that "another's discourse performs here no longer as information [...] but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior" (Bakhtin 342). She realizes that interacting with the English language is the route in which to navigate the American community, and without using and reiterating others' words, one can never understand (from one's own perspective) the other end of the diasporic spectrum.

While the title of the story and much of Sudha's life focuses largely on her younger brother, Rahul, "Only Goodness" is really Sudha's story, a story about her insecurities and inability to combine or to navigate the different cultural facets of her life. Her parents never prefaced their Indianness; they simply went about life the way they knew how to live it. Unfortunately for Sudha, this way was contradictory to the lives of her classmates and friends. She could not identify with her parents' cultural identity because its roots were established in a time and place before her conception; she could not identify with her classmates because she did not have access to their home lives in order to understand them.

Sudha's situation exemplifies many conflicts of a second-generation immigrant in a diaspora because her parents' Indian life and customs are no more real to her than her own American desires are to them. She "regarded their separation from India as an ailment that ebbed and flowed like a cancer" (138). The people and events, even those involved in her own life, are simply mythological to Sudha. Without pictorial documentation of her own childhood, she is left wondering over her own roots. Her brother, born and raised in America, seems to have none of these concerns. When she

was born in London, her parents were poor and depended on their landlord, Mr. Pal. However, with none of her own memories of him, he is nothing but “an episode out of a Greek myth or the Bible, rich with blessing and portent, marking her family as survivors in strange intolerant seas” (135). As Sudha mythologizes her own beginnings in hopes of creating a sense of belonging, she once again underlines her Western tendencies. Instead of comparing her origin story to an Indian-born myth, she subconsciously roots her origins in the Greek mythology and Biblical allusions reinforced in Western curriculums.

Sudha constantly desires that her parents blend in more fully with the American mainstream, yet at the same time she fantasizes about her parents’ past. She is constantly in internal war over which end of her diasporic spectrum to identify with, while the rest of her family never seems to find the issue problematic at all. While thinking about the struggles her parents must have gone through moving from India to England and then to America, she supposes, “Those were the days [...] When immigration was still an adventure, living with paraffin heaters, seeing snow for the first time” (138). No matter the topic, Sudha’s mental wanderings are always disjointed with her verbal reality. She wants cohesion and unity in her life with her parents and their American surroundings, yet she never achieves that state as long as she refuses to address such truths with the very people she wishes would change. The story identifies dialogue with agency, as it is what put Sudha in her familial leadership position, yet Sudha proves just as incapable of entering into direct diasporic dialogue as her parents. It appears that Sudha’s own silences keep the truth from herself as well. Her parents never worried about standing out as “other,” while that is all she focused on. If Sudha were to analyze her own language and silences, she would see how inherently Westernized her character already is. She

subconsciously wants to belong to America, yet feels that she does not because of her cultural background. What she does not realize is that her very worries, analogies, and desires are Westernized in themselves.

The aforementioned family problems in the text lead to dialogic problems of withheld information, silences, and even lies. These dialogic difficulties are rooted in a family that is unable to consolidate their own desires and understandings of acculturation. Lahiri reestablishes the claim that “writing by immigrants from the Indian subcontinent is concerned with personal and communal identity, recollections of the homeland, and the active response to this ‘new’ world” (Tapping 285). She also goes on to establish the multitude of verbal difficulties such recollections create within both the first and second generations of the diaspora.

As the first generation leader of the family, Sudha’s father remains a largely traditional character. However, his strict adherence to his Indian roots only inhibits his ability to converse with his children. In fact, his lack of desire to communicate eventually leads to his inability to do so at all. When he did speak with his children, “he never let his children forget that there had been no one to help him as he helped them” (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 140). Just as Sudha struggles to construct an identity between her cultural past and present, her father is incapable of identifying with his own younger generation: a fact that Sudha’s polyphonic and internal descriptions of the man lament. When he does choose to speak, it is often a final decree given too late. When Rahul wishes to marry an American girl, he states “That’s not possible” (154), ostracizing his son. Later, in preparing for Sudha’s wedding reception, he expresses his concern that Rahul has no control over his alcohol consumption: a fact that has gone

unstated in the family for years (155). The father's silences symbolize a lack of understanding between diasporic generations, and lead to the few times he does speak coming off as harsh and insufficient.

While Sudha's silences about reality have been explored, their resultant miscommunications with others should be elucidated. She used Rahul's childhood as a vicarious path of redemption: everything she felt denied as an Indian-American girl, she felt she could obtain through her younger brother. Her involvement in Rahul's success as a child who "should leave his mark as a child in America" led her to become "engaged with Rahul's upbringing more than he did" (136). Sudha proves just as guilty as her parents in her neglect of truly communicating with her brother. She insufferably works for his success, but it is selfish in nature, and she could not express nor understand Rahul's own desires in life. Conflicts of diaspora arise even within one generation. Language barriers can arise between second-generation immigrants, depending on the family's duration of stay in America and acceptance or at least ambivalence toward the surrounding community's essential differences, as compared to the migrant family. Even though Sudha holds the power of language translation, she lacks true agency because she is incapable of directly addressing her conflicts with the family's diasporic status in dialogue. As such examples of miscommunication and silence are established early on in the narrative, they grow exponentially in the character's futures.

The focus of the plot and the title revolve around Rahul, the younger brother, and he has not been analyzed up to this point for a reason. Rahul is the second-generation child of migrant parents who no longer worry about any cultural identity outside of their own family bubble. This is empowering for their sense of self, but dangerous for a youth

literally born into a different culture. As the younger child in a family of miscommunication, Rahul suffers perhaps the most due to his being on the receiving end of fate. Any failures of his older family members are compounded on his future. However, regardless of how much his family is concerned with his success in the future, no one in the family notices his level of dispassion and indifference he voices from the beginning. While his parents innately cling to the Indian end of the family's diasporic spectrum, Rahul publicly clings to the American end. Sudha constantly worries over and envies her brother. She "supposed it was a combination of his being a boy and being younger, and her parents being more at ease with the way things worked in America by then" (137). However, his life does not prove as easy as she assumes it to be, as he dives into alcoholism at an early age. Rahul grows to feel victimized and even resents his sister at some level for her intrusiveness, just as she was with her parents. When he finally approaches her by asking, "has it ever occurred to you that my life might be fine the way it is?" she does not respond vocally, but readers hear her polyphonic thoughts: "His words silenced her, cut to the bone. She's always had a heavy hand in his life, it was true, striving not to control it but to improve it somehow" (141). Sudha's obsession with her own shortcomings and insecurities with her cultural past leave her incapable of communicating with her brother; the person with the closest diasporic obstacles to negotiate as she. Her inability to negotiate her own understanding and acceptance of self leave her unable to see that she is producing the same level of control and expectations, regardless of input from Rahul, that she resented in her parents.

Through all of the silences and miscommunications rampant in "Only Goodness," Lahiri once again reminds readers of the need to negotiate one's own identifications with

a mixed cultural background in order to consummate true communication with others, even (if not especially) at the familial level. The story heavily emphasizes a sense of nostalgia; both parents and Sudha remember their time in England as ideal compared to the stark cultural differences in small town America. At a glance, the story appears to depict England as more inviting and understanding, but with a closer look at the role of miscommunications in the text, this nostalgia is confirmed as myth. After all, the story ends back in England on a note of disappointment: the potential reunion of brother and sister fails as Sudha kicks Rahul out of her house and life for good. With the unhappy ending in England, Lahiri once again hints at the strength of a character's cultural background as being capable of acting as a positive identity construct. Rahul continues to show subconscious links to his cultural heritage because he calls Sudha "Didi," the Indian term for sister, through all of their troubles, and the term placates his nervousness of being left out. However, the term is not enough to bridge the emotional gap between the siblings, revealing how diaspora as a positive role is dependent on the characters' ability to negotiate their cultural understanding of self.



## CHAPTER VIII

### WORDS AS IMAGINATIVE ESCAPE

Mikhail Bakhtin claims that all languages are a specific perspective in which a person can conceptualize the world in words (292). For Lahiri's characters who are trying to conceptualize a world that appears "other," meaning the social and cultural contexts of their diasporic communities are in discordance with lifestyles they are comfortable with, language can not only help a character understand a pre-existing world, but to also create an escape into a fantasy world.

Oftentimes, words fail – or characters fail to use words effectively - and many of Lahiri's characters are unable to consolidate their sense of self through their conflicting cultural, personal, and societal expectations. Simply put, these characters are unable to see the inherent link between dialogism and diaspora: they see utterances as indicative of either one culture or the other rather than a new coexistence of previous meanings. Sue Vice explains, "among the features of the polyphonic novel are the depiction of how the hero sees the world and how he sees himself, not how the world and he objectively appear; the absence of anything perceptible to a third-person observer, or obtrusive

narratorial comment” (133). This lack of objectivity is exaggerated in Lahiri’s characters whose own view of the world is imaginary and/or metaphorical because they cannot or will not accept what they assume to be the only “reality.” Several of her characters in stories such as “Mrs. Sens” and “The Real Durwan” live by the mantras related to the poor durwan’s “This you will not believe.” Such characters assume that no one else can understand their own worldview because *they* cannot believe the perceived world around them. When many of Lahiri’s characters are incapable of handling or negotiating the reality of their dialogic and diasporic surroundings, they subconsciously choose to imagine a reality that does make sense to them. The characters imply a lack of acceptance of dialogic heteroglossia, which Bakhtin explains as representing “the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between present and past” (Vice 21).

Judith Caesar indirectly approaches the topic of diasporic acceptance as she explains how Lahiri’s fiction compares to other current American literature. Referring to characters’ mental solidarity in connection to their physical surroundings, she states, “The difference is in the imaginations of the characters or their inability to find the space in which to imagine one another and construct a set of values for themselves that respects the humanity and the differentness of others” (“American Spaces” 66). While Caesar focused on the universality of characters’ struggles, I believe that the polyphonic nature of how these characters depict their imaginative versions of reality reveals how Lahiri’s characters that immerse themselves in imagination versus reality are doing so because of their inability to deal with the diasporic context of their struggles. It has been stated that “perception is not universal” (Karttunen 42), and Lahiri’s imagination-driven characters emphasize just how different perception can be. What these imaginative characters are

ultimately struggling with is to come to terms with their own dialogism, which Bakhtin describes as “a struggle among socio-linguistic points of view, not an intra-language struggle between individual wills or logical contradictions” (Vice 50). Lahiri’s Indian-born characters often suffer because they feel they cannot assimilate to American culture, when the thematic implications of the stories themselves suggest what they should really strive for is a newly constructed “socio-linguistic” meaning.

While Caesar focuses on the significance of physical location in relation to a character’s ability to “step outside that door to understand himself and make meaningful contact with others” (“American Spaces” 51), I wish to focus on the intangible spaces between people and cultures that must be negotiated for such contact. Unlike traditional American literature, Lahiri’s characters do not often need to escape the confines of a building for symbolic freedom; her confines are more often characters’ mental connections to their past way of life. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the short story “Hell Heaven” is the best representative of these circumstances, as the story is told from the perspective of a second-generation Indian immigrant who focuses on the stresses of her first-generation mother. For these reasons, this section will analyze “Hell-Heaven” for its portrayal of words as imaginative escape in a narrative rife with diasporic conflicts of identity, rejection of the dialogic nature of discourse, and polyphonic descriptions of communicative failure.

The narrator of the story is an American-born and bred individual, looking back at the conflicts her Indian-born mother faced in a new country. The American influences on the narrator’s voice are always present, down to the description that her “parents were strangers to each other, and [their] marriage had been arranged” (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed*

*Earth* 61). If told from the perspective of an individual born into a nation which practices such marriages, the description would not likely include the fact that they were strangers; after all, their parents would have met and condoned of each other's families prior to the marriage. Therefore, this story is less diasporic in narration than several of Lahiri's other short stories. Rather than being a voice of cultural multitude, the narrator prefers the voice of youthful America. This narration only emphasizes the instances where the mother resorts to her Indian nostalgia and eventually creates friction between the two characters. It also reveals an ironic bias the narrator has against the mother, as she too neglects to acknowledge the presence of dialogic heteroglossia. She merely condescends her mother's tendencies to cling to her Indian nostalgia, while the narrator doesn't even realize her own unwillingness to accept new meanings for terms that accept a diasporic, rather than American, nature.

Per her stylistic tendencies, Lahiri begins her story by emphasizing the underlying cultural and familial conflict within the story. The narrator is a young girl in a family of three, but the story begins with a description of Pranab Chakraborty, their "adopted" uncle (a young man who befriends the family due to lack of his own in America). The way the narrator polyphonically explains that she was "taught to call him Pranab Kaku" (60) – uncle - reveals that she is not instinctually prone to Bengali ways, as her parents are. Pranab comes into the family with mythic force, washing up on the "barren shores" of the parents' social life (61), establishing the link he soon has to the mother's imaginative grasp on life. Pranab and the mother have strong similarities in types of hometowns, age, and desires; all of which her aloof, older husband does not. The mother is "typical of Bengali women," attaching safety pins to her sari for clothing repairs, a

practice Pranab “associated strictly with his mother and aunts in Calcutta” (61). The couple’s strong Indian similarities creates an instantaneous bond that proves helpful for the mother to get through her American days, but in a fashion that empowers a limited, monologic discourse with her surroundings and distances her from the country in which she will spend the rest of her life.

The mother and Pranab’s relationship is established solely on their compatibility of memories and homesickness for India, and as their relationship grows, so does their reluctance to enter into their new American environment in a diasporic fashion. Their days are spent listening and talking about a “medley of songs from the Hindi films of their youth” (65). The two instantaneously form a solid, communicative bond that is unusually reliable and positive for Lahiri’s characters. However, the joy of their union is indicative of a character that cannot reside in the present; the mother’s attachment to Pranab is already a form of imaginative, all too nostalgic living. The joyful memories the narrator recalls of the three – excluding her father – are always separate from the realities of the rest of the world. They would travel to Walden Pond, symbolic for its freedom of society, and talk “fondly about the winter picnics of her youth, grand expeditions with fifty of her relatives, all taking the train into the West Bengal countryside” (66). The physical separation and the grandiose tales of the past, combined with the fact that wherever the trio went, “any stranger would have naturally assumed that Pranab Kaku was [the narrator’s] father” (67), establishes how separated from reality the mother becomes. It is easier for the mother and Pranab to ignore the struggles resultant from acknowledging the inherent dialogic diaspora of their new lives and live in a monologized version of their pasts. Before Pranab, the mother always wanted to escape

the loneliness of her life in America, but with the imaginative 'marriage' with Pranab, she establishes a life in which she can completely avoid her physical life in America, a land she cannot and prefers not to identify with.

The imaginative, too nostalgic nature of the relationship is brought to the forefront when Pranab finally enters into the diaspora and gets an American girlfriend. The new relationship, and the mixture of Indian and American activities the couple does together, signify Pranab finally letting his Indian nostalgia meld with his new, American life. He begins to acknowledge an 'equality of utterance' by melding the different aspects of his surrounding diaspora into his life. The mother, on the other hand, tells her daughter, "I don't understand how a person can change so suddenly. It's just hell-heaven, the difference," she would say, always using the English words for her self-concocted, backward metaphor" (68-69). The mother clarifies Bakhtin's claim that language is never unitary (288) as she uses English words for a purpose most native English speakers would feel were misused. The daughter's judgmental commentary aside, the mother reveals that she cannot come to full terms with reality, the new hellish end of the spectrum her life has her still living somewhere other than America. It becomes apparent that, unlike Pranab, the mother is incapable of accepting that "Dialogism is necessarily the way we construct meaning" and she does not have to choose either her Indian nostalgia or the alien American society. Her chosen phrase of "hell-heaven" underlines the fact that she can make meaning out of English words, and through words reach society. After all, "Each utterance [...] consists of the unique orchestration of well-worn words" (Vice 46). Unfortunately for her contentment, she does not realize this. She continues to feel that Pranab betrayed her and she is now all

alone in the foreign America. Pranab's ensuing happiness with the American girl emphasizes Bakhtin's claim that:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (276)

Pranab actively joins into this "living dialogic thread" by allowing his new girlfriend to speak English to him and take him to American places, just as he opens up his Bengali world for her. The mother's use of "hell-heaven" at her socially significant moment sadly proves ironic because she is not able to enter into this 'socio-linguistic consciousness,' she cannot even see that her pain *is* diasporic in nature.

Even though the mother, especially through the polyphonic narrations and judgments of her American daughter, shows imaginative living as an escape to a reality she does not prefer, the daughter herself is unknowingly guilty of the same. The narrator, often ashamed or bewildered by the essential Indianness of her mother, grows close to Pranab's new girlfriend (and later, wife) in a similarly imaginative fashion. Deb used the narrator as practice for her own future family, and the young girl was swept away by "the sorts of gifts my parents had neither the money nor the inspiration to buy" such as an expensive edition of Grimm's *Fairy Tales* (69). Deb becomes the narrator's own fairy tale, just as Pranab had been for her mother, and she uses the young woman as an escape from the complications of her Indian heritage into what she imagines to be a simple, American life. She is just as guilty as attempting to create a homoglossia within a diaspora as her mother, and like her mother, will learn to accept dialogic heteroglossia from the experience. Eventually Pranab and Deb collect their mythical dialogic power

and leave to establish their own life, and readers are left with a large, blank period of the narrator's life, which is apparently not worth telling without its fairytale influences. The pure bliss into which the new couple apparently enters only makes diasporic living and dialogic contentment that much more unattainable for the mother and daughter. This also pushes the mother-daughter pair further into their opposing, anti-diasporic imaginative narratives, which ultimately disintegrate any chance for diasporic connection.

In the end, after Lahiri leads readers into thinking that the narrator and her mother will forever be left alone, not communicating or understanding each other and stuck in their own false constructions of homoglossia, the mother and Deb surprisingly join forces when Pranab ironically leaves Deb for an Indian woman. Deb calls the mother because "their hearts had been broken by the same man" (81). For all of her previous fear of diasporic living, pure human emotion is enough to drive the mother into a state of dialogism with an American character. The mother is able to come to terms with reality when she had someone to share her pain with. The diasporic differences the mother feared were the harsh reality she faced in coping with everyday life, but the role of communication and sympathy in this diasporic setting was a necessity she needed for realistic survival. While her metaphoric entrance into the diasporic world is still rife with pain, she is free to enter into dialogic understanding with those outside of her specific cultural background. As Sue Vice points out, "Textual meaning results from a specific context's discord" (49). Through the narrator's polyphonic descriptions of her mother's imaginative life that is brought to reality, readers see that Lahiri is careful to warn against both ends of the spectrum: too much nostalgia and too much detachment from one's cultural heritage will only cause detachment and pain in a diasporic setting.



## CHAPTER IX

### CONCLUSION: COMMUNICATING THROUGH THE DIASPORA

As her short fiction proves, Jhumpa Lahiri is an author entering into the current issues of diaspora with a contemporary perspective of immigrants and their status in a new land. For Lahiri, the role of diaspora and polyphony in the construction of identity and expression of self revolve around dichotomous issues of the private/public, Indianness/Americanness, rigidity/spontaneity, and the said/unsaid. However, the ability to construct self revolves around the ability to transcend these oppositions as either-or scenarios and accept them as elements of life that must be navigated, not chosen between.

Lahiri's narratives emphasize the necessity for diasporic studies to avoid the ultimate quest for an "answer." Their sometimes transient and sometimes stubborn characters reveal that diasporas are about a person's ability or willingness to change and adapt in multiple ways. Diasporas are about change and the evolution of personal identity and cultural affiliation within constantly changing geographical and personal boundaries. Simply put, Lahiri's polyphony emphasizes the role of diaspora in a

character's ability to "move beyond metaphor that identifies growth with leaving what is known and shows that it is also rearranging what is known" (Caesar "Spaces" 58).

What this focus on polyphonous descriptions and diasporic conflicts reveals is that Lahiri's narratives center around the notion that language, in the specific moments in which it is used, generates its own meanings: meanings that are intertwined with its historical and cultural past and temporal present. They also emphasize Bakhtin's notion of the dialogized word will never be completed, but rather "increase in complexity as it continues to live" (Bakhtin 426). The choosing of the mother's phrase as title in "Hell-Heaven" exemplifies how characters in diasporas actively search for and use language in various attempts to gain access to their surrounding communities. However, the American-born daughter's spurning of the mother's 'misuse' of the term also emphasizes how unwilling diasporic characters can be in acknowledging the dynamic agency of words. Like Paul in "Nobody's Business," the characters paradoxically pine for dialogic interactions with others, yet either run away from the opportunity or abuse the power, just as Paul abused his over Sang. Lahiri's subtle incorporation of characters' polyphonic judgments, such as Ruma critiquing her father in "Unaccustomed Earth," reveals an innate tendency to cling to the historical meanings and connotations attached to terms. However, the mythical fashion in which Sudha describes her parents' migrant past in "Only Goodness" places awareness to the fact that the historical value put on dialogue is not reliable nor is it consistent. While Lahiri's characters such as Sudha and the "Hell-Heaven" mother never prevail in their dialogic imaginative escapes, Lahiri repeatedly reminds readers of the inherent link between the ability to construct and accept new

meaning to language and the ability to maintain acceptance of the past with an ability to imagine a new and different present.

Characters must navigate between past and imaginative present in order to achieve sublimity with their diasporic surroundings. As Mikhail Bakhtin states, “The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions” (263). It is only when the characters acknowledge and accept the many-voiced nature of their diasporic settings, and allow imaginative room for change and acceptance in the future, that they are able to accept and maintain a cohesive sense of self in their diasporic contexts. Lahiri’s texts warn against trying to fuse the oppositions at work in a diasporic context, because such a fusion empowers the type of stasis that all of her narratives work against. The opposing forces at work in a diaspora are not a problem for Lahiri; rather, they are what actually exist. Her characters that find the most happiness learn to navigate through their cultural contexts and learn to speak a language that is forever shifting and changing. Lahiri effectively deconstructs the common notion that “great novelistic heroes are those with the most coherent and individuated ideologies” (Bakhtin 429) by disallowing them access to any stable form of ideologies, thereby continually forcing them into constant reformation of language, lifestyle, and beliefs.

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