


2017

# Notions of Home, Identity and Belonging in Fiction, Sketching in Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter" and "The Interpreter of Maladies"

Aaron Briseno

Follow this and additional works at: [http://inspire.redlands.edu/cas\\_honors](http://inspire.redlands.edu/cas_honors)

 Part of the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Briseno, A. (2017). *Notions of Home, Identity and Belonging in Fiction, Sketching in Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter" and "The Interpreter of Maladies"* (Undergraduate honors thesis, University of Redlands). Retrieved from [http://inspire.redlands.edu/cas\\_honors/158](http://inspire.redlands.edu/cas_honors/158)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations & Honors Projects at InSPIRe @ Redlands. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of InSPIRe @ Redlands. For more information, please contact [rebecca\\_clayton@redlands.edu](mailto:rebecca_clayton@redlands.edu), [paige\\_mann@redlands.edu](mailto:paige_mann@redlands.edu).

Aaron Briseno

English 420: Senior Seminar

Professor Judith Tschann

15 October 2016

Notions of Home, Identity and Belonging in Fiction, Sketching in Jhumpa Lahiri's "A  
Temporary Matter" and "The Interpreter of Maladies"

Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize winning collection of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies*, explores the intimate connection between home and identity. Her stories frequently revolve around South-Asian immigrants and their children living in the United States, and the challenges they confront navigating between the customs of their homeland and those of their adopted home. "Home," in these stories is depicted as both a site of preservation, in which immigrants hold on to their roots by holding on to the patterns, practices, and rituals from the homeland, and a site of change, wherein these patterns, practices, and rituals from the past are altered or discarded because of circumstances in the present. For the immigrant characters in these stories, feeling as though they belonging in two worlds, yet at the same time none at all, causes a sense of anxiety and instability, which demands that these characters constantly reposition their notions of identity between the homeland and the adopted home, the past and the present, and reality and the imagination. Drawing on several keynote concepts in postcolonial studies, including diaspora, transnationalism, marginalization, language, gender, and race this essay examines the idea of "home" in two of Lahiri's stories, "A Temporary Matter" and "The Interpreter of Maladies". The idea that "home" and identity exist as fluid constructs, 'productions', which are never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not

outside, representation” (Hall 222)”. Analyzing the ways in which “home” is depicted as a conscious construction, which is “always constituted within... [the] representation” of the individual,” in these stories, shows the degree of subjectivity, complexity, and malleability that distinguishes the process of identity construction in an increasingly diverse, multicultural, and transnational world. Moreover, the present study suggests that identities move from a position of fixity to a state of fluidity over the course of these narratives, creating a metanarrative that speaks to the experience of many modern authors working in the transnational genre, and their efforts to represent culture, race, and gender as fluid constructs in fiction.

In the story “A Temporary Matter,” a married couple Shukumar and Shoba struggle to reclaim their identities after the tragic loss of their baby. In months following the tragedy, Shoba and Shukumar find it difficult to communicate with one another and as a result they have grown apart emotionally. The couple had become “experts at avoiding one another in their three-bedroom house” (4). Shukumar, shutting himself up in his office to work on his novel, and Shoba, sitting in front of the television set watching gameshows and editing textbooks for her work. The couple fail to communicate with one another and they have fallen into a routine which allows them to deal with their emotional distress alone. The narrative begins with a letter informing the couple that the power will be out on Beacon Street, starting at 8:00p.m for five consecutive nights, meaning that for the first time in months they would have communicate (4). Throughout the story, Shukumar’s memories function as a way of doubling time, his memories of the couple in the past are juxtaposed with his evaluations of their relationship in the present. The remarkably different portraits that the reader receives of the couple as they were then, and as they are now, convey the radical shifts in identity that these individuals experience and the effects these shifts have on their sense of a collective identity as husband and wife. In exploring

the idea that “home” and identity exists as fluid constructs, the reader finds that the shifting notions of “home” and identity that Shukumar and Shoba experience throughout the story reflects the feelings of anxiety and instability that many immigrants feel towards “home” in a postcolonial world.

The title “A Temporary Matter” alludes to the power outage that occurs in the home of protagonists Shukumar and Shoba. The title also functions to forecast the status of the couple’s relationship throughout the story, framing their troubled marriage as something which is only “temporary.” Of course the word “temporary” carries an implication of time. Time plays a pivotal role in how the reader understands the development of these characters and how their relationship has transformed after the tragic loss of their baby. Through Shukumar’s memories of the couple’s relationship in the past, the reader views their present circumstance as a matter of identity shifts brought about by grief. Shukumar develops a longing to recover his past “home” and attempts to reestablish this home through a connection with the nation and community that embody his idea of home and family. Throughout the story his desire to reclaim the particular way of life and the set of aspirations that his wife and he once shared in the past, is expressed through his attraction to patterns and practices common to traditional India. He longs to be considered successful in the professional sector, expects to have children, and misses the attention and the spoils that he used to receive from his wife. Shoba, on the other hand, desires a lifestyle more commonly considered Western American or modern day Indian. She enjoys working at an independent career, loves convince foods like cereal, and dresses in T-shirts and sweat pants. After the tragedy, her aspiration to have a large multigenerational family with Shukumar seems to have been supplanted by her desire to have a successful career and live a more independent, less communal lifestyle.

The wider social implications of the title “A Temporary Matter,” speaks to the immigrant experience in broad terms. The word “temporary” for example, could describe the lack of fixity that many displaced peoples feel towards notions of “home” and conceptions of the self. Certainly “temporary” could be used to describe the way that many immigrants feel about their place in their host country. For first and second generation immigrants particularly, the feeling of having no place in the larger mainstream society goes hand in hand with their hope of one day returning to the “homeland.” The feeling of being outcast in the community that surrounds them causes many transnationals to see their homes apart from the “homeland” as a temporary-living spaces, rather than a permanent homes. The word “matter” may also be informative of this perception of place and person as it refers simply to “something that occupies space (Oxford English Dictionary).” When the story begins the reader certainly gets the feeling that Shoba and Shukumar are isolated and dealing with the grief of losing their baby six months earlier. While they occupy a common space, they “avoid each other in their three bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible (4).” Shoba and Shukumar simply take up space within their home. They are living in their own heads, rather than with each other. Within the wider social context of the story, the reader may find that the combination of the words “temporary” and “matter” connect the concepts of time and space. Time and space serve as recognizable factors that separate the immigrant subject from their home-country, as well as from their family and community. Time and space in this context means the symbolic representations and social practices of a time and space prior to the event of mass migration, those traditional rituals, religions, and everyday social activities that often shape regional identity. The barrier presented by time and space is for many immigrants insurmountable, thus the imagination as depicted in

the story through the thoughts and meditations Shukumar, is an important mechanism for traversing these barriers and rediscovering “home.”

Shukumar is an ideal subject to begin exploring the idea of searching for a “home” within the intellectual space. Shukumar is ideal because he is a second generation immigrant. His desire to connect with his cultural roots and his attempts to structure a national identity, which resembles that of his Indian background, is not caused by any personal experience in the geographical location or the national community of India. Shukumar is a second generation American who grew up in Concord New Hampshire. He only went to India once when he was an infant and his “nervous” father was afraid to take him back after he nearly died of amoebic dysentery (12). When Shukumar was a boy, he preferred “sailing camp or scooping ice cream to Calcutta (12)”. Shukumar memories of boyhood summers informs the reader of the character’s sense of “home” at this point in the timeline. As a child he saw “home” not only in geographical location of Concord, but in the culture and history of the town, *The Concord Community Sailing Camp* being one of the oldest and most popular attractions for young people since 1882. “It wasn’t until his father died, in his last year of college that the country (India) begin to interest him... (12). Throughout the story, Shukumar’s interest in the home-country of his parent’s appears invariably connected with loss. Shukumar’s struggle to recollect a sense of family and belonging after the death of his father through an intellectual understanding of his father’s home-country, shows the importance of conceptualizing notions of “home” when dealing with loss. Shukumar’s memory of his father is intimately connected with the nation of India in his mind. His desire to develop a stronger concept of India or what it means to be Indian could be read as a reflection of this character’s inward desire for his father. Additionally, if we view the text as a fiction that comments on the history of colonization in India, which caused the massive

dispersion of a peoples from the place they call “home, “the reader understands the ways in which the events in Shukumar’s personal past, the break-up of his household, reflect a global struggle for “home” in the wake of British colonization.” A historical reading of the narrative seems encouraged by certain details the reader receives at the beginning of the story. Shukumar is said to be working on his “dissertation of the agrarian revolts in India (2),” a rebellion in India against the rule of the British East India Trading Company (1852-1857) that according to historian Biswamoy Pati left both sides feeling like they been “divided at home (India: The 1857 Revolt And Its Historiography: An Overview 2006).” Shukumar’s own feeling of being “divided at home” is made apparent through his memory of witnessing how after his father died, “his mother fell to pieces, abandoning the house he grew up in and moving back to Calcutta, leaving Shukumar to settle it all “(6). Shukumar’s interest in the nation of India appears to be an intellectual means for him to recreate a “home” in the aftermath of this traumatic family event. The impression that Shukumar felt that his mother and he had been “divided” from their home without his father to hold the family together, is made clear through the mental language he uses in describing his childhood home as “abandoned.” The sense of division and abandonment that is created in this scene and throughout the story allows the reader to view the American-born Shukumar similarly to the diasporic migrant. Much like many migrant individuals who feel as if they have been divided from the corporal space that contains their sense of what it means to have a “home” and a “family,” Shukumar pines over the forced abandonment of the corporal space that he called “home” for his entire life before he left for college. Having no fixed location to call “home,” Shukumar’s mission to reestablish a “home” unfolds entirely in the intellectual space—this contrasted with his mother who “moves back to Calcutta,” reestablishing a “home” by returning to the corporal space where she grew up—the reader might thus, gauge the import

of the intellectual space for second generation immigrants whose sense of belonging is not solidly fixed in geographical location. However, this not to say that the grief that first generation immigrants experience is not unique in its own ways. Shukumar's description of how his mother went "falling to pieces" when his father died, suggests that his father in some ways held her together; her subsequent retreat to Calcutta could be viewed as her trying to resettle her sense of self by putting back the "pieces" of family and home that she lost when she lost her husband (6). As a first generation immigrant the longing to return the homeland

Aside from aligning the narrative with a commentary that speaks to a national history, the story also appears to comment on literary history. The ways in which gender roles and stereotypes are depicted and disputed in the story seems informative to the larger project of transnational literature written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to extend the agency of women beyond the confines of the home. Many literary critics, such as Gillian Rose and Anthony Vidler, have written extensively on the ways in which a younger generation of writers has attempted to expand notions of "home" beyond the public and private spheres and into a more fluid and subjective space in their domestic fictions. Shukumar's interest in India as a nation speaks to a convention in transnational literature prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which seemed to contain "discourses of men and the "home" within the public arena [while depicting] women within private sphere (George 12)". The character's fixed domestic position throughout the current timeline in the story could be read as a discernable effort to subvert this gender-based form of containment in the modern era. For instance, when the story begins with a notice that the power would go out on Beacon Street beginning at eight p.m., Shoba reads the letter to Shukumar and she comments that "they should do this sort of thing during the day," to which Shukumar replies "when I'm here you mean (2)." From the onset the story overturns traditional gender-based



assumptions of the home by depicting Shoba's participation in the public arena and positioning Shukumar in the private space. In viewing the text as a commentary on the ways in which modern global fiction expands on and often defies the conventional concepts of "home" through an exploration of gender, it is critical to examine the function of the timeline. The first flashback the reader receives from Shukumar is of "six months ago... Shukumar was at an academic press conference in Baltimore when Shoba went into labor... (2)." The image of Shukumar at an "academic conference," while Shoba is in "labor," certainly confines the couple to conventional notions of gender and labor division in the home in this scene. For example, A.H Eagly writes on the subject of sex-typed divisions of labor that "given that women perform more childcare than men in most industrialized societies, women are believed to be especially nurturing and caring. Given that men are more likely than women to hold higher status jobs in industrialized societies, men are believed to be especially dominant and assertive (Eagly 271)". In the past, Shukumar deals with historically masculine concerns he anticipates academic success and he is preoccupied with perusing a career in business. Shoba, alternatively is enthusiastic about being pregnant and she is preparing for a future in which she imagines herself caring for a large family. However, this scene also ties these gender conventions to the past, in a way that does not seem to hold true in present. The contrasting images that the reader receives about the particular roles of men and women in society—as they were in the past, and as are in the present suggest a re-routing of these conventional considerations of the "home" in the modern era. While Shukumar in the current time space is more or less the homemaker because he is unable to teach for the summer, Shoba has a successful career in the academic world editing text books. This scene depicts the waning of traditional gender roles in the home and in the public sphere and reflects a current

trend in fiction and social discourse to encourage a poly-gendered division of labor for men and women.

For example, Shoba provides the reader with a barometer for measuring the ways in which gender stereotypes, presented in fiction, change over time. Early in the story, Shukumar remembers Shoba “waving goodbye in her robe, with one arm resting on the mound of her belly as if it were a perfectly natural part of her body (3).” Depicting Shoba’s pregnancy as something “perfectly natural,” in Shukumar’s memories of her, is one way that the text ties her character (in the past) to a feminized presumption of women in the home. Shukumar, on his way to an academic press conference sees Shoba’s pregnant body out in front of the house as a “natural” image, which could suggest that his ideal of womanhood requires a conflation of the natural womb with the material home. On images of womanhood and the home in twenty-century fiction, Rosemary Marangoly George writes in *The Politics of Home*, that “the home was believed to be an expression of personality of the women of the house, and often it stood in as a metaphor for body (23).” The home as a metaphor for the body certainly appears to manifest in the past of Shoba and Shukumar. The couple’s pantry for instance seems to be a metaphor for the womb. Shukumar recalls how when Shoba was pregnant she would bring in bag after bag of rosemary, gingerroot, chutneys, and yams enough food they both agreed, to “last for their grandchildren to taste (7).” It is in anticipation and in preparation for a new social life as well as a new human one (the baby) that Shoba stocks her pantry as if she nourishing a womb. Evoking the image of grandchildren when reflecting on the fullness of the pantry encloses the couple’s hope of one day having a multigenerational family within a domestic metaphor that at this point and time carries explicitly feminine connotations. To be sure, the pantry metaphor also retains its symbolic relevance as an expression of Shoba’s personality after the miscarriage, but in the

present time the metaphor seems to function as an expression of her rejection rather than acceptance of the social expectations of her gender. In the present time it is clear that Shoba's desire for motherhood has dwindled, the reader sees her feelings towards motherhood reflected in couple's stock of goods, which slowly diminished "until at last they had eaten it all (7)." The inversion of conventional gender-roles in the current timeline appears to challenge Shukumar's idea that Shoba's pregnancy, as well as her role as a mother is "perfectly natural." The reality of the present—depicting Shukumar at home and Shoba out at work—seems to prove that "such gendering of place seems to naturalize the notion of home, resulting in the categorization of home alongside natural phenomenon like birth and death", is a false sentiment that equates notions of the "home" with notions of nature (George 23). Regardless of the individual components that make up the category "nature," which might be arguable in different academic circles, nature could be generalized in this story as a formation of a fixed set of objective principles. The category "home" by contrast is not fixed, particularly for the migrant subject "home" is a category that is frequently expanding beyond gender stereotypes, or even physical locations (Rose 47).

Another way of viewing the story as a larger social commentary on the female subject in fiction is to explore the ways in which the story depicts the connection between "home" and womanhood across generational lines. For example, the literary movement initiated by a younger generation of Indian authors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century dedicated to freeing the feminine "self" from the confines of the house and home, might be implicated in the narrative through the contrasting images of Shoba in the current time-space and her mother. The image of Shoba's mother that is presented in the story reflects the burden of womanhood in an era of pre-independence, wherein it was the woman who was responsible for "saving the nation," by persevering the traditional

values of that nation “socially, culturally and spiritually” across geographical borders and throughout generational lines (Tharu 256).” Shukumar recalls that, “she (Shoba’s mother) cooked dinner every night, drove herself to the supermarket, washed their clothes and put them away. She was a religious woman. She set up a small shrine, a framed picture of a lavender-faced goddess...and prayed twice a day for healthy grandchildren in the future (9).” Shukumar’s description of Shoba’s mother reveals the ways in which the literary construction of womanhood in the twentieth-century “offer them no context for agency that is not turned outward beyond themselves (Tharu 256).” Shoba’s mother is depicted in the text without any reference to her independence or subjective personhood; she cooks, she cleans, and even prays in the interest of the larger familial and communal whole in mind. But it is perhaps too simplistic to say that Shoba’s mother is intended as a criticism of “the woman of the house.” She also expresses the cultural desire to preserve some notion of “home” when apart from the homeland. In connecting the act of praying with the desire for “healthy grandchildren,” Shoba’s mother is able to transplant the social and religious values of her homeland into a foreign space. She brings with her the artifacts and rituals that embody the traditional values she subscribes to. It is in the desire, the want to preserve these values that the line between victim and volunteer begin to blur. Thus, a discussion pertaining to the position of the immigrant subject in fiction reflects the discussion between worldviews that transnational peoples must negotiate within themselves. The push and pull between Shoba, who feels herself confined by tradition and feminine expectation, and her mother, who feels defined by these very same demands, seems to suggest the role of a person’s subjective and generational viewpoint has in determining who the victims are and who are the volunteers of cultural gender expectations.

Shoba seems to reflect the competing desire to move away from tradition and expand social role of women in ways which offer women the opportunity for agency outside of that which is purely interested in the health of the greater community. Shoba's response to her house in Boston sends the message that unlike her mother, for her the differences between house and "home" are clearly denoted. Unlike in the past, Shoba's treatment of the house in the present time suggest that her idea of "home" no longer coincides with the domestic space that she occupies, "Shukumar moved her satchel and sneakers to the side of the fridge. She wasn't this way before. She used to put her coat on a hanger, her sneakers in the closet, she used to pay the bills as soon as they came. Now she treated the house as if it were a hotel (6)." Shukumar's acknowledgment that "she wasn't this way before" marks the character's movement away from a fixed idea of home into a more modern fluid definition of "home." Wherever "home" is at this point in the story for Shoba it is clear that it is not the three-bedroom space she shares with Shukumar. The fact that she "treated the house as if it were a hotel," implies that the character feels that the house has become more of a temporary space which she merely occupies for the time, rather than the space that she "lives in." Shukumar's use of the word "hotel" marks the house as more of a dwelling for Shoba—a place that has some familiarities of a house, but that is definitely not a "home." In viewing the text as a story that alludes to the immigrant experience through fiction, this passage seems to convey the feelings that a lot of immigrants have about their "adopted home. For many migrants the nation that they come to live in as the result of forced or elected migration is often seen (both by immigrants and second generation children) as being simply a space that they occupy, a "hotel" in a sense, which is apart physically and culturally from the place they consider "home."

It must be stated that although the story defeminizes the category of “home” by inverting gender conventions, the social implications suggested in the narrative seem to be of greater complexity and scope than simply a reclassifying of the public and private space along gender lines, the text also appears to detail the creation “a space in the imagination, which allows for the inside, the outside, and the liminal elements in between (Cliff 52).” On the first night of the blackout’s Shukumar’s makeshift construction of what life in India means in his imagination provides a fictional example of Cliff’s observation. The space that Shukumar creates in this scene resides on the threshold of what the character knows of the “inside,” the objects, decorations, and food available in the couple’s Boston home and what he imagines of the “outside,” his idea of what an Indian dining table and family life might be like based on outside generalizations about what is unique about Indian cuisine, cultural, and social life. Shukumar may not have been to India since he was baby, but he is intellectually engaged with nation—he seems fascinated with culture and politics of his parents’ home-country—which allocates his creation in this instance entirely within the imagined space. As Shoba’s reaction to the scene, “it’s like India” suggests that the imagined nation is not India, but in fact “like India (11).” In effect, Shukumar’s translation of what it means to belong to an India community and share an Indian identity is not perfect according to Shoba, but his creation shows the power of the imagination to connect people with a national identity that might remain unsettled, out of reach, or otherwise unknown to second and third generation transnationals. His choice to cook the distinctly national dish *Rogan Josh* and rice, as well as to “set a pot of ivy on the table” with a “makeshift candelabra,” speaks to his desire to recreate his idea of a national home inside the physical space that is his Boston home. However these choices cannot be simplified as mere expressions of desire, but rather an implication of the couple’s liminality. For example, in this

scene the “makeshift candelabra” that the character constructs provides not only a source of light, for which to illuminate the dining table and silverware that would be difficult to see in the darkness (in the literal sense), it also appears to be symbol for the liminal space the couple seems to occupy at this point in the story. The symbol forecasts the dining room table as the setting of the space between Shoba and Shukumar, the place in which the difference between unknowing and knowing is a matter of moments and series of choices about which past secrets to reveal, what to bring to light for the other person. In describing the candelabra as “makeshift,” the text seems to imply that this delight is impermanent. It is something which is temporary or substitutional, it is something that may suffice for the time being but it cannot, or will not, sustain permanently. The combination of illumination and temporality in this symbol informs the reader that the couple are in the time between what was and what’s next. It is a place of uncertainty and transition, in which their past ideas about each other will begin to fall apart and the truth of the past and of the present will be revealed. This truth shows the role that the unknown, or the mysterious parts of another person’s character, plays in another person’s romanticizing of them. For instance, in one scene Shoba confesses to Shukumar that she went out to a bar with her friend Gillian late one night when his mother came to stay with him. Shoba told Shukumar that she had to work late on that night and Shukumar believed her. He noticed “how her eyes well up” when she told him how “touching” it was that his mother still loved his father so much after all these years (17). Shukumar falsely equates Shoba’s reaction when she witnesses the enduring love that Shukumar’s mother has for his father to a sign of her own feelings about commitment. While Shoba confession shatters this romantic memory of the past for Shukumar, it also brings him some clarity as to the present state of his marriage.

During the blackouts the house also serves as a liminal space, the couple must negotiate their identity in the space between their old and new sense of self, as well as settle their collective identity. The transitional process that unfolds in this space takes the form of the “honesty game” that the couple plays during the power outage. The couple exchange secrets from their past with one another other slowly revealing the truth about certain events that defined their collective identity, concluding with each of them gaining an entirely new sense of this identity. When Shoba first presents the idea of the game she used to play “during the power failures at her grandmother’s house” to Shukumar, he tells her that he used to play the game in high-school when he got drunk. Shoba replies “you’re thinking of truth or dare. This is different (12-13).” This exchange shows how both characters understand and interpret events in the present through reflections of the past. Shukumar misunderstands Shoba’s game because the world he understood as a child existed within an entirely different context than his wife’s. Shukumar recognizes some similarities in truth or dare and Shoba’s game, believing that the games are identical he attempts to exchange her game for his. But, Shoba protest that “this is different.” For Shoba, clearly differentiating between the two games is her way of attempting to retain some sense of family identity and culture that is not distorted or reassumed through the filter or lens of the American culture. Although this trivial misunderstanding seems to have no deep emotional impact on the characters in the story, the scene defines what anthropologist and postcolonial historian Partha Chatterjee calls “nationalist thought.” This scene could be read as a fictional construction of the nationalist movement which “decries the modern or the imported and offers in place a homespun ideology of the people (George 117).” Shoba in this scene represents the voice of the colonized at the “moment of arrival”—when the stories by non-European voices successfully protest the central power’s insistence that colonized adopt the



culture of colonizer. Shoba's challenge that "this is different" reinforces the ideas of the nationalist protesting Western contextualization; she roots the origins of the game in "the power failures at [her] grandmother's home in Calcutta," and offers her own "homespun" framework for Shukumar to understand the game, rather than simply equating it to Shukumar's western context. A more global reading of this scene might reveal the liminal space to be the space of ambiguity and uncertainty, the transitional threshold where one's ideas about that community, spirituality, vocation, relationships and/or self are unsettled before they are reestablished. The image of darkness coupled with the element of secrecy in this scene could be read not only as a representation of the character's own feelings of uncertainty, but the feeling of not belonging to one place or the other that many immigrants experience when transitioning from their native culture into their adopted culture. If the reader elects to view the text as an examination of the immigrant experience, framing the immigrant experience through fiction, then Shoba's defense of her family's game when Shukumar misrepresents it as "truth or dare" reveals a commentary on the many immigrants who hold on to the rituals, patterns, practices and customs of their homeland, attempting to keep these traditions intact as they existed in their native culture.

Over the course of the blackouts, Shoba and Shukumar reveal secrets to each other under the cloak of a game. The game provides the perfect cover for the couple to engage in the honest and open dialogue that they have been avoiding. This form of sincerity allows the couple to be vulnerable as they attempt to negotiate their individual identities and define their future together. The symbolic import of the blackout and the name Beacon Street collaborate to communicate the idea of the couple coming from a place of uncertainty into a state of clarity. For Shukumar the blackout appears as a "beacon of hope" that is his desire to restore a sense of harmony in his marriage. For example, after the night that Shoba told him she had looked in his address book

when they first meet to see if she had moved from the margins,“ Shukumar looked forward to the lights going out...it felt good to remember [Shoba] as she was then, how bold, how nervous she'd been when they first met, how hopeful “(15). In this scene, Shukumar expresses a desire to return to the past, finds pleasure in “remembering Shoba as she once was,” and equates her desire to move “from the margins” of his address book with her desire to build a home or have a relationship with him. By escaping into the past, Shukumar reconstructs his notion of “home” in the imaginary space where Shoba and he were happy. But the inevitable separation of the couple also invites a reading of the word “beacon, “as “a light or other visible object serving as a signal, warning, or guide, especially at sea or on an airfield” (Oxford English Dictionary). According to this reading the darkness functions as a metaphor for Shukumar’s bewilderment. In the darkness the “signals” and “warnings “of the inevitable dissolution of his marriage are obscured by his hope of reconciliation. When the light returns to Beacon Street, Shukumar is confronted with Shoba’s announcement that she found an apartment and is moving out. Suddenly the “signals” and “warnings” embedded in Shoba’s confession become clear. Like Shukumar, Shoba is confronted with the confession about the sex of their baby. Not knowing the sex of the baby had “enabled her to seek refuge in a mystery.” With the veil of that mystery revealed she also emerges with a sense a clarity and resolution.

“A Temporary Matter” is a story about the intimate connection between “home” and identity. The fictional domestic story of Shoba and Shukumar speak to the experience of many transnational peoples who struggle to construct/reconstruct a sense of self amid constantly shifting notions of “home.” While the story suggests some parallels to the struggles of transnational peoples who attempt to assert their identities in the geographical, political and cultural realms of their adopted land, a closer inspection of these characters—their behaviors and

their feelings— reveals the measure of subjective dimensionality that effects identity construction . The protagonists in “A Temporary Matter,” display subjective and markedly different desires from one another, while they begin by sharing a desire to have children and start a family together their individual desires and feelings drive them apart. The individuality of Shoba and Shukumar shows the resistance of the transnational subject against categorization and furthermore shows the variance at which fluid identities transform because of time and circumstance. The idea that notions of identity and “home” could be fixed in such identifiers as race, nation, and gender is exhausted in the liminal space, wherein the ideas of the past are contested and transformed by the present and identifiers cease to be the measure of identity. In this space the reader sees the elements individuality and uniqueness of identity construction and the immigrant experience.

The title story “The Interpreter of Maladies” goes even further to disrupt these categories. As with “A Temporary Matter,” this section will explore the ways in which the story comments on the experience of migration, as well as the history and evolution of transnational fiction, while refusing to fix either the immigrant subject or the genre to any limiting conventions or generalizations. The story depicts an American family of Indian heritage who travel to the “motherland” for vacation, but who have no connection to the nation, its culture, or its history, and thus require the aid of their native tour guide, Mr. Kapasi. The title “The Interpreter of Maladies” refers to the weekday job of Mr. Kapasi, who works as a doctor’s interpreter when he’s not giving tours. As an interpreter Mr. Kapasi translates the various languages of his boss’s diverse cliental so that the doctor may effectively treat their different ailments. In viewing the text as broader commentary on the global literary history of Indian literature written in English, the reader may find that this title describes the difficulty of communicating a transnational

history to a global audience that may or may not have any direct contact with that culture. Mr. Kapasi occupies the position of the twentieth-century transnational writer in the story, he is constantly having to contest the information that he gives the family about India against some western model of the country. For instance, when Mrs. Das asks how long it will be before the tour group arrives, Mr. Kapasi replies “about two and a half hours”, to which Mr. Das responds “the Sun Temple is only eighteen miles north of Puri...tapping on his tour book. (47)” Mr. Das questions Mr. Kapasi, who travels to the Sun Temple every weekend, solely because Mr. Das trust the authority of his English language tour manual. But his tour book only has general information, but it does not have the intimate everyday experience with the land that Mr. Kapasi does. Mr. Kapasi has the information about the roads that is not published in the tour book only the natives that use these roads regularly would know that “the roads to Konarak are poor. Actually it’s a distance of fifty two miles (47).” Mr. Das’s gesture of tapping on his tour book is a commentary about the pre-twentieth century colonial novel, which strongly favored the “dominate ideology of the English colonist,” that is, “the imperial narrative (McLaughlin 152).” Mr. Das assumes that the printed English document must be correct because it is directed toward him in his language. However, the reader might also find that Mr. Kapasi’s quick correction Mr. Das could be read alternatively as the voice of the colonized who “use the same literary tools to assert a subject position for themselves and the communities they wish to represent (George 5).” Mr. Kapasi does not dispute the information that the Sun Temple is “eighteen miles north of Puri” he in fact uses that information to resist its claim toward accuracy. Mr. Kapasi counters the book’s claim by supplying Mr. Das with the information he has gathered from his “subject position” as a member of the community in Orissa

The word “maladies” is informative as to the global commentary in the text. Throughout the story, Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das attempt to forge a connection through the shared experience of participating in an unhappy marriage. Whereas Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi are both Indians in a troubled marriage, the cultural differences between these characters cause them to view the construct of marriage differently and make it difficult for them to establish a connection. Mr. Kapasi is in an arranged and unloving marriage. He cannot communicate with his wife, but he feels culturally responsible to honor his parent’s arrangement. Mrs. Das, on the other hand, picked her own spouse, but because of her guilt, she has trouble commutating with Mr. Das or her children. The story depicts the “unwholesome condition” or the “maladies” in the marital relationship of the Das’s and Mr. Kapasi, while simultaneously echoing the “unwholesome condition” of the migrant subject when they separated from the “homeland.” The Das family depicts the divide between national heritage and national identity that many second and third generation multicultural peoples express. Without a fixed sense of identity the children of first generation immigrants are often compelled to negotiate their sense of identity within this divide, and hence feel “un-whole.”

Early in the story, the conventional markers of identity that are common to global fiction written in English, such as a race and clothing fail to function as identifiers of group homogeny. The story begins with Mr. Kapasi, who is “accustomed to foreign tourists,” observing that “the [Das] family looked Indian but dressed like foreigners (44).” The Das family illustrates the influence that culture and setting have as shapers of identity. The fact that the Das family “looked Indian” indicates that they have a common national heritage with the people who live in Orissa (where the story begins), but the fact that “dressed foreigners” suggests that this heritage exists apart from a deep cultural connection with that community. The divide between national

heritage and national identity that these characters express might be read as a challenge toward the tendency to conflate these two categories into a single homogenized feature. This tendency occurs in global fictions and in the social discourse on migration, but fails to capture the diversity of identity construction among multicultural individuals. Additionally, Mr. Kapasi's initial confused reaction to the Das family shows the breakdown of homogenized categorization that is increasingly more likely in multicultural and well-traveled world. Mr. Kapasi, while "accustomed to foreign tourist" that are similar to "the elderly couple from Scotland, both with spotted faces and fluffy white hair (44)," which he received the day before he receives the Das's, finds the "tanned skin and youthful faces" of Mr. and Mrs. Das, "in comparison all the more striking" (44). The character seems to find the family "striking" precisely because their visible Indian heritage violates his image of what a "foreign tourist" should look like. From Mr. Kapasi's vantage point the Das's would definitely fit into the category "foreign," in that their behavior and their worldview are "characteristic of a country or language other than [his] own," as well as the category "tourist" in that they are people "traveling or visiting a place for pleasure, or culture (Oxford English Dictionary)." However he has trouble pigeonholing them in the category "foreign tourist," because their skin color reflects his idea of a local native.

The Das family's national identity is American, in that their sense of "home" appears entrenched in the culture, customs, and social modes of behavior that are characteristic the United States. In the story Mrs. Das's connection to an American identity is demonstrated by the way the Mrs. Das "squeezed hands like an American," when Mr. Kapasi "pressed his palms together" to greet her. The fact that they travel to India every couple of years to visit their parents suggests a need or desire to connect to the homeland. The desire to connect with one's national identity and gain a sense of belonging within that collective national community is common to

many generations of immigrant children. This need is suggested in the text by the ways in which Mr. and Mrs. Das attempt to connect with Mr. Kapasi through similar shared experiences, and the ways in which their children seem to delight and take interest in various aspects of Indian culture and daily activities of the locals. For example, when Mr. Kapasi asks Mr. Das if he “left India as a child?” Mr. Das “announced with an air of sudden confidence” that Mina (Mrs. Das) and he were both “born and raised” in America (45). The character’s “sudden air of confidence” indicates the measure of self-assurance and pride that he takes in his American cultural identity. However when their conversation turns to occupations, the reader might note that Mr. Das loses his confidence in the exceptionality of the American cultural identity. He tells his tour guide that he teaches middle science in Brunswick, New Jersey, and that “every year I take my students on a trip to the National History Museum in New York City.” Mr. Das realizes that the experience of leading a class through a museum holds some common ground with Mr. Kapasi’s job of relaying information to tourist visiting his country. He states to his companion that “in a way we have a lot in common, you and I “(46). The divide that Mr. Das feels in his cultural identity is implied by the character’s use of the collective “we” to connect himself and Mr. Kapasi through the shared experience of directing tours. At the same his use of the words “you” and “I” suggests his need to clarify the category “we” as alignment between the definitely separate “you” and “I”. Mr. Das, as the immigrant subject in the story captures the sense of insecurity in national identity that may immigrants feel when they attempt to distinguish the “we” from the “you” and “I”. The category “we” becomes problematized when one’s notions of “home” becomes separate from the space that the “you” calls home. Thus, because “we” becomes the category that describes one’s sense of belonging, second generation immigrants often feel the need to negotiate between two

identity groups, making the distinction between the identity groups that characterize “you” and the identity groups that make up “I.”

Other than the desire to establish some personal connection with his Indian tour guide, Mr. Das attempts to connect to India through the information he gathers from his tourist guidebook and the pictures he takes along their trip. Photographs are an important factor in determining how one understands and interprets the narrative of a nation. Anthropologist Tim Ingold writes in his book, *Imagining Landscapes: Past, Present and Future*, “landscape tells - or rather is - a story told partly through monuments, memorials and murals. Yet, it is not merely a material space. It carries the meaning and values that individuals and groups ascribe to it as they construct and sustain their particular visions of national identity (153)”. In this context, the reader might speculate that Mr. Das’s preoccupation with taking pictures reflects his desire to understand a group and to be included in the imaginative construction of that group’s vision of a national narrative and identity. By capturing that identity in an image, Mr. Das becomes at least in-part a contributor to the national narrative and imaginative identity of India. Alternatively, the images that Mr. Das elects to capture might be criticized because they too fail to capture the diversity among the subjects. Rather than capturing a collection of diverse individuals with varying experiences, Mr. Das prefers to take pictures that confirm the outsider’s narrative of India. Mr. Das took a picture of “a barefooted man, his head wrapped in a dirty turban, seated on the top of a cart of grain sacks pulled by a pair of bullocks. Both man and bullocks were emaciated” (49). In this scene, Mr. Das is excited when he sees an individual performing a task that confirms his idea of life in India, an idea most likely supplied to him by the media in his own homeland. Writing on ethnic and cultural stereotypes reproduced by “western media of third world comintuies”, Uma Narayan writes that “the sorts of contextual information that get left



out leave the issues (reported of the “third world” in west) vulnerable to misconceptions (Narayan 103)”. Mr. Das seems to prefer to take pictures of the “emancipated barefoot man” because they confirm his culturally conditioned biases about the lives of “real Indians.” The scene works as social commentary concerning the important role that writers, photographers, and artist have in redirecting the wrongheaded notions of one’s “home” that influence the global conversation. As “the owners and controllers of significant markers of identity and particular national narratives of landscape have a strong influence on the production and continuing reproduction of national identity. They have the power to select which meanings and memories are to be encoded on that landscape which is presumed or constructed as the heartland of the nation (Ashford, Graham 3).”

On their way to the “The Sun Temple,” Mrs. Das breaks her “extended silence” to describe Mr. Kapasi’s job as a doctor’s interpreter as “romantic.” Mrs. Das’s “extended silence” becomes a metaphor for her inability to communicate emotionally; she doesn’t engage with her children when they attempt to speak with her, nor does she talk with her husband, who also hides from conversation behind his tour book and his camera lens. At this point in the story, Mrs. Das’s own struggle to communicate with others in a meaningful way may be her impetus for seeing the “romance” in what Mr. Kapasi does connecting individuals who speak different languages, and who would otherwise be unable to communicate without the interpreter. Mrs. Das states that if Mr. Kapasi makes a mistake, “the patient would never know what you told the doctor, and the doctor would never know you said the wrong thing. “It’s a big responsibility (51)”. Ironically Mrs. Das seems to see the “big responsibility” of effective communication when treating physical maladies, but loses this perspective in her own personal life where the breakdown of communication results in an acerbation of the emotional maladies within her

family. For Mr. Kapasi the irony is that although he occupies the role of translator in many arenas, he misinterprets Mrs. Das's intent in using the word "romantic." While Ms. Das's apparently sees the ability to communicate effectively across cultural and linguistic borders as "romantic" because it connects people that would otherwise be suffering to a person offering a remedy, Mr. Kapasi sees Mrs. Das's use of the "romantic" as an expression of her attraction to him. Mr. Kapasi observes that "she did not behave in a romantic way toward her husband, and yet she used the word to describe him "(53). The complexity of interpretation is suggested by the degree to which intent is lost in the subjective associations that individuals connect with words like "romantic." Mr. Kapasi's desire to forge a connection with Mrs. Das is spurred by her use of a single word "romantic" to describe him. Simply categorizing him (or his occupation) as romantic Mr. Kapasi begins to see "the signs that he recognized in his own [unhappy] marriage—the bricking, the indifference, the protracted silence "(53). The story highlights the power of words and translations to transverse the emotional spectrum of the hearer. The subjective attachments that the hearer holds in connection to a word like "romantic" for instance may suggests a preoccupation or idealizing of love or another person. But "romantic" could also describe something that is fanciful or incredible, a romantic idea. It is the hearer that assigns meaning to a word with multiple meanings or connotations. This power is suggested by the way that Mr. Kapasi imagines a connection between Mrs. Das and himself through his evaluation of "the signs" that confirm his translation of the word "romantic". In exploring the text as a narrative that comments on the history transnational fiction, the reader sees this scene as a metaphor for difficulties in conveying one's notion "home" to a multicultural audience through a different language without defeating intent. The ways in which "the signs" of otherness, sameness, diversity, and universality effect the way the reader sees the author's vision of "home"

is suggested in the text in the ways in which Mr. Kapasi reads “the signs” of Mrs. Das’s failing marriage and the effect these signs have on his opinion of what “home” means for the Das family.

Interestingly, the subjectivity and diversity of the immigrant subject is represented as much by Mr. Kapasi as it is the Das family. As a fictional construction, Mr. Kapasi’s “nativeness” in the country where the story takes place prevents a literal understanding of him as an “immigrant subject.” However he shares many similarities to the marginalized “other” in global fiction; he feels “powerless, isolated, and marginalized” in the domestic space that he occupies with his wife (Weaver 72). The character’s struggle to obtain a sense of “home” and belonging in the story parallels on the domestic scale what transnational immigrants often experience on the national scale. He feels that he and his wife are “a bad match,” that they have little in common, and feel “indifferent” toward one another (53). Mr. Kapasi’s arranged marriage makes him feel “powerless” and this feeling of powerlessness comes not from his personal or subjective situation, but rather a “configuration of powers that govern the world (McGee 30)”. Mr. Kapasi’s feeling of being powerless is outside of his control. As Mrs. Das’s description of his job implies, Mr. Kapasi is actually quite powerful in the public sphere, but the demands of culture, which obligate him to arrange marriage, abolish this power in private sphere. Similar to the subaltern who “cannot speak”, Mr. Kapasi’s home life is plagued by “indifference” and “protracted silence (McGee 30)”. The feeling of indifference” that the character receives from his wife may be viewed as an isolation mechanism wherein he is shut out from any attempt to articulate his feelings in language. His wife’s lack interest and concern for his daily experience makes him feel marginalized. Marginality is often a condition attributed to the “other” in social theory, it is the condition inherited by “one that is considered to be at a lower or outer limit, as of

social acceptability.” In the story Mrs. Kapasi use of the phrase “doctor’s assistant,” rather than doctor’s interpreter to describe her husband’s job suggesting that she feels his position of interpreter is somehow “lower” or not as “socially acceptable” than that of a doctor’s assistant. Although Mr. Kapasi is a national native, in the domestic sphere the reader may find that the character mimics the position of the voiceless other in global fiction.

Given the character’s feelings about his home-life, it is easy to imagine how a person like Mrs. Das becomes the subject of Mr. Kapasi’s fantasies. Unlike his wife who makes him feel powerless, isolated, and marginalized, Mrs. Das regrades his job as “a big responsibility,” his position as an interpreter in her view is elevated by the fact that “the doctor depends on [him].” Furthermore, she shows interest in him. She is frequently asking about his various patients as they travel throughout Orissa (51). Mrs. Das satisfies his a need to belong, which Mr. Kapasi feels is missing in his personal life. In the most direct way we can see this need is satisfied in the scene at the restaurant. Mr. Kapasi always made a stop at a roadside restaurant with his tour groups. He would normally venture away from the group he was guiding so that he could be alone and enjoy some tea. However, he joins the Das family after Mrs. Das orders him to wait, she generously tells him “[t]here’s room here,” before proceeding to make space for him at the family’s table (54). The gesture of “making room” alludes to the advancement of modern transnational fiction in the literary arena. If Mr. Kapasi indeed represents the position of the immigrant author, as well as a character that could be identified as marginalized to the extent that his “voice cannot be heard by anyone in power,” then the process of “making room” could suggest the movement of transnational fiction from the margins of the fiction genre and into the mainstream—the beginning of the immigrant voice being heard (McGee 30). The historically interested reader might also draw parallels between the story and the larger social objective of

some authors working in the immigrant genre, the objective “of giving a voice to the subaltern (Zsadanyi 177)”. For example, Mrs. Das offers “room” for Mr. Kapasi by offering him a seat at the table, but she also “makes room” for him intellectually in the way in which she takes an interest in him and allows him room to tell his stories while she listens earnestly.

However, if the reader elects to view the text as an observation of transnational literature, he or she might also find that the text alludes to the fact that for much of the history of transnational literature the voice of the immigrant novel written in English has come by the condition that the “colonized not raise their voices, for to raise their voices is to change the contents of the English novel...” (Morangoly 5). To clarify what it means for the colonized not to “raise their voices,” we might turn our focus to the ways in which the English novel is structured to resist change in nationalist fiction. While “code switching”—switching between English dialects and those of a character’s home-country—has become a highly regarded technique for characters to express their affinity for “home” in transnational fiction today, before the mid-twentieth century, the models and literary tools present in Standard English prescribed the rules for dialect and vernacular; essentially considering the vernaculars of the third-world to be “bad vernaculars.” For authors from regions like Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia,” this meant “you can’t write it as the person speaks it. You have to put it through a certain process (the process of translation) that conveys the impression that it is being said in the dialect (*NourbeSe Philip, National Endowment for the Humanities, Interview 2014*)”. In disempowering the vernaculars of third-world nations, the Eurocentric nationalist tradition imposed built in systemic controls and forms of censorship on the third-world voice, making it the difficult for third-world writers to communicate a true vision of one’s “home” across cultures. The story appears to allude to challenge of communicating across borders within certain pre-established limits. For

example, after Mrs. Das requests that Mr. Kapasi give her his address so that she may send him the photo that she took of the two of them at the restaurant, she tears out a piece of a page in her English language Bombay film magazine, which she had been reading throughout the trip, so that Mr. Kapasi can write his address down on the scrap. But Mr. Kapasi notes that “the blank portion was limited, for the narrow strip was crowded by lines of text and a tiny picture of a hero and heroine embracing on a eucalyptus tree” (55). Mr. Kapasi has a limited space for which to supply the information he needs to print in order to forge a genuine connection with Mrs. Das. Much like the immigrant writer who must confine his or her voice within the limits of the English customs, Mr. Kapasi has only “a narrow strip” in which to print the representative letters of his home. He is required to write within the narrow space crowded by the previously printed images and text on the page. Furthermore, this scene speaks not only to the experience of transnational authors, but to the immigrants in a postcolonial world in general. The massive displacement of peoples from the “homeland” to various points on the globe that accrues as a result of colonization, and the sense of detachment that these peoples feel from others in their national community, is suggested in the way Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das are separated by a “narrow strip,” or rather an ocean, which makes (or made) communication and connection a challenge. Still, even when these communication challenges are alleviated by technology, the natural physical desire that human beings have to embrace a love one poses unique challenges for those separated geographically. In this context, the “hero and heroine embracing” in the picture that “crowded the narrow strip” in Mrs. Das’s magazine becomes a metaphor for the ways in which the desire to physically connect with others is ever-present in humans, but often fails to manifest in the lives of the colonized and formerly colonized causing pain and anxiety.

As Mr. Kapasi writes his address in the tiny space left on the paper, he begins to imagine what his life with Mrs. Das could be like now that they have the opportunity to communicate across geographical barriers. “She could write to him and ask him how his day interpreting at the doctor’s office, and he would respond eloquently, choosing only the most “entertaining anecdotes.” In this sentiment the reader may find that Mr. Kapasi’s fantasy is his way of alleviating his feelings of being voiceless and unimportant in his home life. Whereas Mr. Kapasi feels that he is unimportant to his wife, and in such unimportance feels forced into a position of silence within his domestic home in Orissa, within the imaginary “home” that he creates with Mrs. Das, he responds “eloquently” and chooses his own “entertaining anecdotes.” In this imaginary space he has the power to assert his identity. He has a voice of his own for which say the words and tell the stories he wants Mrs. Das to hear, and to furthermore create the image of himself in her mind that he wishes to convey. Within the intellectual “home,” Mr. Kapasi is able to rediscover his sense of belonging and is able to use his remarkable ability to communicate in ways which allow “their [Mrs. Das’s and his ] relationship would grow, and flourish (55)”. We see again the importance of communication in relationship development. Communication becomes the essential tool by which relationships “flourish”. Within the wider social scope of the text, the intellectual “home” appears to be the location where individuals who feel disconnected (either physically or culturally) from their sense of “home” can reconnect, or even reimagine a “home,” and establish some sense of belonging within the larger communal whole. But the story refrains from overpraising the intellectual space by depicting this space as not entirely free from the challenges one faces in the present reality. For instance, while escaping into his “imaginary home” allows Mr. Kapasi to feel that “all the world was right, that all his struggles would be rewarded, and that all his life’s mistakes would make sense “(53), this

romantic notion of “home” is almost instantly unsettled by his anxiety and insecurity about the present. As Mr. Kapasi hands the paper to Mrs. Das “he begin to worry that he misspelled his name, or accidentally reversed the numbers of his address” (56). Mr. Kapasi seems to register the fragility of this “imagined home” when pressed against the conditions of reality, which inevitability enter his mind. In reading into the social context of the story, Mr. Kapasi’s concerns in this passage might be viewed as not only a reflection of the character’s personal anxiety, but the anxiety of many marginalized groups of immigrants across the globe. Anxiety over a “misspelled name” in the story comes to represent the feeling of insecurity that many immigrants express towards their cultural identity in a place where they are an underrepresented minority, an identity constantly under the threat of misrepresentation by those in power. The fact that so much of one’s identity is symbolically represented by their name helps to explain the implications of fear over the misspelling of that name. The misspelling of name in this context is a metaphoric disordering of identity, it is a misrepresentation or distortion of a group of peoples that makes communication and understanding across cultural barriers impossible. We may make a similar observation about unsettled feelings that many transnational individuals have towards notions of “home,” which is symbolically captured by the act of reversing the numbers in one’s address in the story.

When the tour group finally reaches their destination at the Konark Sun Temple, Mr. Kapasi relays to group that the inside is in ruins and cannot be explored. Reading from his guidebook, Mr. Das begins to explain the symbolic import of the various images embedded in the temple’s architecture. “It was dedicated to the great master life, the sun, which struck three sides of the edifice as it made its journey across the sky”(56). Mr. Das’s description of the outside of the temple speaks in a personal way to Mr. Kapasi’s experience. The temple speaks to



the character's ambition to become "the great master of [his own] life". Like the sun, Mr. Kapasi dreams of uniting people all over the world merely through his purpose (as the interpreter, or rather as the one who through the act of translation brings light to the previous unknown) in their life. Furthermore, like the structure of the temple itself, a chariot with "twenty-four giant wheels and pulled by seven horses speeding as though through the heavens," Mr. Kapasi drives his "chariot" from the place where he receives various tourist, "speeding through the heavens" on a "journey" through his nation, and finally to the temple and back. Mr. Kapasi especially likes the statue of Astachala-Surya at the northern wall of the temple—a figure with a tired expression on his face as a result of his hard days' work. Because the temple reflects Mr. Kapasi's experience, it is easy to imagine why Mr. Kapasi says that "The Sun Temple is one of my favorite places" (50). "The wheel of life" might also be read in this scene as an expression of Mr. Kapasi's identity and his desires. As Mr. Das reads from his guide book, he notes the wheel "depicts the cycle of "creation, preservation, and achievement of realization" (57). The wheel, while representing the biological cycle of life over generations, also shows the intellectual cycle depicting the creation, preservation and ultimate realization of the self. The reader may connect the three events depicted on the wheel to Mr. Kapasi's "creation" of an intellectual, or imaginary "home" with Mrs. Das. His attempt to "preserve" that "home" is suggested by the way he gives her his address and imagines her reciprocating his desire to have a relationship. And at last the "achievement of realization," which for Mr. Kapasi at this moment in the narrative might mean the corresponding divorces of Mrs. Das and himself from their spouses at which time they can fully realize a relationship together. But of course "realization" is a state of mind that sits entirely apart from what one desires to achieve and Mr. Kapasi has yet to reach this point in the cycle. This is not to suggest that Mr. Kapasi is incapable of realization at this point in his experience.

For insistence, “it occurred to him as he... gazed at the topless women, that he had never seen his wife fully naked” (58). In seeing the physical forms of the statues and carvings on the temple, Mr. Kapasi instinctively begins to make physical and cultural comparisons between his wife and Mrs. Das, “his wife kept the panels of her blouse hooked together,” unlike the European tourist who often exposed their “bare limbs” (58). On one hand, Mr. Kapasi is making an observation between women in two different cultures; the expectations or preferences in dress of the women native to Orissa, whom Mr. Kapasi lives with and is familiar with in his community seem unexciting to him when compared with the expectations or preferences in dress of the tourists from Europe and American, whom he is not so personally connected to and in being less familiar to him seem very exciting. This of course is important for understanding cross-cultural differences and how these differences effect the interactions and evaluations that individuals have with one another in a multicultural space. But for Mr. Kapasi, the observation that he makes regarding his wife’s sexual and conservatism is not so much a cultural consideration as it is a symbol of the emotional disconnect and lack of intimacy in his marriage. As Mr. Kapasi evaluates the differences between his wife and Mrs. Das he begins to consider what it means to see a person “fully naked.” The “protracted silence” that exists between Mrs. Kapasi and himself, coupled with the lack of interest that she takes in him when compared with Mrs. Das, who has taken a tremendous interest in him and even shares with him intimate details about her feelings regarding her own relationship, might suggest that Mrs. Das is certainly the more emotionally “naked” of the two women. But while Mr. Kapasi likes Mrs. Das’s openness because it contrast the sort of emotional closure of his wife, Mr. Kapasi has yet to see Mrs. Das “fully naked” emotionally. Like the darkness in “A Temporary Matter,” which ironically functions as a symbol of clarity, the temple in this scene seems to function as counterintuitive

symbol. “The Sun Temple” is not a moment of illumination or realization for Mr. Kapasi, but a moment of darkness where the “fully naked” or true Mrs. Das has yet to uncover herself to Mr. Kapasi.

In taking the long route back to the hotel, Mr. Kapasi finds the opportunity to have the private, intimate conversation with Mrs. Das that he has been longing for. As their car rattled past a set of miraculous caves, situated at the top of a winding path that had been constructed for tourists, the children beg their parents to stop so that they could get out and see the caves. Mrs. Das complained that “her legs were tired” and requested that Mr. Kapasi stay in the car with her (61). After Mr. Das and children venture up the path, Mrs. Das tells Mr. Kapasi that her middle child is not her husband’s. She explains their relationship in detail, describing the love that Mr. and Mrs. Das once had for each other, how she had married young, and in not being able to experience her youth she had an affair with one of her friends one afternoon that resulted in a child. Mrs. Das even supplies Mr. Kapasi with very elaborate details about the sexual acts between her and the man who fathered her middle child. Seeking to end the feeling of discomfort that he experiences with hearing the information that Mrs. Das is relying on him, Mr. Kapasi asks her “why have you told me this information” (64)? To which she responds “because of your job as an interpreter... I feel terrible all the time, I feel terrible when I look at the children, and at Raj...I feel terrible all the time...suggest some kind of remedy (65)”. Her confession reveals how failures at interpretation have far-reaching ramifications. For Mrs. Das, her misunderstanding of what Mr. Kapasi does as a doctor’s interpreter leads her to make a difficult confession to him with the hope that he could “suggest a remedy” for her emotional pain, which of course he cannot do. Furthermore her description of the job as “romantic” appears to be entirely based upon this misunderstanding, which reveals her desire to rekindle her love with Mr.

Das and not a flirtatious signal to Mr. Kapasi. For Mr. Kapasi, who has reinvested his notions of “home” and his desire to belong in Mrs. Das because of her use of the word “romantic,” her confession demolishes the foundations of imaginary home (like the inside of The Temple of Sun) leaving his imaginary “home” and his sense of belonging in ruins. He recognizes that “protracted silence” between Mr. Das and herself is not solely a symptom of their marital discord, but a symptom of her guilt, a symptom of the fact that she feels “terrible” about what she had done to the man she had loved. The image that Mr. Kapasi had of Mrs. Das dissolves with this confession, he begins to evaluate her as “a woman, who was not yet thirty, who neither loves her husband, nor her children, who has fallen out of love with life” (66). In this moment Mr. Kapasi can no longer “preserve” the foundation of his imaginary home. The intellectual space in which he constructed his ideal notion of home was built on his romantic perception of Mrs. Das, a perception which has inevitably been transformed by his “achievement of [the] realization,” that Mrs. Das is unfaithful and (in Mr. Kapasi’s view) unloving. When the car arrives back at the hotel, Mrs. Das whips out her hairbrush and as she gets out of the car she unknowingly drops the paper with Mr. Kapasi’s addresses written on it out of her purse. As Mr. Kapasi “watched the slip of paper with [his] address on it flutter away in the wind... [he knew that] this was the picture of the Das family he would preserve in his mind forever” (69). The story ends with a rather poetic but heartbreaking image that forecast the permanent separation of these two individuals. If viewed through a theoretical lens this final scene could be read as an observation about the unsettled foundations of the “imagined home.” For displaced individuals, where “home” is often not fixed in physical location, definitions of one’s “home” are subjected to a constant state of change and are increasingly vulnerable to constantly shifting circumstances that might in an instant transform one’s sense of belonging. The story might be read as a tale

about the experience of separation. The loss of one's sense of communal identity in the event of migration, which causes a shift in cultural alignments that prevents individuals with similar ancestral ties to a nation from sharing in a collective identity.

“The Interpreter of Maladies” is a story about constructing identities and the process of negotiating between multiple notions of “home.” The story speaks to the divided nature of these two intimately connected constructs (home and identity) for many transnational immigrants. The narrative suggests the unique set of challenges that many individuals like the Das's and Mr. Kapasi confront. While, the Das's struggle to connect with their ancestral roots and rediscover their Indian identity, Mr. Kapasi struggles against his culture obligations and finding a sense of purpose in a place where he feels marginalized. The reader is allowed to see inside the intellectual space of the immigrant subject, who may find a temporary escape from the harsh realities of the present by building a sense “home” that satisfies the need to belong in their imagination. However, as the story suggests, this “home” is only a threshold, a space wherein an evaluation of past insists upon one coming into an unknown and ever-changing future. The story is also about the difficulties that one encounters when communicating with others, many of whom may have vastly different perceptions of the world and of their own reality. Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das differing interpretation of the word “romantic”, frames the various communicative barriers that exist between people with different cultural perspectives. Of a larger project in transnational fiction in general: the story alludes to the efforts of modern authors who promote the immigrant voice not only to speak its own stories, but to have those stories be heard and understood by a global audience.

Ultimately, “A Temporary Matter” and “The Interpreter of Maladies” are stories that resist categorization. “Home” and identity for the characters in these stories is not neatly fixed or

rooted in any assumed notions about culture, nation, race, language or gender. ‘Home’ is localized within the imagination and identity is expressed in the form of a conversation between one’s homeland and one’s adopted home. The subjective dimensions of identity that separate Shoba and Shukumar after the death of their child reflect the transforming cultural landscape of the world, which in countries like the United States is increasingly complex, multicultural, and diverse. The historical experience of migration to countries with vast, differing populations reconstitutes identity in uniquely individual ways even among those with a shared cultural past. The miscommunication that occurs between Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi depicts the challenge of communicating one’s notion of “home” across cultures. The communicative challenges that these characters face echo the experience of the transnational author attempting to convey their notion of home across cultures throughout most of the twentieth century. These stories expose the fact that “the new global economy has to be understood as complex, overlapping, disjunctive order which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models... (Appaduri 296).” Lahiri’s Pulitzer Prize win in 1999, as a South Asian-American author and the daughter of immigrants resonates with complex-overlap in identity illustrated by her characters and expands on what it means to produce American literature in the modern era. The praise that her collection received in the United States, coupled with the mixed reaction her collection received in India appears to speak to the rise of multiculturalism and transnationalism in the United States and the acceptance of “new” diverse, fluid American identity in fiction.

Works Cited

- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Revised Addition ed.). Verso.
- Appaduri, A. (1990). *Theroy, Culture, & Society: The Disjunctive Differences in the Global Cultural Economy, Here and Now*. Nottingham Trent, Minneapolis London: SAGE Press, University of Minnesota Press.
- Eagly, A. H. (1999). *Sex Differences in Social Behavior: A Social-Role Interpretation*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- G.J Ashford, B. G. (2005). *Senses of Place: Senses of Time*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- George, R. M. (1996). *The Politics of Home*. San Diego: University of California Press.
- Hall, S. (1996). *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Washington, D.C: SAGE Publications.
- Ingold, T. (2016). *Imagining Landscapes: Past, Present and Future*. Howick Place, London : Routledge Publishing.

McGee, P. (2009). *Theory of the Common: From Marx to Badiou*. New York: St. Marin's Press LLC.

McLaughlin, R. L. (2002). *Unreadable Stares: Imperial Narratives and the Colonial Gaze in Gravity's Rainbow* (Vol. Pynchon Notes). Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Rose, G. (1993). *Feminism Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*. London: Blackwell .

Said, E. (1984). *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge,: Harvard University Press; .

Takaki, R. (1993). *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural American*. Boston: Back Bay Books.

Tharu, S. (1990). *Tracing Savitri's Pedigree: Victorian Rascism and Images of Woman in Indo-Anglian Literature*. Rutgers University Press : Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Eds.).

Weaver, B. (2015). *Offending and Desistance: The Importance of Social Relations*. London: Routledge.

Zsadanyi, E. (2015). *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures: Vocing the Subltern*. Leiden: BRILL Publishers.