

The Elephant and the Refrigerator: Jhumpa Lahiri as Interpreter of Maladies

“Some people fall between the cracks”
(Jhumpa Lahiri)

According to a well-established commonplace on multiculturalism, moving from one country to another, living a nomadic existence does create a new open-minded and richer identity. The *Financial Times* weekend issue celebrates this perspective in the page devoted to “Expat Lives”, where successful transnational characters relate their wanderings throughout the world, enabling each of them to develop their skills and improve their professional opportunities. A plethora of hyphenated words have been coined – not only in English—to describe subjects belonging simultaneously to at least two different nations/cultures/languages. In the era of glocal nations borders contain the multiplicity of identities co-habiting contemporary diasporic individuals. Asian-American, South-Asian American,¹ Indian-American, Italian-American, Chinese-American and so forth denote a mutual belonging to worlds apart. These coordinative compounds – or “dvandva, Sanskrit term for a compound in which the relation between members is like that of coordination”² – should encourage a balance between the contradictory selves represented by the nationality nouns. Even if coordinative compounds are supposed to have two equivalent heads (i.e. Asian ‘equal to’ American), the tendency is to interpret compounds according to the Right-hand Head Rule (in this case American).³ Consequently, it is not by chance that many postcolonial writers have rejected these terms, feeling that they sentence them either to a thorough integration with the nationality ‘head-noun’ or to existence in a no man’s land, lost in translation. A statement by the Canadian cosmopolitan writer Yann Martel is highly relevant in this context:

Sabine Sielke: You’re Quebecois and your mother tongue is French, yet you write in English. I assume you consider yourself a citizen of the world?

Yann Martel: No. I’m Canadian. I don’t believe there are citizens of the world. Everyone is from somewhere, rooted in a particular culture. We’re also citizens of the languages we speak. Some people speak many languages – I speak three, I’m a citizen of English, French and Spanish – but no one speaks World. World is not a language.

Sabine Sielke: You prefer writing in English, obviously?

Yann Martel: Yes, I grew up going to school in English. It’s the language I learned to write in and to think in at my most subtle. But French and Spanish are dear to my heart.⁴

¹ South Asian American has a different meaning from Asian American, the latter referring to people of East Asian origin.

² P. H. Matthews, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 107.

³ Thomas Roeper and Muffy E. A. Siegel, “Lexical Transformation for Verbal Compounds”, *Linguistic Inquiry* 9.2 (Spring 1978), 199-260.

⁴ Yann Martel and Sabine Sielke, “‘The Empathetic Imagination’: An Interview with Yann Martel”, *Canadian Literature* 177 (Summer 2003), 12-32.

Is Martel French-Canadian, Quebec-Canadian or English-French-Canadian? Likewise, is Jhumpa Lahiri South Asian-British-American, Indian-American or Indian-Bengali-American? Once or twice hyphenated? Which label defines them best? Should Lahiri be included within the canon of American or of Indian literature? Criticism of Lahiri's work is also 'hyphenated'. While many interviews and articles have appeared in the United States, in India two books have been devoted entirely to her work.⁵ One thing is sure: both Martel and Lahiri are citizens of the same language: English, be it in its Standard Canadian or American variety (Lahiri uses Standard USA spelling and lexis in her stories).

Lahiri is a second-generation writer of Bengali Indian parents who grew up and studied in New England. In her short stories she explores a point of view based on the difficulties of multiculturalism through characters who do not belong to the White American majority, as she suggests in a recent interview. Lahiri has insisted in many interviews, on being in-between cultures and languages. Asked if she would call herself an Asian-American author, she answers that "labels are restrictive and daunting. I've never felt American nor Indian. Some people fall between the cracks".⁶ "Fall", here, also implies the danger of 'falling down', a loss of identity, a surrender of previous traditions and deep-felt beliefs. Devoid of a solid background, traditions and beliefs become empty rituals, unsubstantial shadows of a past the new Bengali generations living in the United States put aside or weakly cling to, in their efforts to achieve a deceptive American identity, to fully share an often elusive, slippery, uncertain American way of life. Disillusionment, resignation, emotional dislocation, lack of love and spiritual emptiness are the result of the characters' behaviour Lahiri probes in the wide range of short stories collected in her first two volumes *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), as well as in her novel, *The Namesake* (2003).

If we follow the four categories, based on the "choice of locale – the physical, geographical, and cultural landscapes that form the backgrounds and contexts of works by most of these authors" outlined by Roshni Rustomji-Kerns in her introduction to *Living in America: Poetry and Fiction by South Asian American Writers*, we find that the majority of Lahiri's stories, with due exceptions, fall into the third category which "feature South Asian protagonists' lives in America".⁷ By quoting this anthology I wish to underline the existence of a long standing tradition of diaspora writers migrating from the Indian subcontinent to North America, to which – alongside Chitra Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Kirin Narayan and many other women writers – Lahiri's name should be added. Winning the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction – a prize for an American book by an American author – with *Interpreter of Maladies*, put the young author, and thus South Asian American voices in general, under the international spotlight.

⁵ Suman Bala, *Jhumpa Lahiri: The Master Storyteller. A Critical Response to Interpreter of Maladies* (New Delhi: Khosla Publishing House, 2002) and Indira Nityanandam, *Jhumpa Lahiri. The Tale of the Diaspora* (New Delhi: Creative Books, 2005).

⁶ Oriana Palusci, interview with Jhumpa Lahiri, Milan (8 July 2008), unpublished. Italian version in "Identità allo specchio. Jhumpa Lahiri e il realismo domestico", *Il Manifesto* (10 luglio 2008), 13. See also Jhumpa Lahiri, "My Two Lives", *Newsweek* (6 March 2006), and Teresa Wiltz, "The Writer Who Began with a Hyphen" (8 October 2003), <www.washingtonpost.com>, 26 June 2008.

⁷ Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, *Living in America: Poetry and Fiction by South Asian American Writers* (Boulder: Western Press, 1995), 4. A fundamental role in consolidating the visibility and achievements of transnational Indians is played by *India Abroad*, the oldest Indian weekly newspaper published in North America, advertised as "An Indispensable guide for Indian-Americans".



Fig. 1: *Washing India*, photograph, Jaipur, August 2007, courtesy of Veronica 76

Ironically two very different symbols of India and the United States – on the one side the powerful elephant, representing the strength and god-like vitality of this hugely populated country,⁸ on the other the refrigerator as the triumph of domestic technology and well-fed bellies — blend together in “Only Goodness”, a short story in *Unaccustomed Earth*. During the very American celebration of Halloween, the uprooted girl Sudha envisages a fancy suit for Rahul, her younger brother, born in the United States, who will become a miserable drunkard in his adult life: “She

thought up elaborate Halloween costumes, turning him into an elephant or a refrigerator”.⁹ Asked why refrigerators seem to assume a relevant role, among the domestic objects that figure in her stories, Lahiri quotes a personal episode, explaining the rather surreal detail of Sudha’s choice:

⁸ The elephant is an integral part of the cultural history of India. It symbolizes the strength of the mind in Buddhism and stands generally as a symbol of eternal India.

I remember I once saw a boy dressed as a refrigerator and I was impressed, when I was young. When we went to India to visit our relatives, the refrigerator was a physical reminder of what we were and where we came from. Our refrigerator was taller than me. At the beginning very few people in India had refrigerators. In Bengali, at a certain point, I remember my aunt had a refrigerator with a key, so that servants couldn’t open it. It was a prized object. When you have a refrigerator it’s a totally different way of life.¹⁰

⁹ Jhumpa Lahiri, “Only Goodness”, in *Unaccustomed Earth* (London, Bloomsbury, 2008), 136.

¹⁰ Palusci, “Unpublished Interview”.

¹¹ Lahiri, “Only Goodness”, 136.

¹² See, among others, Gillian Brown, “Hawthorne’s American History”, in Richard H. Millington, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 121-142.

Diasporic Sudha dreams of a beautiful life for Rahul, after her own childhood has been wasted by the migrations of her family from Bengal to racist London in the 1960s, from London to Massachusetts. At school Sudha is unable “to present her autobiography”, and can only exhibit a few casual pictures taken in London by Mr. Pal, their Bengali landlord: “None of these mattered after Rahul arrived. Sudha had slipped through the cracks, but she was determined that her little brother should leave his mark as a child in America”.¹¹

Lahiri does not deny the influence of the American literary tradition, and acknowledges Hawthorne as a master, so that her second collection of stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, starts with an epigraph distilled from Hawthorne’s “The Custom-House”, referring to the fact that Hawthorne’s children (Una, Julian, Rose), by being born respectively in Concord, Boston and Lenox, and not in Salem, had avoided the sterility of too long a lineage of ancestors and the dangers of a dull, repetitive existence.¹² Behind “The Custom-House” lies, of course, the ‘scandalous tale’ of Hester Prynne

in *The Scarlet Letter*, but Lahiri seems to be satisfied with Hawthorne's introduction to his historical romance. The "unaccustomed [urban] earth" a few miles away from Salem, strikes a slightly ironical note, compared with the huge cultural and geographical gap dividing Bengali (one of the manifold facets of India) and New England (one of the manifold facets of the United States). It is also true that Hawthorne travelled with his family, taking up residence in England and Italy, two European countries well known to Lahiri, who has lived most of her existence in New England, but was born in London (thus making Sudha one of her most autobiographical characters) and visited Rome, the site of her conclusive story in *Unaccustomed Earth*. In both her collections, Lahiri's characters cross the globe, migrate from one country to another, settle down, reluctantly leaving behind and secretly cramming into their baggage memories and ways of seeing, while still hoping to crystallise remnants of their homeland culture in their daily life by sticking with people from their own country, thus establishing a 'little Indian Bengali abroad' in which caste imperatives evaporate into thin air. Differences considered insurmountable in India appear irrelevant in the United States, although a sense of loneliness defines each individual in the American-Indian community. Be it by way of "drawstring pajamas", "a packet of loose Darjeeling tea" or a wife selected through an arranged marriage in the homeland of one's ancestors, cultures undergo deep scrutiny and gain significance exactly because they project a sense of longing never to be completely satisfied. In the short story "The Third and Final Continent", the first-person nameless narrator's initiation to life requires a long journey through space – geographical space, from India, to Great Britain, to the United States — in order to acknowledge some aspects of an 'Indianness' which are dangerously given for granted, forgotten, excluded from daily life. Only after his newly wed wife Mala arrives in Boston (a marriage arranged in Calcutta by his family) does the narrator, who believes he has adjusted to "cornflakes and milk" and the new life in America, realise he "speaks Bengali for the first time in America":¹³ "We ate with our hands, another thing I had not yet done in America" (192). As a foreigner in his own national heritage, he observes Mala's elegant saris and wedding bracelets, the vermillion in her hair with curiosity. Lahiri disseminates her writing with culture-bound items related to the home of her characters' ancestors: food, clothing, customs, place-names and family names crop up in her American English, but not in the way a travel writer would employ them or a tourist from another country. Sudha, Rahul, Raj and Mina Das, Mala, Hena, Kaushik, Dr. Choudhuri, Parul Di, Mr. Kapasi embody their diasporic selfhood through their names. Lahiri's Bengali home-bound lexicon placidly makes room and settles down in the English language, enriching it through the addition of cultural terms rooted in a far away land, translated into the target language texture

¹³ Jhumpa Lahiri, "The Third and Final Continent", in *Interpreter of Maladies* (London: Flamingo, 2000), 191.

¹⁴ Palusci, “Unpublished Interview”. See Jhumpa Lahiri, *Una nuova terra* (Parma: Guanda, 2008), 367-369.

by her characters. The author was in fact surprised to see that the Italian translation of *Unaccustomed Earth* was provided with a Glossary.¹⁴

At the end of “The Third and Final Continent”, the nameless protagonist is ready to visit the house of old Mrs Croft – the centennial lady who had rented him a cheap room on his arrival in Boston. The moon landing, watched on television on July 20 1969, blends in his memory together with the consciousness that the past has not vanquished, it is still alive, and that maybe, being American means to apprehend both the new technological world and the old habits and recollections. Thus Lahiri engages the male protagonist of her story – a narrative portrait of her father? – in yet another voyage, significantly juxtaposing his ‘awakening’ with the slow acquaintance of his wife, Mala, the ‘stranger’ from Calcutta revitalising, through her presence and habits, the language of his forsaken self. In order to speak about Mala, the protagonist recalls details and aspects of his home culture; positioning himself as a mediator between worlds, he voices what for him – after all a migrant in Boston — is a form of in-bred knowledge of the female world:

I wondered if Mrs. Croft had ever seen a woman in sari, with a dot painted on her forehead and bracelets stacked on her wrists. I wondered what she would object to. I wondered if she could see the red dye still vivid on Mala’s feet, all but obscured by the bottom edge of her sari.¹⁵

¹⁵ Jhumpa Lahiri, “The Third and Final Continent”, 195.

Two polarities play with one another in Lahiri’s stories: her characters cover great geographical distances, live in a rootless condition, but their life is still encoded in the pattern of everyday domestic experiences. On the other hand, homes conceal secrets, unhappiness, mutual hostility. The writer is well aware of it, as she states “Homes have both a material and a metaphorical meaning. ... Homes left behind. Homes recreated elsewhere. Houses are so foreign to me. ... I feel a strange contradiction, a sense of being a refugee within the home”.¹⁶ Everyday life and family relationships – involving sexes and generations – are surgically dissected and reassembled so that what looks banal and routine opens up windows into memories, the past, distant lands and desires. The intricate structure and fine texture of her work bring to mind that of Alice Munro, the Canadian short story writer, who is much admired by Lahiri. North America has a long and solid tradition of short story writing, starting with Edgar Allan Poe; so too does Indian English literature.¹⁷ Munro’s personal contribution is to polish the sentence to the essential, making it allusive, ambiguous, pregnant with meaning, while weaving seemingly distant lives into her stories. This is what Lahiri succeeds in doing in her best stories, while she replaces Munro’s provincial Ontario setting with a map of the world consisting of distant lands of the heart.

¹⁶ Palusci, “Unpublished Interview”.

¹⁷ See Suman Bala, “Jhumpa Lahiri: The Master Storyteller”, in Bala, *Jhumpa Lahiri: The Master Storyteller*, 9-16.

A sophisticated artist from the very beginning of her production, Lahiri selects Hawthorne as a sort of Virgilian guide through her limbo of shy and careworn heroes and heroines; behind Hawthorne we glimpse another writer, Henry James, an expatriate himself, whose artistic subtlety, irony and ambiguity have certainly influenced the structure of some of Lahiri's best short stories. On the other hand, if we take into proper consideration Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies", the title story of her first collection, composed of nine short stories, we also detect the influence of Edward Morgan Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924). Intertextuality is an essential tool for reading Lahiri, who reverses Forster's title and re-defines it as "A passage to America". Both passages end in failure: in Forster's novel the English are unable to embrace the vastness and complexity of India also because their role of colonisers undermines any possibility of friendship and mutual understanding, while in most of Lahiri's stories the Bengali migrants – often professional, wealthy people — are doomed to be totally assimilated and, at the same time, to live in unhappiness and nostalgia, until their roots are totally severed by their offspring. A different lot awaits first- and second-generation migrants to the United States, Lahiri tells us, as the process of integration, imbued at school and by society, increasingly cuts away the tenuous threads with the parents' country of origin, as in the case of Rahul in the short story quoted above, or in many other characters she portrays, where India tends to be embodied by the figure of the mother, who at times upholds Indian secular tradition, at other times modernity. Hema, the narrative I in "Once in a Lifetime", the first of the three stories forming Part II of *Unaccustomed Earth*, perceives for instance the deep contrast between her mother and her beloved Kaushik's mother: in India the two women would have never had the occasion to meet as they belonged to different social classes:

They talked about the lives they had left behind in Calcutta: your mother's beautiful home in Jodhpur Park, with hibiscus and rosebuds blooming on the rooftop, and my mother's [Hema's] modest flat in Maniktala, above a grimy Punjabi restaurant, where seven people existed in three small rooms (225).

If the national personification of India after Independence was to be found in the Bollywood 1957 film *Mother India*, directed by Mehboob Khan, where Rahda, interpreted by Nargis Dutt, desperately fights for her children, her village and her dignity, the life of these two female expatriates reads as a double version of Indian motherhood abroad: the more traditional and the modern sophisticated Americanized lady. Both women had had an arranged marriage; they are not poor and destitute, yet each in her own way is uprooted, clinging desperately to homebound cultural values and family ties within the Bengali community in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Forster's *A Passage to India* and the film directed by David Lean in 1984 both play a role in the development of the short story "Interpreter of Maladies", especially through the episode of the journey to the Marabar Caves, enthusiastically planned by the ambitious Mr. Aziz for his two distinguished English guests, Mrs. Moore and her would-be daughter-in-law Adela. The day ends in disaster as the innocent Aziz is arrested and charged with molesting the white girl, while Mrs. Moore is haunted by a nightmare of cosmic emptiness and chaos inside the caves. In "Interpreter of Maladies", one of the three stories set in India, Mr. Kapasi, a Bengali English speaking friendly guide, drives a car with a second-generation family of Bengali descent living in New Jersey, which allows them to visit the Sun Temple at Konarak, in Orissa. The young couple reveals their Indian origin, but does not seem proud of it: they behave like perfect Western tourists, shooting photos, commenting chattily on their holidays, explaining a few superficial details of the landscape to their children, the girl Tina and the boys Bobby and Ronny (also the name of Mrs. Moore's son who should marry Adela in *A Passage to India*). In fact, Mr. and Mrs. Das – Raj and Mina – were born in the United States and travel occasionally to India only in order to meet their parents, who have returned to Assansol, in West Bengal. Second-generation offspring, their degree of Americanization is displayed through their children's English sounding names. It is interesting to notice that the narrative point of view in the story is that of the Indian guide, even if we know him only by his surname, while all the members of the Das family are given a forename. Sudhir Dixit, in speaking of "names as symbols of identity" in Lahiri's stories, points out that to call Mr. Kapasi by his surname suggests "a representative characterization".¹⁸ I believe Dixit's remark is true in some of the other stories in the collection, but in this case it is difficult to say that Mr. Kapasi, who speaks many languages, is just a sort of allegory of a faceless nationality.

¹⁸ Sudhir Dixit, "Names as Symbols of Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Stories", in Bala, *Jhumpa Lahiri*, 63. Names are essential in Lahiri's writing, as can be clearly seen in *The Namesake*, which revolves around the protagonist's name, Gogol – particularly demanding for an American of Indian origin, 21. Lahiri, "Interpreter of Maladies", 50.

In fact, this genuine Indian character – the only one in "Interpreter of maladies" – is fascinated by Mrs. Das, by her bare legs, the seductive strawberry sewn on her blouse, her easy-going behavior, and excited when the lady is intrigued by the story of his life and his other job as an "interpreter" in a doctor's office:

"What does a doctor need an interpreter for?"

"He has a number of Gujarati patients. My father was Gujarati, but many people do not speak Gujarati in this area, including the doctor. And so the doctor asked me to work in his office, interpreting what the patients say" ... ["A job] so romantic," Mrs. Das said dreamily breaking her extended silence.(50)

As a translator, Mr. Kapasi considers himself an ideal go-between among different languages, and the fact that Mrs. Das is sympathetic to him and

even asks him for his address in order to send him the photographs of their Indian journey raises his brightest expectations. They will write letters to each other: “In its own way this correspondence would fulfill his dream, of serving as an interpreter between nations”(59).

It does not matter if the disturbing sculptures of the ancient Temple of the Sun, with their explicit erotic meaning, do not elicit any reaction from the American family, who “looked Indian” but dressed and spoke with “accents [which] sounded just like the ones Mr. Kapasi heard on American television programs”(49). Especially Raj Das, the science school teacher, with a “camera slung around his neck, with an impressive telephoto lens”, is concentrated on the photographs he obsessively shoots. The family views the human beings and animals on the road in the most superficial way, like the most conventional tourists, singling out images of their stereotypical idea of India. The car is stopped to shoot a photo of the monkeys, who have bounced onto it. It is stopped once again to allow Mr. Das to take “a picture of a barefoot man, his head wrapped in a dirty turban, seated on top of a cart of grain sacks pulled by a pair of bullocks. Both the man and the bullocks were emaciated”(49). This last shot by Mr. Das perfectly immortalizes a country to be pitied, a place of poor and starving people, typical of a tour book on India printed abroad, and to be kept at a safe distance. The plump Mina Das, who complains about the car not being air-conditioned, has no such problem. Her refrigerator is obviously full.

“Interpreter of Maladies” is also a story about tourism and its pitfalls: on the whole when literature deals with tourism, it usually focuses on the negative, controversial aspects of this widespread industry, and stresses the conflicting points of view of the tourist, the touree, and the native guide.¹⁹ The cheapness and silliness of the remarks attributed to the Das family underlie their newly acquired spotless American identity. India has been digested and assimilated, or rather, reduced to a few snapshots, souvenirs for the children, a guidebook in the hands of Mr. Das, the middle-class leader of the small expedition, only slightly less prejudiced than his grumbling and bored wife. Lahiri is more generous with Hema, the main character of “Going Ashore”, the final story in *Unaccustomed Earth*, but Hema, whose knowledge of home is more authentic, heart-felt, is a scholar and a researcher on Latin and Etruscan antiquities, and the Jamesianlike writer, together with her heroine, succumbs to the beauty of the Italian past.

In “Interpreter of Maladies” Lahiri seems to lead her readers towards an obvious conclusion. The Indian tourist guide, whose source in America is the TV serial *Dallas*, does not give due weight to the fact that the scrap of paper on which he writes “his address in clear, careful letters” had been “hastily ripped from a page of her film magazine”, the same “folded Bombay

¹⁹ See Graham Dann, “Revisiting the Language of Tourism: What Tourists and Tourees are Saying” and Carlo Pagetti, “Visita al Maelstrom: Edgar Allan Poe e le modalità del racconto turistico”, in Clotilde de Stasio and Oriana Palusci, eds., *The Languages of Tourism. Turismo e mediazione* (Milano: Unicopli, 2007), 15-32, 165-172.

film magazine written in English” that Mina fanned herself with. Lahiri – the translator of cultures— spreads clues and ironic touches. Mr. Kapasi will be bitterly disappointed when a second tour, suggested by him, triggers a minor accident, involving Bobby, frightened and slightly wounded by a fastidious bunch of monkeys. (Monkeys, by the way, are not mentioned in Forster’s *A Passage to India*, but they crowd the landscape of the cinematic version by David Lean). Besides, Mr. and Mrs. Das do not grasp the cultural implication of the word *hanuman*, the monkeys named after the Hindu monkey-god Hanuman, thus representing the sacred monkeys of India. While monkeys abound, no real elephant is in sight except “a picture of the elephant god taped to the glove compartment” (45) in the car Mr Kapasi is driving and the carved “procession of elephants” near the statues of the naked lovers in the Sun Temple. In any case, the slip of paper on which Kapasi has written his address “fluttered away in the wind”, while Mrs. Das reaches for a hairbrush in her bag to smooth Bobby’s hair:

No one but Kapasi noticed. He watched as it rose, carried higher and higher by the breeze, into the trees where the monkeys now sat, solemnly observing the scene below. Mr. Kapasi observed it too, knowing that this was the picture of the Das family he would preserve forever in his mind. (69)

Ironically, Kapasi’s gaze below is compared with the monkeys’ gaze above. In both perspectives India does not ‘connect’, does not belong to the same level of reality the Indian American tourists inhabit. This implication is made clear also through the intertextual web linking “Interpreter of Maladies” to *A Passage to India*, so that the visit to “the hills at Udayagiri and Khandagiri” – “there’s something mentioned about it [in the guidebook]. Built by a Jain king or something”(60) according to Mr. Das, “there is much to explain about the caves” according to Mr. Kapasi (62) – acquires a dark undertone. Mrs. Das, alone in the car with Mr. Kapasi, unburdens herself of a secret she had never told: Bobby was conceived with an occasional Punjabi friend of her husband, “staying with them for a week for some job interviews in the New Brunswick area”(64), and now she wants to know from the Indian interpreter of maladies (‘maladies’ now more correctly meaning spiritual, not physical, diseases) what she should do to heal her “terrible urges”(65). Thus, a real communicative process has been finally established between two very different figures, although one might stress the fact that Mrs. Das is the one who asks, while Mr. Kapasi has only to supply a convenient answer: “Eight years, Mr. Kapasi. I’ve been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy”(65). Mr. Kapasi replies with another question: “Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?”(66). He tries to reach into the woman’s

soul, and, of course, he fails. All of a sudden, the epiphanic instant is lost. Mrs. Das does not want to be genuinely helped and Mr. Kapasi is not a healer, not a doctor like Forster's Aziz, only a well-meaning cicerone and driver for rich tourists. Whatever India the American-like family has seen (or rather not seen), they have completed their voyage:

"God, let's get out of here," Mrs. Das said. She folded her arms across the strawberry on her chest. "This place gives me the creeps"
"Yeah. Back to the hotel, definitely," Mr. Das agreed. (68)

The strawberry attached to Mina Das's blouse is a fit substitution for the heart she has stifled inside her, together with her forgotten Indian identity. Maybe Mr. Kapasi is wrong: the slip of paper with his address on it was not removed by chance by a mediocre casual adulteress, but deliberately thrown away. No relation is possible, no positive ending, no secret revealed, no dream fulfilled. As an interpreter of maladies Mr. Kapasi has failed. Lahiri takes the place of her benign character, with the wisdom of an artist and the irony of her subtle language. Now it is her turn to explore the secrets of the soul, to seek for the heart under the strawberry, the scarlet letter denied and demeaned, by metaphorically doing what Mr. Kapasi is not allowed to do. She follows the Das family – or, rather, their fictional counterparts – to the unaccustomed earth of America.

But yet, as often happens in reading Lahiri's stories, there is still another possible thread to follow: Mina Das's blouse, "decorated at chest-level with a calico appliqué in the shape of a strawberry"(46), reminds us of Hester Prynne's red scarlet uppercase letter A, placed on "the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread"²⁰ to signal her sin – adultery. That letter will be embellished and made precious by the fallen woman. From Puritan Boston and from Hawthorne's masterpiece, Lahiri draws out another red mark on another American woman's bosom, where it tells the secret truth of a young lady betraying her newly wed husband of Bengali descent and accidentally conceiving a baby boy. Lahiri's story resounds with parodic overtones: the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale is replaced by an Indian, a man from Punjab, himself a diasporic character, hoping to settle far from his homeland, about whom the reader knows very little (he is married "to a Punjabi girl", lives in London and exchanges Christmas cards and the ubiquitous family photos). Mina Das is no Hester Prynne, even if she shares with her an act of sexual rebellion and sin. Her deep secret – adultery – is revealed, in the land of her ancestors, where ancient caves loom in the background, to a total stranger, who is also an Indian and can be easily discarded, erased. Thus, Mina has not only light-heartedly betrayed her husband but also her son Bobby, who will forever ignore his true

²⁰ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (London: Penguin, [1850]1986), 80.

father, and her Indian heritage, in favour of an American way of life – short skirts and nail polish – in which exterior values prevail over spiritual ones. She is not interested in the caves, in their historical and spiritual importance. She ignores the existence of The Hathigumpha cave (or “Elephant cave”) with its precious inscription. We might imagine her refrigerator heavy with cold, tasteless dishes. No elephant in sight indeed, only a world of monkeys, aping human beings.