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"Uncanny Domesticity" in Contemporary American Fiction : The Case of Jhumpa Lahiri

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**“Uncanny
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Even though Jhumpa Lahiri, a contemporary US writer, demurs at her work being designated as “the immigrant fiction”—which might rightly be seen as a current PC successor to the formerly widely used label of ethnic fiction—the fact remains that her writing steadily and skillfully registers the rifts, crises and estrangement resulting from the act of immigration, and extending into intergenerational conflicts and misunderstandings. Still, anyone following her work in recent years cannot but agree with Susan Koshy, who has recently commented on the lack of attention for Lahiri’s work in contemporary criticism (354), even though the themes she tackles are the texture of contemporary U.S.-American experience set in a global mold. To reframe this observation a bit, it would seem that Lahiri imagines scenes and scenarios in which her mobile characters affirm their aptitude to claim America but also delves into costs of the way “Indian new immigrant families” are situated in American multiethnic—first liberal and then neoliberal—contexts (Koshy 348–49).

The thing that struck me as illustrative of a certain type of effect observable in Lahiri’s fiction—that in my argument I try to identify and analyze as the uncanny—stems from a revealing statement Lahiri made in her autobiographic sketch contributed to *The New Yorker*, where she explained how her early attempts at writing sprang from a sense of anxiety that she might be a “stranger” to her parents, being “an American child” (“Trading Stories”). I would like to claim that this captivating metaphor exemplifies well what I argue is an on-going sense of being (feeling) strange or estranged from the people closest to you and, ultimately, from yourself that in turn finds outlet in her fiction as the uncanny effect. This effect is compounded by Lahiri’s next acknowledgment—that most of her characters are struggling to belong and feel at home somewhere (“Trading Stories”). This indicates how her vision proceeds from a sense of anxiety, displacement and (incipient) estrangement that are somehow locatable at home. My reductive definition of domesticity implies the trappings of the middle-class, American way centered around the family, emotional sustenance derived from it, and the site of home (both in the sense of haven and of property).

In recent public appearances and essays Lahiri has, it seems, deepened her ambivalent attitude towards America as home, but such a one that has been suffused by feelings of otherness, distance, and strangeness. This underlying sense of the unhomely comes forth in an essay written in Italian and translated into English (and compiled in her recent collection originally published in Italian, *In altre parole*), where Lahiri explains how she deliberately moved away from English which contained her parents’ experiences as immigrants and her own complex and demanding adjustment to America:

Why am I fleeing? What is pursuing me? Who want to restrain me? The most obvious answer is the English language. But I think it’s not so much English in itself as everything the language has symbolized for me. For practically my whole life, English has represented a consuming struggle, a wrenching conflict, a continuous sense of failure that is the source of almost all my anxiety. It has represented a culture that had to be mastered, interpreted. I was afraid that it meant a break between me and my parents. English denotes a heavy, burdensome aspect of my past. I’m tired of it. (“Teach Yourself Italian”)

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Lahiri locates the sense of anxiety in a “burdensome” past, a rift and a conflict in a culture and a language that would have been her “own.”¹

This conjuncture readily calls to mind the oft quoted account of the uncanny (as a psychological symptom and an epistemological notion) provided by Sigmund Freud.² One of the possible readings of his essay “The Uncanny” rests on noting a persistent link between the individual and the collective, where the individual is often already structured by prior exigencies of the species’ mental development (Freud 152). The hereditary logic is constitutive of, but not exclusive for, Freud’s explication of this peculiar affect. The second general observation derived from Freud’s piece concerns a certain anthropological bent of his psychoanalysis evident not least in a number of examples that he draws on in order to support his theory and that derive from the cultural field, including literature. Having thus established literature as a helpful source of information regarding the apparently important pattern of psychological behavior both in individuals and collectivities (since, according to Freud, it is observable also in dreams, folk tales and myths indicating a shared experience or is to a degree attributable to children or so-called primitive peoples [139, 142, 147, 153 et passim]), this essay will further contend that Lahiri’s work so far (two short-story collections and two novels) shows deep and sustained concern with elements of American culture and society that evince the effects of the uncanny precisely in the sense outlined by Freud. In other words, these texts taking place in ordinary, domestic and familiar surroundings, and in unmarked cultural spaces, often register the intrusion of a strange, unfamiliar and alien element made so due to the effect of inexplicable and uncontrollable recurrence, which, by virtue of its repetition, suggests something already known or familiar but subject to repression or deliberate forgetting (Freud 147–48).

That the incursion of the uncanny is almost inevitable is testified on the level of the plot by a rather simple indicator: the characters simulating the American middle-class ideal are doing it right and achieving an almost perfect balance until something happens that ruffles the surface, from a seemingly innocuous quotidian interruption or a light family crisis to the most harrowing experience.³ Going back to Freud, we will say that the unknown that intrudes into the text is not simply either an individual neurosis or disturbance but a symptom of a larger cultural and social malaise attending some of the most cherished of America’s self-images, which centers on that of a self-sufficient, upwardly mobile, balanced national family. Lahiri is intent on showing how American domesticity works as a regime that requires of her Indian-Bengali characters a degree of adaptation and accommodation that in turn relies on

1 In a recent interview Lahiri makes several claims that foreground the semantic play between the self and the other, the homely and the unhomely, and thus, in my view, produce a slippage that evokes the uncanny. She is overwhelmingly inspired by the literature that registers „a sense of displacement,” which arises as a character moves from one country to another, from one’s language/culture to a „foreign” one; from country to city. She confesses to have had a strange relationship to her „home state,” Rhode Island. Even though the place ought to have been familiar, she talks about her uneasy perception of it. Finally, she explicitly places her parents’ immigrant experience as a focal point of her life and creativity: „I was living that experience. That was my whole experience. That was my whole life” („Conversations with Tyler”). All these strands I find as potential triggers unleashing the uncanny effect in her work, as I try to contend in my argument.

2 For an outline of the varied contexts in which the concept has been placed by critical theory and cultural studies in recent times cf. Masschelein.

3 This is evident in Lahiri’s short stories, which pivot on the motifs such as emotional crisis, settling into a new house, a family visit, a tourist visit to the old country to the loss of a child or a parent, to name a few.

the conscious or subconscious work of repressing the distressing content. Her texts, therefore, are keen to register the moment of the release of the repressed material. The situational equivalents for the process of repression are emigration, assimilation, adaptation, racialization, estrangement from the family, solitude, abandonment, ruptured family relations, illness, and death, among others.

This would refer to the uncanny part of my argument; the other part being that this affective process actually takes place in what we deem typical domestic settings and in a family circle—therefore my phrase of “uncanny domesticity.” However, in my argument I will also provide a proposition that at least part of the anxiety results from the attempts of migrant (here, South Asian, Indian, or Bengali) characters to successfully replicate and mimic the ideal of American middle-class domesticity. Their being very successful in the process is not meant in the least to disparage them, but to indicate a certain gap or loss that is irreplaceable. A very general sense of such an affective dynamics is aptly summed up by Gogol Nikhil Ganguli, a protagonist of Lahiri’s first novel *The Namesake*, who reflects on the costs and benefits of his family’s transoceanic mobility: “He wonders how his parents had done it, leaving their respective families behind, seeing them so seldom, dwelling unconnected, in a perpetual state of expectation, of longing” (281); “And yet it was for him, for Sonia, that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning these customs” (286). In fact, in order for the middle-class, upwardly mobile Bengalis to emulate their middle-class US counterparts, a certain forgetting or even repression has to occur. Koshy warns that “the production of familiarity,” especially when proceeding in diasporic families (almost exclusively featured in Lahiri’s works), must necessarily show that the costs of reproduction of model minority citizenship—ascribed to the Asian minorities—are shared unevenly, cutting across gender and generational lines (cf. 352).

Useful initial categorization of Lahiri’s fiction is provided by Caren Irr’s comprehensive critical model, which will be used as an important analytical mold, allowing us to place Lahiri’s writing in the set of “domestic novels that explore psychic conflicts of traditionally minded, middle-class professionals” and reinforce the ranks of “the canon of Indian American immigrant literature” (58–59). It is in the interstice of “domestic” and the psychological crisis specifically caused by immigration that I would like to place my reading. This cultural recoding takes place by way of Lahiri’s “use of a common American narrative, such as the upwardly mobile immigrant story” (Irr 11).

If, to use the above wording, “a common American narrative” now features a set of alien characters, this points principally to apparently successful globalizing of South Asian diaspora, as propounded by Inderpal Grewal. Pointing to South Asian Indians’ spectacular mobility and achievement riding on the wave of the demand for skilled workers, Grewal further proposes that “knowledge formations” enabling such agency are both “national and transnational” (1). In the next instance, however, we need to take heed of what Koshy has recently termed costs of neoliberal exigencies that are often hard to grasp beneath the veneer of the “model minority thesis,” a catch-phrase designating the phenomenal rise of various Asian minority groups in their seemingly unequivocal embrace of middle-class American values (cf. 345–46). Other critiques have addressed more sinister aspects of the appellation, suggesting how it was used to adjudicate social and civic worth among different minority groups in twentieth-century America (Palumbo-Liu). The slogan’s very cogent recent dismantling comes from Helen Heran Jun, who places the phrase within the context of a comparative ethnic studies scholarship by

looking at the parallel strategies of racialization of African American and Asian American populations in nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States (3). The history thus revealed and summoned from oblivion testifies to what is perhaps the key—if according to the Freudian model appropriately muted and ineffable—factor of the uncanny transcribed as (non)belonging: the country's looming tradition of extending or withholding of citizenship on account of complexly intersecting ideas of race (Jun 1).

Koshy takes over and carries on an approach similar to Jun's historical reading by placing the scenes depicted in Lahiri's and host of other South Asian diasporic and transnational writers' works in the context of the 1965 sweeping reform of the immigration laws that have suspended more heavy-handed racial considerations, until then an important assessment grid for the incoming people. Grewal notes correctly how us immigration laws display the cross-section of "biopolitics and geopolitics" (1). In other words, what Lahiri's texts juggle with is a meticulous imagining of South Asians accession to us-American citizenship by their clever and deft appropriation of the native ideal of middle-class domesticity. This is what her first generation immigrants had to "forget" (having accomplished that task) while their offspring, the second generation, struggles with recurrences of the scenes of trauma for the generation of their parents. Koshy aptly casts this affective mechanics as a "reinscription of the intergenerational narrative as filial gothic" (355).

Not the least of reasons for the insistent operations of the strange behind the domestic are the intense, on-going and massive processes of globalization that, as many observers agree, are put in motion by America but are not entirely controlled by it. (As Koshy contends, the unintended effects of the immigration reform are a case in point; cf. 350.) So even when the nation-state activates yet another globalizing strategy (whether military, political, economic or cultural in provenance), the end point is far from secure, creating a situation of denial, repression or forgetting of the country's implication in a process happening outside the domestic bounds, far from the homeland. Yet Lahiri's plots remind her American and global readers that history works in uncanny ways refusing to put to rest the haunting (what Freud calls the involuntary return of the repressed content—precisely the source that emanates the uncanny; cf. 148) that accompanies it.

In contemporary American fiction and cultural production in general, there are two ways broadly speaking of dealing with the burden of the United States' overwhelming presence in and influence on global affairs. One is disparagingly evoked by John Carlos Rowe, a leading Americanist nowadays, who wryly notes a preponderant tendency on the part of the us nation-state to exercise a great degree of obliviousness to its past actions leading consequently to the forgetting (if not quite repression) of the undesirable content as a result of the state's previous acts (as in the relation of the First Gulf War to its successor, the 2003 invasion of Iraq; cf. 61). This penchant for oblivion is then compounded by what Rowe further criticizes as the hypernationalistic inclination, evident in the drive to domesticate the global by reducing it to us standards (107).⁴

4 One instance is the imposition of us democratic standards on foreign nations across the globe; the other is the less ominous but no less encompassing Hollywood-ization of the entertainment and culture industry that often can be harnessed for suspect foreign politics goals. Witness the case of Ben Affleck's fairly recent critically acclaimed film *Argo* (2012), covering an episode from the Iranian Revolution at a time when Iran is portrayed by the us as an intransigent nation. The film is inevitably read through the lenses of the current us political stand.

The other, more rewarding procedure, as I have already pointed out, has recently been outlined by Caren Irr in her valuable study of the tendencies in early 21-century American novel that she situates precisely at the cross-section of the domestic and the foreign, the local and the global, the native and the non-native, while she follows the emergence of a kind of global literature, written in English but not restricted to a single national terrain. Unlike the previous hypernationalizing impulse, this one seems to opt for a de-territorialization, even when the epicenter is situated in the United States, which is seen more as a router for various global currents than their single or most important generator (for this expression, cf. Irr 28).

Having provided in the first part a tentative critical frame for the discussion, I will next consider Lahiri's two novels to date: *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland* (2013). The first is a family-centered and eerily coincidental (as Freud would point out, there are no pure coincidences) text, in which the uncanniness is already implied in the novel's central conceit—that the protagonist's life (the main character being Gogol Ganguli) is somehow paired up with and doubled in his namesake's existence, the namesake being the troubled Russian-Ukrainian writer, Nikolai Gogol. The mysterious connection, that is meant to have saved the protagonist's father's life in a devastating railway accident years ago in India, extends to the next generation, even if the rest of the family cannot know the debt the father, Ashoke Ganguli, presumably owes the long dead writer (*The Namesake* [N], 21). This beyond-the-grave connection literally sustains the life of the protagonist since it has guaranteed his father's survival and thus also his own. The debt of survival is not easily repaid, however, and is therefore transferred to the next generation, to Ashoke's American-born son Gogol, who becomes the dubious benefactor of his father's secret legacy that simultaneously contains the mystery of his origin. That Gogol is unwilling to read the pages of Nikolai Gogol's collection of stories—the book that literally saved his father's life by indicating to the rescue team that he is still alive amidst the train wreckage and scattered bodies—until the very end of the novel accounts for an inverted temporal structure of his identity search (N, 18, 289). Literally, the book and the father's secret contained in it has been as close to him as his father's graduation gift, tucked away on the shelves in his room where he soon forgets about it, that this situation of obliviousness chimes with the feeling of the familiar that ought to remain hidden (a central idea permeating the Freudian concept of the uncanny; cf. Freud 132).

Although Gogol Ganguli eventually learns the story of the train accident and his father's second birth (by Ashoke's testimony, his third birth happens upon his arrival to America), he refuses to honor the portentous bond with Nikolai Gogol and the debt that both his father and he himself have incurred by it. As Koshy argues, the debt contracted in a sustained emotional effort of maintaining family ties from one generation (the immigrant parents) to the next (their Americanized children) is, in fact, unsettling (357). In Gogol Ganguli's case, it is both haunting and resisting settlement since the creditor is dead. Gogol initially submits to the economy of indebtedness. Later on, however, he refuses to keep on carrying his name, which he even changes by a formal procedure to the more neutral Nikhil, a fact that contains a betrayal of his father and his whole family—turning him into an estranged son adrift in the irrepressible current of New York life. At a certain point he is literally placeless (his family can't reach him at his New York residence), while trying to reinvent himself as a fully assimilated young professional in his relationship with an upper-class New Yorker, Maxine. As he inhabits American

middle-class identity apparently without effort and appropriates features of highbrow urban culture, Gogol (now turned Nikhil) commits a symbolic fratricide—he's forsaken his parents, his family and their quaint Indian/ Bengali ways for the sake of belonging to an American family (and literally so, since he is likely to become their son-in-law). In a house full of artefacts that testify to their owners' superior taste accumulated by the generations of the family and displayed in a very nonchalant but subtly deliberate way, however, Nikhil/ Gogol's background becomes racialized, foregrounded only to the extent that it fits in with other appurtenances of his emergent social status. As an upstart he must support his social ambition by credentials such as his elite education and a promising career: "They are at once satisfied and intrigued by ... his Mediterranean looks" (*N*, 134). By erasing Gogol, Nikhil pretends that an identity make-over in the vein of a successful neo-liberal agent is within his grasp. By doing so, however, he turns his back on the lifeline his name has come to embody, while his repudiation of the name given to him by his parents signals his sinking into the void where his identity remains adrift (*N*, 158).

The death of his father follows upon this symbolic renunciation of him by Nikhil. This causes the estranged Nikhil to turn back to his family, which he is able to do in a symbolic way, by participating in the mourning process that will jolt him back into remembering the bonds and debts that have formerly constituted his identity (*N*, 180). Getting back to India, performing a funeral rite for his father, shaving his hair and participating in a religious ceremony performed in commemoration of the deceased parent, restores his self that was cracked and fragmented. This reconstitution suggests an abiding effect of trauma that is transmitted through generations but also shows that cultural rituals are devised in part to forestall the shattering effect of death, loss or separation. The novel is replete with the procedures that anchor the Bengali characters in their place and time, relate them to other individuals, and point to their social status; equally so, when they no longer perform them, this omission signals the acquisition of an American middle-class identity (marriage, honoring one's parents, burial, the wake ceremony, rice ceremony, festivals). Additionally, the slippages attending the original performance of the rituals and their reiteration in the American context imbue the otherwise stabilizing effect of the act with certain open-endedness. So is the rice ceremony tweaked in a way that it may reflect the American context (*N*, 63); additionally, Gogol's traditional marriage tries to recreate the density of Indian mores, but fails to ensure the same kind of stability for second-generation characters (*N*, 276).

Once in America, presumably one is no longer bound by the obligations incurred in India, so that Gogol can indeed change his name as he wishes, but the deferred effect of repudiating the name bestowed by the father begins to haunt Gogol so that eventually he will come to understand that his identity is irrevocably linked to the point of trauma, the act in which his father almost ceased to be. Since that very act is commemorated by his name, Gogol, it is not entirely up to him or his boundless sense of individual freedom to interfere with the name: in his case, the name is the destiny. Choosing a new name is thus unsettling his sense of self—"he doesn't feel like Nikhil" (*N*, 105)—making him momentarily estranged from himself.

The narrative underlying the father's affinity with Gogol (the writer) is a repressed content that re-activates the other momentous occasions, his rebirths: his real birth, his survival in the railroad accident, and his immigration to America against great odds. When the son learns about the father's past, for which the name of Gogol is an encryption, a feeling of estrangement sets

in—he sees his father no longer in domestic, familial terms but literally as “a stranger, a man who has kept a secret, has survived a tragedy, a man whose past he does not fully know” (*N*, 123). The attribution of it to the son is thus an attempt to ensure the continuity that has been shattered by the act of leaving India over and against the explicit wishes of his parents, precisely the act of filial disobedience, the rupturing of intergenerational bond that Gogol, the son, will repeat in his own instantiation of the filial rebellion. The psychic economy of the name thus comes to signal what above has been termed the interrupted intergenerational ties due to the “filial gothic” (Koshy 362).

It is important that in the final scene of the novel the son begins to read the book, a collection of stories by Gogol, to which his father owed so much, and so to imaginatively re-enact the father’s life in a gesture of reconnection beyond time and death. By reclaiming Gogol the writer and thus acknowledging the bond with the now deceased father (whose act of reading Gogol—his beloved author—literally saved his life), in this recurring act he is in fact coming back to himself after a period during which the name (his parents’ legacy) was diminished, obscured and hidden. This recurrence suggests that an anxiety still attends the fate of immigrants’ children, even when their process of acculturation is seemingly perfect, suggesting the usurpation of domesticity by the uncanny. Thus the story of Gogol’s naming, his attempts to rename himself, and dire consequences of such an act stand for a literary equivalent of psychological and cultural costs not only of belonging in America but of doing so on the foil of the maintenance of a diasporic family (Koshy 352). The potential of the name Gogol to signal a traumatic residue testifies to the underlying ruptures in the story of setting up a new immigrant family against the globalizing us-Indian backdrop.

Lahiri’s shift in focus is observable in her latest novel, *The Lowland*, which more intentionally than her previous fiction pays attention to what Irr terms, “the interconnected global environment of the new millennium” that gives rise to “a concerted movement toward a new literary form: the geopolitical novel” (2). In more direct terms, in this novel “a political problem [is] fundamental to the story,” while the writer’s focusing of attention to the 1970s Indian political movement of the Naxalites signals the novel’s intention to represent “an active social process in which new political positions and attitudes are emerging” (Irr 3). Even if Irr’s term of the new geopolitical novel as an exemplary form of early 21st-century us fiction might be taken up as a matrix for Lahiri’s novel, this should not foreclose other avenues of reading, in particular those that still engage us middle-class domesticity codes when re-interpreted by immigrant characters, but should nevertheless reorient our reading of the novel in terms suggested by Irr as being key questions posed by this new genre: “how assimilation comes about in a media-saturated environment, . . . what safe spaces the nation provides in the context of neoliberalism, when and how revolutions happen, or how we might recognize the hero of globalization” (4). In *The Lowland* Lahiri thus sets out to present the dubious heroes and heroines of globalization.

Locating part of the action of her two novels, as well as of some of her short stories, in particular places in India, the city of Calcutta figuring prominently among them, Lahiri is not simply paying a due tribute to the old country, but is additionally infusing the stories with a surplus meaning that is likely to be missed even by an attentive Western reader (I find myself vicariously occupying that position for the purpose of my argument), and yet is a supplement to the story’s intent. Calcutta as a capital of Bengal and

erstwhile the capital of British India thus suffers layered historical interventions and sustains a mingling of myth and history. Its locations and sights in *The Lowland* evince the uncanny effect, made so by forgetting or repression of the events which have occurred in various locations in the city. In addition, Calcutta is situated in the swamps creating the terrain particularly resilient to all modernizing or public health efforts on the part of the colonizers and later national administrations. This is partly why a recent reader calls it a site of “unreasoning modernity” (Chattopadhyay 3). The swamps were also nests of poverty and political radicalism, as seen in *The Lowland*.

On the level of spatiality, the novel graphically pits the “abject” and “undisguised” (Chattopadhyay 1) poverty that the city shamelessly and openly sports against the spaces of refinement, luxury and (post-colonial, independence) privilege. Considering an interesting account of Calcutta’s urban history given by Swati Chattopadhyay, we should note the city’s persistent refusal to submit to endless British and subsequent national government’s efforts at modernization and urbanization in the Western vein (cf. 1–2). Rather, the city with its complex national and regional politics, together with its uncontainable urban face, creates a dense backdrop against which the dramatic action evolves, while its materiality haunts the characters even when they emigrate and make a new life in the United States. The mingling of the domestic and the political here also creates an uncanny effect since the repercussions of historical events are played out against a backdrop of the story of two brothers, the elder of whom, Shubash Mitra, immigrates into the States and adopts the trappings of us middle-class domesticity, while the younger, Udayan, remains in India, gets involved in the radical Naxalite movement in the 1970s and gets murdered as a result. However, the haunting continues sustained by further family attachments. Namely, Gauri, the killed brother’s wife finds herself pregnant with Udayan’s child, accepts the elder brother’s offer of marriage and follows him to the States as his wife conveniently hiding the child’s real origin. After a while Gauri chafes under the pressure of the familial and domestic routine, the result of her disaffection being that she launches her own, independent process of upward mobility leaving her family behind for an academic career in California. This bold if controversial reinvention is marred by the intrusions from the past—as a character that bridges the States and India; the domestic and the political; ultimately, the two brothers separated by immigration and politics, she is the one that maps the history of her emotional attachment, courtship and eventual marriage to the younger brother onto the spaces of Calcutta, the memories of which trail her in the States. According to Koshy, she carries the burden of the second(ary) (usually gendered) immigrant (352) further exacerbated by her previous history.

As stated above, the geopolitical bent of the novel is often relayed by the mapping of space and places in the novel. Early on, we learn that Tollygunge, the Calcutta neighborhood from which the Mitra brothers come, sprang into being by the British efforts of subduing the swampy land; while the period of the British reign is appropriately closed off by the scene of the bloody Partition in the wake of the Indian emancipation (*The Lowland* [L], 13). Still, the space of the city is even in the national period marked by the remnant of colonial times, the intrusive presence of the walled-in golf club standing apart from its modest, working and lower middle-class Indian neighborhood. The space of post-independence Calcutta is additionally striated by districts—we learn further that northern Calcutta is a home of wealthier and more respectable strata of Indian professional and administrative echelons, the home of Udayan’s

girlfriend, Gauri. Even though it would be preposterous to simply transpose the social structure of the United States onto that of India, it is safe to say that the fact of Udayan and Gauri’s matrimony marked a breach not only of familial but also of social decorum, so that Udayan’s parents barely stood her presence as their daughter-in-law (*L*, 114).

However, the places in the US to which the characters migrate hoping to reach safety and immunity from the social and political disorder of 1970s India rent by civic unrest, incipient revolution, and the state of emergency, are no less susceptible to their own unrestful past. This I will show on the examples of Shubash and Gauri, who both indicate the abiding interest that Lahiri has for the intersection of the domestic and its hidden counterpart, here cast as radical postcolonial politics. When Shubash, who unlike his brother has no interest in domestic Indian upheavals, arrives in the States to pursue his doctoral degree in New England, he finds many reminders of his native land superimposed onto a foreign, American landscape (*L*, 34). As time goes by, the sense of what is foreign and what is homely will change for him as he revisits his native city of Calcutta after years of residence in the States and finds the place uncannily different—both familiar and unknown (*L*, 112). Even though it is the features of Rhode Island that now seem familiar to Shubash, the place itself is burdened with history, layered with the usually unacknowledged traces of the former inhabitants, the extinguished Indian tribes that used to thrive there until the arrival of the white settlers (*L*, 244). However, even when he learns much later on about the native Indian presence in his New England town followed by their violent uprooting, there is no simple way for him to digest this repressed, and now reactivated, history—he himself belongs to the latest wave of “settlers” that have symbolically claimed this place from its original inhabitants. Interestingly, his acquaintance with the distant history of the place that he now sees as an alien locality peopled by ghosts of vanquished Indians, makes him both a native and a stranger at his second home (*L*, 253).

On the surface, Shubash’s immigration story features him as the ideal model minority subject first as a bio-chemical student and, later, as a successful researcher—the trajectory resonates with the post-1965 South Asian high-achieving immigrants ambivalently welcomed by America. If the level of social integration lags behind, the one that has remained operational is the mechanics of “the liberal democratic state” that not only profiles some types of immigrants as good and desirable but also embraces them as consumers, rather than as political subjects (Grewal 7). Shubash is congenitally predisposed against any political action, one surmises not because he condones, say, the American actions in Vietnam as a student in the 1970s, but because hewing to “the American way of life” is seen as paying off the unspoken debt that he owes America for taking him in. Grewal reads this disciplining of a new immigrant in the way that “the new consumer culture produced gendered and racially marginalized subjects also as consumers” (7) (and we might add, as desirable and assimilable professionals), thus muting their political agency.

Gauri’s example is even more indicative of the shift that Lahiri’s discourse of the new South Asian global diaspora has assumed in *The Lowland*. Gauri apparently welcomes the bland and levelling hand of a depoliticized and hyper-commercial America: everything is on display—from commodities to university courses so that a knowledge-hungry philosophy graduate can choose for herself, exercising her newly gained agency in America. In contrast, the wife and mother Ashima of *The Namesake* is originally an exponent of, what Koshy terms the assiduous, vigilant maintenance of the family ties in the context of

new immigration and the spectral influence of the model minority family (cf. 351, 352). In *The Lowland*, Gauri's character is much more complex since her history in India is revealed to us in flashbacks of first and third person narration. We see how she is upon her arrival to America turned into a dutiful and obedient wife wrapped in a shawl marking her marital status, and then literally enclosed in her cramped American home (*L*, 123).

Unlike other women immigrants in Lahiri's fiction (but more like their second-generation, Americanized daughters), Gauri negotiates her American spaces always with her interior eye upon Calcutta during the revolutionary upheaval following her and her husband's intense and morally dubious involvement in it; it becomes so that the American space for her (both New England and later more intensely California) is a blank slate where she literally inscribes her memories of the past in India, refusing to acknowledge Udayan's death (*L*, 275). The landscape that she recreates is phantasmatic, peopled by ghosts and sunk in the past to the point where she almost loses the capacity to distinguish the past from the present, the debt to the dead (husband) from the obligation to her living daughter. This haunting brings her almost to the brink of suicide, but at the last point she is able to face up to the past, recognize her guilt and strive for atonement (*L*, 323).

Both *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* show us characters caught up in an intensely globalizing world. Even though they may seem to successfully manage the codes of acculturation and adaptation in the United States—as shown by their adoption of upward mobility and US middle-class domesticity—still, they have to contend with the intrusions of the uncanny bestowed by their personal, family, and (trans)national pasts that belie the stability they have found in their new culture. The conveniently broad Freudian model, fruitfully combining the findings of individual and collective psychology and enmeshing them with bold, far-reaching anthropological and ethnological speculations, is used here to provide a sustaining argument that due to the current and deepening processes of globalization, US society is undergoing huge changes that often defy clear conceptualization. More often than not, US citizens, especially in the genres of the geopolitical novel (Irr) or the “new immigrant fiction” (Koshy) or “the South Asian diaspora novel” (Grewal), find themselves at a loss to account for the effects of the processes way out of their control but certainly emanating from the homely and familiar spaces of the homeland that, therefore, can be traced back to the uncanny effect. Recent US literature mixing the domestic and the foreign (conveniently speaking) strives to make sense of the increasingly dehumanizing, complex and unhomely world—even when it seems so close to home.

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