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Of Kaleidoscopic Mothers and Diasporic Twists: The Mother/ Daughter Plot in the Work of Jhumpa Lahiri

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The title of my chapter pays an unambiguous homage to Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother/ Daughter Plot* (1989), in which the critic builds upon Adrienne Rich's understanding of Lynn Sukenick's concept of 'matrophobia' to show the extent to which the stories of mothers are even more submerged than those of daughters, not only in conventional plot structures within which "women function as objects or obstacles only" (1989, 2), but also, more surprisingly, in so-called 'feminist' variations of family romances and in texts written by women writers. Taking its cue from Hirsch's influential study, my chapter looks at the fiction of the Bengali-American 'celebrity author' Jhumpa Lahiri and starts with the premise that, from her Pulitzer Prize-winning short-story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), through *The Namesake* (2003), to *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and *The Lowland* (2013), Lahiri's stories of migration between India and the U.S. and of putting down roots at the level of the first and the second Indian-American generations follow a trajectory where the maternal perspective, experience, and subjectivity are given unusual prominence and significance.

To the extent that they challenge the interlocked 'matrophobic' and assimilationist streaks at play in 'classic' texts by US ethnic women writers – witness Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* (1990), Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), and Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* (1995), in which, as Ambreen Hai remarks, "the natal," that is, "the family and culture into which one is born" (2012, 182), gets invariably constructed as "the site of origin, restriction, or formation of the old self from which the individual *must* break away to form a new self" (2012, 189, my italics) – Lahiri's mother-centered narratives have tremendous implications which, to date, have been left under-examined. In what follows, my contention is that what sets Lahiri's fiction apart certainly owes less to the fact that she is "the first second-generation South Asian American writer to write from a second-generation perspective about both first- and second-generation experiences" (2012, 190), as Hai remarks, than to the 'mother-friendly' character of her work. Never totally giving in to the South Asian American formula, which is seen by Ruth Maxey to center on the trope of the "small-minded, materialistic and controlling" first-generation Indian mother (2012, 25) as well as involve "such schematic archetypes as the unfeeling birth mother, the warm maternal surrogate, and the prematurely deceased biological father" (2012, 28), Lahiri's narratives of female coming-of-age refreshingly deviate from these predetermined 'either/or' scripts according to which an adaptive sense of second-generation Indian-American female identity comes to be premised on "performing radical surgery" (Rich 1976, 236) from the (Indian) mother – usually to the benefit of the warm (American or Americanized) surrogate. However, as I want to show, Lahiri's work does much more than just unsettle this generalized tendency to locate the ancestral land and the birth mother in the past as well as to associate Hai's "natal" with forms of unadaptability and/or backwardness.

Nowadays, as the dominant discourses of U.S. and Indian exceptionalisms have respectively recast the post-1965 Indian diaspora in the U.S. as a 'model minority' and a 'model diaspora' – in fact as an aggregate of "exemplary neoliberal subjects defined by flexibility, high human capital, and opportunistic mobility," in Susan Koshy's words (2013, 346) – Lahiri's rewritings of the mother/daughter plot somewhat contrapuntally insist on a "reckoning of the costs of displacement" (Koshy, 2013, 352) and on exposing the human impasses that have been

generated by her community's 'twice-model' neoliberal aspirational mode. In fact, by refraining from mobilizing those one-dimensional constructions of motherhood that can easily be enlisted in the service of scenarios of assimilation or ethnic retention, Lahiri's 'mother-friendly' narratives of female development can be seen to work at two levels. Because they shift the focus away from an assumed contest of values between America and India, such narratives have the potential to better challenge "the neoliberal narratives of economic agency, freedom, and development that infuse hegemonic accounts of new [i.e. post-1965] immigration in India *and* the US" (Koshy, 2013, 351, my italics). Through a special focus on "Hell-Heaven" (included in *Unaccustomed Earth*) and *The Lowland*, the main goal of this essay is therefore to show that, even if it is relayed, delayed, postponed, rerouted, or still semi-repressed, the mother/daughter plot and the maternal perspective in Lahiri's work insistently cause daughters (and readers) to complicate model-minority mythology and assimilationist imperatives as well as open new gendered vistas on silenced histories and on "the fallacious developmental assumptions that ground the teleology of economic migration" (Koshy, 2013, 362).

Partly because of their popularity, partly because of their exclusive focus on the upper-caste upper-middle-class Bengali Hindu community of the USA, Lahiri's stories have been, by and large, both over-scrutinized and ignored. While critics working from within the field of postcolonial studies have either tended to turn a blind eye to the specificities of Lahiri's second-generation perspective (Mishra, 2007; Bahri, 2007) or have associated it with lack of authenticity and cultural treason (Trivedi, 2009), other scholars working from within the field of South Asian American studies have taken the author to task for the "not-too-spicy" (Dhingra Shankar 2009) character of her work, for the ways in which it "allow[s] some American readers to tame difference" (Hai, 2012, 205; see also Srikanth, 2012). Refreshingly, though, an emergent critical trend has challenged the consensus that the popularity of Lahiri's work and the privileged background of her Bengali-American characters necessarily entail that her stories lack complexity and/or fail to carry a political edge. For instance, Gita Rajan (2005), Stephanie Li (2011), Delphine Munos (2013) and Susan Koshy (2013) have contended that Lahiri's *oeuvre* engages, respectively, with ethical, racialized, aesthetic and neoliberal matters in ways that we have yet to learn how to read. Interestingly, Koshy's 2013 essay breaks the artificial boundary between the (India-bound) postcolonial and (U.S.-bound) area-studies approaches to Lahiri's work. Indeed the critic positions Lahiri's fictional world, in particular that of *Unaccustomed Earth*, within a context formed, at one end, by the 1965 arrival of highly-skilled migrants from Asia and the model-minority discourse in the U.S., and at the other end, by the transnational social networks linking the diaspora to the homeland. For Koshy, rather than avoiding political issues, Lahiri relocates them to the domestic domain, notably by illuminating how "the neoliberal logic that infuses [post-1965] economic migration penetrates the emotional structure of the [Indian-American] family, distorting filiality and disrupting belonging" (2013, 351). In *Unaccustomed Earth* and *The Namesake* in particular, the fact that Lahiri redirects attention to those who are called by Koshy "secondary migrants" (2013, 356) – namely wives who trailed after their husbands from India to the US on dependent visas and children whose Indian-American hyphenated identity owes to their parents' class aspirations – is part and parcel of the author's strategy to expose the ways in which the neoliberal ideals of productive citizenship and accumulation of human capital have placed the burden of accommodation onto those who are paradoxically associated with the post-1965 phenomenon of 'voluntary migration' even as they usually had no say in the matter.

The suggestion that the Indian-American success story is presented by Lahiri to be one of misguided, even never-possible ideals is emphasized by the metaphor that first-generation highly-skilled characters such as Gogol's father (in *The Namesake*) migrate to the US in order to conjure away the shock of having experienced a near-fatal train accident in India, as if, by "walking away as far as he could from the place in which he was born and in which he nearly died" (Lahiri, 2004 [2003], 20), Ashoke could indeed wish away the reality of mortality. Similarly, in the short-story cycle "Hema and Kaushik" (which is included in *Unaccustomed Earth*), the return migration of the Choudhuris to the US from Bombay is revealed to be caused by Kaushik's mother's breast cancer and her resolve to flee the reflection of her impending decline through the eyes of her parents in India (Lahiri, 2008, 250). This further associates transcontinental (in particular back-and-forth) mobility, not with boundlessness and freedom, but with escapism (see Munos, 2013, for more of this). The metaphor of migration as illness (and more specifically cancer) is also deployed in the short-story "Only Goodness," in which second-generation Sudha likens her parents' migration from India to "an ailment that ebb[s] and flow[s] like a cancer" (Lahiri, 2008, 138). In the title story of *Unaccustomed Earth*, even Ruma's father, a recently widowed first-generation Indian-American migrant, looks back at his quest for upward mobility with a sense of guilt and futility beyond repair: "In the name of ambition and accomplishment, none of which mattered anymore, he had forsaken [his Indian parents]" (Lahiri, 2008, 51).

Increasingly so since *The Namesake*, Lahiri's determination to expose the blind spots and human impasses intrinsic to the 'twice-model' Indian diaspora in the U.S. takes the form of transgenerational narratives in which first-generation mothers are granted a voice and/or second-generation daughters gain new insights into their mothers' lives as they develop into adults or become mothers themselves. In *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Hirsch remarks that representations of the mother/daughter relationship – when they exist at all – are generally written from the perspectives of daughters, for whom female development, being inevitably framed as it is by broader patriarchal structures of power, comes to be conditioned, in turns, by processes of identification with powerful fraternal or paternal role models, and by processes of "disidentification from the fate of other women, especially mothers" (1989, 10). Lamenting the fact that, even in so-called 'feminist' texts written by women writers, "maternal stories are mediated and suppressed, especially if they involve anger" (1989, 39), Hirsch makes it clear that such matrophobia is ultimately self-defeating for women, as it essentializes mothers as the mainstays of patriarchy and constructs motherhood as the end point of female agency and singularity, while leaving broader systems of oppression unaddressed and unchallenged. As Adrienne Rich ironically puts it, "easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her" (1976, 235).

It is significant in this context that *The Namesake* not only opens, but also virtually ends with, Ashima's maternal perspective, which prevents readers from reducing this character to the typical first-generation Indian mother who "lives in fear that [her adolescent daughter] will color a streak of [her hair] blonde" (p. 107), or to the one who has a heavy hand in arranging her son's marriage with a bride of self-same Bengali descent – though Ashima does just that, too. That Lahiri's novel starts with Ashima as she gives birth to Gogol in 1968 and feels "terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare" (p. 6) begs questions about the very possibility of adequate 'fresh-off-the-boat' mothering in the communal desert of the late 1960s, a time when the aftereffects of the 1965 amendments to the US Immigration and Nationality Act had yet to

give relative visibility to the Indian presence in the US. Similarly, at the end of the novel, the fact that Lahiri gives readers access to Ashima's feeling of guilt for having "encouraged" (p. 276) her son to meet Moushumi emphasizes Gogol's mother's self-reflexive character, well beyond the archetype of "the unfeeling birth mother" that Maxey perceives to be endemic to South Asian American Literature.

In the short-story collection *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri's texts teem with figures of floundering, flawed, grieving and fallible mothers, associating motherhood with limitations and vulnerability, but also with unassuming and unsuspected forms of fortitude. In the title-story of the collection, for instance, the experience of small-scale displacement from New York to Seattle and projected motherhood in alien West Coast territory cause second-generation Ruma to "[feel] closer to her mother in death than she had in life" (2008, 27) – an intimacy that she likens to a "mirage," yet one that allows to think and "speak with two voices" (Hirsch 1989, 176) now that she understands that her double positioning as mother *and* daughter makes it untenable to think of her first-generation mother's home-bound example as "a path to avoid" (Lahiri 2008, 11) only. Interestingly, in "Hema and Kaushik," Lahiri feigns to embrace part of Maxey's South Asian American formula through the trajectory of second-generation Hema, the daughter of a family who hosts the Choudhuris upon their return to the U.S. In the first story of the trilogy, although Kaushik's mother, a sophisticated and multiply-uprooted Bombayite who returns to the US in the crucible context of the mid-1980s, is first perceived by Hema as the proverbial "warm maternal surrogate" who might offer an alternative to her own mother's 'more Indian than the Indian' rigid brand of diasporic Indianness, she finally shrinks back when she learns that this model of 'global' and westernized Indianness is diseased. True though it is that, as Aditya Nigam argues, India's post-1990s neoliberal project was facilitated by the emergence of a fantasy of a deterritorialized Indian national family from the 1980s onwards, the return of Kaushik's mother from India in the mid-1980s can be associated with "the immense imaginative possibilities (…) of a deterritorialized global [Indian] nation" (Nigam, 2004, 72) for second-generation Hema and her parents. Hema's painful disengagement from Kaushik's mother, then from Kaushik's himself, which is soon followed by Kaushik's death, make it clear, however, that the fantasy of global Indianness embodied by the Choudhuris is all but futureless. As against what happens in more conservative narratives such as Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* (2002), in which the final reconnection between diasporic, multiply-uprooted and resident Indians brings grist to the mill of India's neoliberal project by suggesting that the deterritorialized Indian family will "spread to encompass the world" (Sharrad, 2013, 130), Lahiri here underlines "the tense plurality of [Indian] diasporic identity" (Goh, 2011, 341) and calls into question celebratory narratives bringing together Indians of all stripes. What interests me is that through Hema's successive identification with, and disidentification from, Kaushik's mother as surrogate mother – a pattern of seduction and separation anticipating what will happen with Kaushik himself – Lahiri mobilizes the mother/daughter plot and narrative of female development to lay a claim to a form of Indian-American diasporic identity that *cannot* be subsumed within those fictions of globalized Indianness which have been handed out by India since the 1980s to its 'model diaspora'. This is not to say, however, that the rooting of second-generation diasporic selves can be subsumed within assimilationist scenarios either, as my detailed discussion of the short-story "Hell-Heaven" will show.

"Hell-Heaven" offers a valid complement to "Hema and Kushik," in that it shows how Lahiri employs the mother/daughter plot, not to condemn, this time, those hypermobile forms of

Indianness whose celebration has made the day of India's neoliberal project, but to problematize assimilationist scenarios in which female development should automatically entail some full-blown discarding of the "natal" (to return to Hai's terminology). "Hell-Heaven" is narrated in the first person by Usha, a Berlin-born Indian American daughter and self-confessed "child of America" (Lahiri, 2008, 82) who reminisces about her mother's desperate infatuation with a young Bengali bachelor. Befriended by Usha's family out of homesickness and soon appointed to the role of honorary uncle to the narrator, "Pranab Kaku" (uncle Pranab), as the fresh off-the-boat character comes to be called, revels in Usha's mother's cooking and nostalgia for Calcutta and even gets included within the fold of his family by Usha's father, who is "relieved to see [his wife] happy for a change" (p. 66). Ignoring the submerged mother/daughter plot which informs, too, Lahiri's story, Deepika Bahri locates "the heartbreak and tragedy" of "Hell-Heaven" in the fact that Aparna emulates the "wrong" role model in her relationship with Pranab, "that of wife rather than sister-in-law" (2013, 44). Predictably enough, after having indulged in a fantasy of reconstituted Bengaliness during his first months in the US, Pranab proceeds to 'claim America' in proper fashion by dating, and then marrying, Deborah, a woman who is significantly described by the narrator as "an American" (p. 67). This leaves Aparna bitter and devastated. No less predictably, Usha "[falls] in love" (p. 69) with Deborah, too, electing her as a nurturing (American) surrogate mother who lavishes both the affection and the permissiveness she lacks with her own (Indian) mother, as well as seeing in Deborah's wealthy family, unadorned hippie-style beauty, and pot-smoking cousins a pathway to cool-liberal (white) America.

To the extent that it is focalized through Usha, who keeps venting her adolescent rage against her much-controlling Indian mother, the linear plot of "Hell-Heaven" first appears to all-too-perfectly fit the bill of a classic second-generation assimilationist script, complete with ready-made binaries between the agentive Western woman (Deborah) and the passive Indian woman (Aparna), or between the home-bound first-generation Indian mother and her second-generation daughter who aspires to an American lifestyle. Taking place more than two decades after Pranab's marriage with Deborah and fourteen years after the narrator prepares to go to college, the last section, however, reshuffles the narrative to such an extent that readers are caused to backtrack and made to realize, not only that the mother/daughter plot has sidetracked the assimilationist script all along, but also that it has finally hijacked it altogether. Quite fittingly, this last paragraph starts with the narrator's admission that "[her] mother was right" (p. 81), in that Aparna rightly predicted Pranab's divorce, even if it took some twenty-three years for this prediction to come true. In fact, long after having cycled through the roles of Aparna's husband, golden child, and brother-in-law, Pranab strays for good with a married Bengali woman, "destroying two families in the process" (p. 81). True though it is that the Bengali identity of this other woman retrospectively suggests that Aparna's affection might not have been unrequited after all – indeed that Pranab "may have crossed the line with Aparna, or toyed with its elasticity," as Bahri suggests (2013, 44) – the most decisive moment of the paragraph lies elsewhere, as the narrator recounts how Aparna's fantasy of her 'marriage' with Pranab once threatened to put her mother's life at risk. Shortly after Pranab's and Deborah's wedding, as the narrator reveals, her mother dosed herself with lighter fluid when nobody was at home, ready to set herself on fire in the backyard of the family house. As Stephanie Li points out (2011, 121-122), that Aparna's aborted suicide takes the form of *sati* is highly significant, since her performance of this quintessentially Indian custom of self-immolation by widows would consecrate Aparna as Pranab's real (Indian) wife, well in spite of what actually takes place in her American reality.

My particular concern, however, lies in the fact that, in *any* assimilationist narrative structured by Maxey's South Asian American female formula (or by the matrophobia Hirsch disturbingly associates with narratives of female development), Aparna's aborted *sati* would figure the ultimate escapist fantasy – indeed would constitute the nadir of an increasingly "desolate life" that appears to boil down, in the wake of Pranab's marriage, to "clean[ing] and cook[ing] for her husband and [her daughter]," as well as "watch[ing] soap operas to pass the time" (p. 76), as Usha cruelly reminisces. Here, though, this apparent nadir is dramatically reshuffled by the narrator's final admission that her mother broke the news of her past suicide attempt, and desperate infatuation with Pranab, "after [her] own heart was broken by a man [she]'d hoped to marry" (p. 83). Recontextualized as it is by the fact that Aparna shared her story with her daughter to offer guidance and empathy as Usha started dating American men (p. 82), Aparna's nadir is here recast as evidence of her resilience and ability to withstand the pain and bafflement of crushed illusions, which reinstates her as a positive role model for her daughter. That Aparna's aborted *sati* (or rather, the story of her aborted *sati* as told by her daughter) should constitute the moment when the assimilationist script is revealed to offer all but an over-simplistic reading-grid for Aparna's first-generation trajectory and her relationship with her daughter is doubly ironic if we consider that *sati* – a "larger-than-life symbol of 'Hindu' and 'Indian' culture" (1997, 65), as Uma Narayan ironizes – has been deployed by Western institutional discourses to construct the stereotype of the passive downtrodden South Asian woman. In fact, not only does Usha's final revelation of true intimacy between mother and daughter cut short the assimilationist master-plot within which Lahiri's story (as well as Usha's narration) appeared thus far to be cast, but it also causes over-hasty readers to pause and backtrack as they now realize that the mother/daughter plot has in fact sidetracked the assimilationist script all along. That Usha is finally revealed to have told Aparna's story from the perspective of a grown-up who has "made peace" (p. 81) with her mother – not from that of an adolescent – retroactively draws attention to those passages in the text that 'mainstream' readers might have overlooked because of their over-reliance on the conventions of the assimilationist plot, in particular that of the first-generation Indian mother as "mother-weight" (Meena Alexander, cited in Maxey, 2012, 25). It is not only that Aparna as passive downtrodden South Asian woman turns out to be not so passive after all. In the last paragraph, Usha indeed reveals that her mother, "after years of being idle," suddenly decided "to get a degree in library science at a nearby university" (p. 82) at age fifty. Nor is it that the binary between the 'victimized Indian woman' and the 'agentive American woman' is thrown into crisis as Deborah turns to no-one else but Aparna to seek comfort during her divorce, and even confesses about having "felt threatened" (p. 82) by Aparna because she was symbolizing a Bengali part of her husband's life she could never access. Rather, Aparna's sharing of her story of aborted *sati* with her daughter prompts readers to change tracks, retrace their steps and retrospectively make sense of those passages in which the daughterly perspective of the 'narrated I' is complicated by the more mature perspective of the 'narrating I' – passages in which Usha's recent intimacy with her mother allows her to speak *for* her, too. Whether this is by returning to the point where Usha explains that her mother allowed her to go off with Pranab and Deborah only because she was "pregnant for the fifth time since [Usha's] birth and was so sick and exhausted and fearful of losing another baby that she slept most of the day" (p. 70) – or whether this is by going back to the passage where Usha remarks that her own birth might not have brought her mother the "pure happiness" Pranab gave her because she was "evidence of her marriage to [her] father, an assumed consequence of the life she was had been raised to lead" (p. 67) – readers are given new insight into the broader forces and blind spots that have

framed Aparna's life and her relationship with her daughter. At the same time, they are made to realize that, possibly, the re-rooting of Usha's second-generation diasporic self also lies, not in "dating one American man, and then another, and then yet another" (p. 82), but in "think[ing] back through [her] mother" (1992 [1929], 99), as Virginia Woolf famously put it – that is, in finding a new generational voice by reorganizing her connection to the silences of her mother.

If "Hell-Heaven" finally doubles back on its own assimilationist master-plot by locating the possibility of generational arrival in partial reclaiming of the mother (as well as by showing that such a master-plot does not stand the test of a more mature storytelling and/or re-reading), *The Lowland* can also be seen to further problematize the widely-held assumption that the putting down of roots in the new land requires a rejection of the "natal" for the sake of a putative newness. As I wish to show, here again, Lahiri utilizes the mother/daughter plot to dislodge readers from a taken-for-granted position of competence, turning to the maternal perspective, moreover, to reveal the ways in which pre-departure contexts highly condition – and might even overthrow – fantasies of brand new beginnings in the U.S.

Along with three stories included in *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Lowland* ranges among Lahiri's rare books to be partially set in India. It is the first one, however, in which the context of pre-migration to the US is more than just adumbrated, but fully developed. This somewhat shifts focus away from the "language of arrival" (1996, 18) that Mary E. John sees as a dominant feature of works dealing with US migrant experiences. Perhaps because the opening pages of this novel first appeared in *The New Yorker* as a short story entitled "Brotherly Love" (2013), *The Lowland* is often presented to mainly revolve around two brothers, Udayan and Subhash. This is well in spite of the fact that, as Cressida Leyshon (2013) rightly suggests, the triangle formed by the two brothers and Gauri, Udayan's widow, is really one of novel's main structuring principles. Born in the Calcutta of the 1940s, Udayan and Subhash are so close that they are often mistaken from one another during their childhoods even if they soon enough follow quite different paths in life. During the late 1960s, while Subhash migrates to the USA to pursue a PhD in oceanography, Udayan joins the far-left Naxalite movement that arose out of the brutal repression of peasants by the Indian government in 1967 in Naxalbari. Arguably, the first part of Lahiri's novel nods to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, in that the two brothers' high fevers and near deaths on 15th August 1947 at a young age mark them to be equally "handcuffed to history, [their] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [their] country" (Rushdie, 1981, 9) as Rushdie's protagonist, who famously comes into the world "at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence" (1981, 9). Primyamvada Gopal perceives *Midnight's Children* as "an elegy for the vision of a secular and democratic nation most closely identified with Nehru," one that "attempted to steer a course outside the polarities of socialism and capitalism" (2009, 97). *The Lowland*, on the other hand, shows that "the polarities of socialism and capitalism" – which here take the form of Udayan's embrace of Maoist insurgency and Subhash's quest for professional advancement in the USA – possibly represent the two main escape routes for the Bengali youth of the late 1960s, who grows up being torn between the new elites of postcolonial India and the mass influxes of East Bengali refugees washing up on the shores of Calcutta following the Bengal Partition in 1947 and the War with Bangladesh in 1971. It is thus highly significant that, in 1971, Udayan burns with fever again, in ways that can only return him to his and his brother's synchronized sickness in 1947, "the night where Nehru made his speech, the night freedom came" (p. 321), as Udayan ironizes. Arguably, Udayan's and Subhash's symptoms suggest the same impossibility – that of fully taking part in Nehru's and Indira Gandhi's versions of postcolonial India in a city swamped by

desolate refugees at the same time as it still hosts British-built exclusive country clubs graced by portraits of Elizabeth II on the walls (Lahiri, 2013, 7). The play of similarities and differences between the two brothers likewise culminates in the wake of Udayan's execution by the paramilitary in 1971, as Subhash decides "to take his brother's place" (p. 115) by marrying Gauri, Udayan's pregnant widow. In fact, most of the novel takes place on US soil, as Subhash raises Udayan's daughter as his own in Rhode Island but keeps postposing telling her the truth about her origins. As for Gauri, she proves unable to bond with her daughter and ever-increasingly retreats into the study of Philosophy – so much so that, two-thirds into the novel, Gauri abandons Bela altogether and vanishes to California.

The Lowland has been met with mixed reviews, which either take Lahiri to task for utilizing the Naxal insurgency as mere background to another US immigrant family saga only (Deb, 2013; Majumdar, 2014), or for staging archetypal characters (Kakutani, 2013; Lasdun, 2013). More particularly, Gauri, who is probably Lahiri's darkest female character, is depicted by *The New Yorker* star reviewer Michiko Kakutani (2013) as "a folk tale parody of a cold, selfish witch," one whose abandonment of her daughter, the journalist adds, is never made "plausible, understandable, or viscerally felt." Quite surprisingly given that whole sections of the novel are focalized through this character, Siddharta Deb (2013) observes that Gauri is "compellingly opaque," while Kakutani (2013) complains that Lahiri "never gives us real insight into Gauri's decision-making or psychology." Adding to Deb's and Kakutani's dislike of Gauri, but apparently more attuned to the fact that Lahiri "wants to enlist our sympathy for Gauri as a person of tragic emotional integrity," James Lasdun (2013) remarks that Lahiri's rendition of Gauri is "infuriatingly compassionate," that the author's "scrupulousness" in charting Gauri's trajectory "seems intended to confer a kind of martyred dignity upon her. The perplexity concerning Gauri is not limited to professional critics alone. The *Goodreads* website hosts a discussion entitled "What do you think of Gauri's character?" which totals sixty-six comments. For John Cussen, such generalized vexation primordially owes to the fact that Gauri's trajectory – from Indian widow victimized by her in-laws through abandoning mother to ascetic scholar – thwarts the "unanimous perception" that Lahiri is a "feminist" (2014, 90), a label that the critic dismisses in relation to the author given "the despairing light" (p. 91) that her fiction shines on first and second-generation Bengali American women. My reading is at odds with that of Cussen in that it suggests that Lahiri's "infuriatingly compassionate" rendering of Gauri is first of all intended to give voice, representability, and legitimacy to a female character for whom motherhood can only intensify the catastrophic loss represented by Udayan's execution – a loss complicated even further by the bottled-up anger Gauri has felt since learning, hours before Udayan's death, that "he had lied to her and used her" (Lahiri 2013, 338) to plot a political murder. Commenting on Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Hirsch remarks that women, unlike men, "cannot leave their children and get away with it: that plot does not exist" (1989, 183). In *The Lowland* though, not only does Gauri survive her abandonment of her daughter, but she "gets away with it" by being offered by Bela a second chance in relation to her granddaughter at the very end of the book – hence, possibly, the generalized perplexity toward a plot (and a mother) that supposedly "[do] not exist."

The suggestion that Gauri experiences motherhood in catastrophic fashion comes early in the narrative, as Subhash drives her to the hospital to give birth. At that moment, Gauri associates "the hot pouring summer rain" (p. 143) released by the sky with the "impenetrable" (p. 129) fog that had enveloped her on the way to the airport when she left Calcutta – an "insubstantial but unyielding" vapour that she endowed with the power to "draw everything to a halt" and

that she unambiguously likened to "death" (p. 120). On her way to the hospital, though, it is now Gauri who embodies the death-like power to "draw everything to a halt" as she partly wishes "for the pain to subside but for the baby *not* to be born" (p. 144; my italics). Similarly, although Gauri first feels, "as it was after Udayan's death," an acute awareness of "the future looming, accelerating" (p. 144) upon Bela's coming-into-the world, her renewed perception of the passing of time is kept in check by "grotesque images" and petrifying scenarios in which she imagines rolling on top of Bela and crushing her, or letting the wind pry her daughter from her grasp. Much symbolically in this context, Bela's name can take different forms to designate morning (*shakal bela*), afternoon (*bikel bela*), or night (*ratrir bela*) (p. 149) in Bengali, which suggests that she embodies repetitive and cyclical time. So it is unsurprising that Bela's dependence as a child brings back to Gauri the unwelcome sensation of being "entwined" and "alone" (p. 163), a feeling of fusion in isolation that repeats her ambivalence towards Udayan in death, one that is exacerbated, moreover, by Subhash's insistence on keeping Udayan's existence a secret.

Governed as she is by her refusal or plain inability to inscribe herself into the present time – a present time that the unchanging yet demanding everyday routine of motherhood exemplifies – Gauri ironically pursues a PhD in Philosophy in order "to understand time" (p. 151). The suggestion that scholarship is perceived by Gauri as an alternative to, or compensation for, motherhood, is emphasized by the fact that she speaks of her dissertation "as she might speak of an infant (…) worrying about the pages being blown out of an open window" or being left "unattended in the house" (p. 201). A survivor of catastrophic loss and a representative of a field which Gauri invests with the potential to make sense of how her witnessing of Udayan's execution has absorbed her sense of the present, Otto Weiss, her PhD supervisor, is the only person in whom Gauri confides part of her reason for being in the US, namely that she needed to get away after her husband was killed and "[she] watched it happen" (p. 166). But the "kinship" (p. 165) Gauri feels with Weiss, and the ways in which it might enable her to distance herself from her Bengali past by giving it representability in the present, have clear limitations. A survivor of the Holocaust who lost his parents in the camps, Weiss pretends that "he never thinks of [Germany]" (p. 165) although, unlike Gauri, the identification number on his lower arm anchors his traumatic history to the tangible world. Unspeakable as it might be, Weiss' past is given minimum shape, moreover, by the fact that it is officially recognized as 'History', something that Gauri's past can never hope to be. Weiss' words of reassurance that "with children, the clock is reset, [we] forget what came before" (p. 167) can only ring hollow in this context. Indeed his words bring into sharper relief the realization that Gauri's experience of motherhood is so enmeshed in unrepresentable aspects of her past that it can never open up to the future. So it is not only that, for Gauri, Bela represents the absent presence of a man whose dis-idealization was massive after she learnt that he had betrayed her by making her the accomplice of a murder. Nor is it that Udayan's final recognition, hours before his execution, that his killing of a man has deprived him of the moral right to become a father (p. 322) surrounds Gauri's pregnancy with unauthorization. Indeed Gauri's impossible letting go of her past and failure as mother are framed, too, by broader contexts of institutionalized indifference and denial. While in the USA, the media ignore the rest of the world, giving always "the news of America, of America's concerns and activities" (p. 130), as Gauri wryly remarks, in India, the story of the massive repression of Naxalites by the government during Emergency is denied even now. Of the scene Gauri had seen from the balcony in Tollygunge, of the hundreds of "foot soldiers [like Udayan] who'd been anonymous dedicated, anonymously executed" (p. 277), there is no trace. "No notice was printed. No admission of what had been done" (p. 181).

As years go by, even the small stone tablet that Udayan's party comrades put up in the lowland of the title gets sullied by the refuse that people throw away in the flooded water. In short, Gauri is the carrier of an interdicted history, one that gets all the more internalized by the female character because of its having gained no right of entry within History.

In slightly subversive ways, *The Lowland* revisits the now-classic Indian diasporic narrative of female development in which the reevaluation of Indian mothers or mother figures seen as decisive poles of identification culminates in a physical return to India, which thus figures a site of transgenerational revelation (Vijayaraghavan, 2001; Banerjee, 2005; Malladi, 2003). For it is not Gauri's desire to reevaluate her connection to the previous generation that finally leads her to board a plane to Calcutta forty years after she left the city, but the shock of having accidentally met her daughter (who is now a mother too) in Rhode Island. That the scene between mother and daughter replays an execution scene is evidenced by the fact that Gauri likens Bela's words to "bullets" (p. 312). Even after Gauri's departure, Bela likewise feels the need "to be rid of her, to kill [Gauri] all over again" (p. 314). However, Bela's declaration that Gauri "is as dead to [her] as Udayan is" (p. 313) is oddly liberating too, in that it causes Gauri to feel a new "solidarity" with Udayan, with whom she is now aware of sharing "the bond of not existing" (p. 320). Against all expectations, Weiss' suggestion that "with children, the clock is reset" is given renewed meaning, since Bela's lashing out appears to finally authorize her mother to return to Calcutta. Forty years after having witnessed the death of Udayan from a balcony in Tollygunge, Gauri looks down at the streets of her former district from the same spot, now able to "hold the present moment" in her mind, "the moment that, until now, she'd never been able to see" (p. 323). Significantly, that "present moment" is not really about what Gauri *sees* before her in Tollygunge, but about long-suppressed feelings that are at last allowed to resurface: "she recalled the thrill of meeting [Udayan] (…). The moment of losing him. The fury of learning how he'd implicated her. The ache of bringing Bela into the world, after he was gone" (p. 323). As if Bela's long bottled-up expression of rage towards her mother and Gauri's subsequent recognition of her "fury" against Udayan were synonymous with new beginnings, back in California, Gauri receives a letter from Bela in which she mentions her resolve to "facilitate" Gauri's relationship with her granddaughter Meghna, "when Meghna is older, when she and [Bela] are both ready" (p. 325). To return to Hirsch, that Gauri is given a second chance by Bela legitimizes a plot that supposedly "does not exist": that of the abandoning mother who is able "to get away with it." But the ending of Lahiri's novel does much more than just that. True though it is that, as Hirsch argues, the impossibility to give representability to maternal anger underpins a more generalized maternal repression at play in literary traditions ranging from Greek mythology to post-modern feminist fiction (1989, 38-39), *The Lowland* suggests that generational continuity might well take its roots, not in predetermined 'either/or' cultural scenarios, but in the uncovering of maternal silences and unspeakable plots. Because they de-emphasize or just complicate taken-for-granted, all-determining macro narratives such as those giving pride of place to "the shock of arrival" (Alexander, 1996) or the Indian-American success story, Lahiri's rewritings of the mother/daughter plot invite readers to ponder the inevitable transgenerational and transcontinental ripple effect generated by interdicted stories at large.

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