

Interior Frontiers in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Houses, as much as the wide wilderness and open spaces by which we have defined the reaches of our collective imagination and identity, are the locus of the central conflicts of American life. The same ideological forces that shaped domestic architecture in the United States also shaped other forms of cultural expression, including, of course, our literature. The way we build and inhabit our houses has a good deal to do with the way we tell our stories.

—Marilyn B. Chandler

For American-born writers manifesting their characters' narrative destinies, "the walls that surround the inner spaces of houses are more often a metaphor for confinement within one's own ego, or [...] within [...] conventions that deny intimacy and individuality" (Caesar 51). Perhaps no better example illustrates the house as metaphor than Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." Its domestic architecture displays the marital, medical, and occupational confinement of upper class Victorian-era women through one young mother and wife undergoing the infamous "rest-cure" in a second-story "nursery" (408-9). Similarly, William Faulkner characterizes a town's collective obsession with its fallen Southern belle, Miss Emily Grierson, a virtual prisoner within her family's dilapidated mansion no less than within the antebellum Southern conventions of its former slaveholding aristocracy (76-81). From the puritanical *House of Seven Gables*' inheritance of sin to an abolitionist *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s exposé of slavery, the American house historically serves to contain the fate of individuals within the modes and codes of a given time and place. Configured in the previously mentioned texts, frontiers of personal freedom remain outside the house.

For transnational immigrant Americans seeking respite from political unrest, economic malaise, or social strife, the American house figures less as a metaphor and more as a conceptual journey: the discovery, unfolding, and achievement of dreams implying a locus of choice and freedom. Furthermore, for Indian households initiated through arranged marriages, the house represents an evolution into love and family, subverted or fulfilled, and all that "family" implies. In fact, an estimated

95% of all Hindu marriages in India (Chawla, par. 2) remain arranged ones with the slim minority resulting from “love matches,” or individual romantic courtships. In Jhumpa Lahiri’s Pulitzer-winning story sequence, *Interpreter of Maladies*, the distance or intimacy within the marital relationships, love matches and arranged marriages, finds expression through the structure and furnishings of old American houses, repurposed for the Asian Indian characters; the displacement, sometimes within one character, echoes from remembered walls, closed doors, separate rooms, and different floors. These unspoken articulations diffused through the characters’ relationships to the house—the simultaneity of a final step reached on a stairwell, a shared moment at the kitchen table or coinciding laughter in a foyer—trace the evolution of relationships that define the concept of the house. Of the nine stories composing *Interpreter of Maladies*, three feature houses inhabited by recently married couples. “A Temporary Matter” opens the book not with an arranged marriage but with a love match’s estrangement while the interior story, “This Blessed House,” depicts disunion through an arranged couple’s conflict over interior furnishings. The closing narrative, “The Third and Final Continent,” follows a nameless Bengali who journeys to America and builds a successful conceptual home together with his bride from an arranged marriage.

Critics discern that most stories in Lahiri’s debut collection “treat troubled marriages or problematic relationships” (Suchen 127) or enumerate the “miscommunications” or “missed connections” afflicting them (Brians 196). The opening story, “A Temporary Matter,” does indeed examine a strained love match between husband Shukumar, a Ph.D. candidate, and wife Shoba, a professional editor, who have shared a quiet, three-bedroom house in Boston for three years (Lahiri 1). However, the couple’s disconnections and connections articulate themselves through the house: the individual characters’ absence, presence, and movement; their choice of rooms to occupy, decorate, and avoid; and their physical closeness in or distance from the house. These individuals’ discrete relationships to the house speak for their marital distress, the growing estrangement and uncertainty in the wake of their stillborn first child.

Since the child’s death in September, the individuals’ absence and presence in the house, their disparate occupancy, have illuminated their distance. Leaving for work before he awakens (4), Shoba absents herself more, “putting in extra hours,” while he finishes his dissertation inside the home (2). The night she lost the child, three weeks before the projected due date, he was away at an academic conference in Baltimore at her urging. Their separate experience of the transformative event and internalized grief continues as Shoba and he avoid “each other in their

three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible” (4).

Provoked further by the life-changing tragedy and reinforced by their separate occupancy, the husband and wife switch household roles, foreshadowing greater changes. Undertaking Shoba’s former duties of shopping or cooking, Shukumar depletes her fastidious stockpile of homemade Indian preserves that the couple had earlier agreed had been “enough [...] to last for their grandchildren to taste” (7). Now with no child and diminished hope for grandchildren, each retreats to separate places, he to his study and she to the living room to watch television or resume work.

While Shukumar cocoons in the house, cooking in the kitchen or lounging in bed until noon, reluctant to leave except for provisions, she now regards the house as if it were a hotel, tossing aside her shoes and coat and dropping bills on the kitchen table. Every night before bed, she visits her husband sequestered in his study, making a routine attempt at intimacy; placing her hands on his shoulders, she “stare[s] with him into ... the computer screen” and states, ‘Don’t work too hard’ (8). The vacant reiteration of the nightly ritual and her emotional absence depict her departure from the figurative household as well as the literal one.

Both the husband and wife respond to their child’s death by altering their home. Dismantling and redecorating the nursery before she arrives home from the hospital, Shukumar assumes the infant’s room as his own office, suggesting erasure of the child with his work. Similarly, upon returning from the hospital, Shoba redecorates the hallway, flinging objects from each room into a disordered pile. She stares at the inert mass and weeps alone, replicating the stillbirth experience and her solitary grief.

The two characters, the narrative housing itself, appear unable to negotiate the abyss of loss between them. In a detached, third person flashback limited to his perspective, Shukumar does not weep with nor console her. Instead, the account of her weeping appears within a list of facts he knows about his wife, including her preference for honeydew over cantaloupe. Further demonstrating the denial of his own grief and his disconnection from his wife, his next narrated statement returns him to his present, beginning “to feel cold” while seated next to his wife on the outside stoop (16), the house’s exterior.

Finally, the narrative’s architecture hinges upon a notice of temporary disconnection from the electric company to make repairs for a consecutive five nights during the 8 o’clock hour. The blackout notice at the story’s onset symbolizes a broken circuit between the couple. Over the course of five nights’ hour of darkness, the couple fashions a tenuous connection

by playing a game Shoba initiates of sharing untold secrets after eating dinner together at the candlelit kitchen table. Their discussion about the blackout notice and their exchanged secrets serve as the primary source of dialogue between the otherwise non-communicative couple. Shoba first confesses across the table that she searched for her address in his address book without his knowing when they first started dating. He in turn responds that, during their first date, he suddenly suspected he would marry her.

The following night, the two edge closer, sitting next to each other on the front stoop, preferring to stay home together instead of joining their neighbors at a bookstore with electricity. Revealing old secrets and rekindling an intimacy, Shukumar and Shoba open hidden rooms within themselves to each other. By their fourth night, reminiscing about their courtship and anniversaries, they ascend the stairs, “feeling together for the final step with their feet before the landing, and making love with a desperation they had forgotten” (19). Synchronized in their positioning in the house, the couple reconnects, or so it seems, in the dark.

By the fifth night, the exchanged secrets culminate with simultaneous union and disunion. Shoba turns on the lights repaired ahead of schedule and confesses she has signed an apartment lease, an ironic echo of her first confession, because she needs time alone (21). The trial separation makes physical their emotional separation for the past five months.

In response, Shukumar reveals “the one thing in her life that she wanted to be a surprise” (21), their lost child’s gender, and pries open the last room, the one they both avoid. While she was asleep in her private hospital room, he had held their dead baby boy in “a darkened room in an unknown wing [...]. His fingers were curled shut, just like [hers] in the night” (21). Switching off the lights, resuming a semblance of mystery, she and Shukumar finally weep together at the table. The moment of Shoba’s declared separation gives way to their first shared moment of grief, enabling reconciliation and prompting the question, *To what “temporary matter” does the title refer?* The electric circuit, the five-night reunion, their stillborn child, the separation, or their marriage—all remain possibilities as the couple begins to explore the frontier of grief within and between them.

In “This Blessed House,” a continental divide widens between husband and engineer, Sanjeev, and his new bride, an English literature graduate student, as they settle in and decorate their suburban Hartford, Connecticut, home. To his Mahler and classical music tastes, she adores jazz; to his traditional homemade curry on weekends, she prefers prepared American foods. To his introduction of her as Tanima, she asserts her Western nickname, Twinkle (151).

Further, despite their common Hindu background and his traditional interests, the discovery of Western Christian trinkets hidden within her new American house enraptures her. She pressures Sanjeev to display them and finally achieves dominion in the household, similar to Shukumar's spatial dominance in the prior story's house. At the story's climax, she leads the housewarming party guests on a collective quest for Christian treasures, an activity in which Sanjeev is not involved. She, however, compels him, in front of their guests, to help her plant on the mantel a hefty silver bust of Christ flanked by other Christian "paraphernalia" (137).

Instead of Sanjeev's and Twinkle's wedding photos and family mementos on the mantel, the visual focus providing the narrative genesis of most homes, Mary and Joseph salt-and-pepper shakers and a nativity-scene snow globe spotlight the prior occupants' family archetypes. Additionally, a 3-D postcard of St. Francis, wooden cross keychain, a black velvet painting of the Wise Men, a Sermon-on-the-Mount tile trivet, and a porcelain Christ effigy complete the mantel tableau. Sanjeev regards "the idiotic statue" (136) and the other kitsch as mere "dust collectors" and former occupant refuse, and is tempted to gather all of the Christian ornaments into a garbage bag and drive it to the dump against Twinkle's objections (155).

Not only does Sanjeev's perceived trash and Twinkle's discovered treasure replace true family mementos on their mantel, 90% of their conversation involves the Christian items, replacing any deepening intimacy between the newlyweds who have known each other for only four months. In fact, the narrative structure of "This Blessed House" hinges upon the sequence of her discoveries, opening with her first and closing with her last, with much of the text narrating Sanjeev's responses. First, he complains that the realtor should dispose of all "nonsense" items while she, Twinkle, regards their disposal as possibly "sacrilegious" (138). While he manages to discard and replace all the Christian-themed light switch plates, she prepares the first meal described fully in the story—fish stew and bread, reminiscent of the fishes-and-loaves Biblical miracle—with a found Jesus trivet and a Ten Commandments towel. She pronounces "[t]his house...blessed" (144), titling the story, and displacing Sanjeev's aesthetics in it.

Her most revealing New World discovery is a waist-high plaster statue, a lawn ornament of the Virgin Mary with a "blue painted veil draped over her head [as if] an Indian bride," poised beneath a half-submerged bathtub (146). The couple's first true marital fight follows, determining the trash-or-treasure fate of the blue-veiled "Virgin on a half shell," as Twinkle quips (145), no doubt an allusion to Botticelli's painting, "The

Birth of Venus,” in which she is depicted on a shell hovering above sea foam.

Later, the image of the Virgin Mary, likened at first appearance to an Indian bride, merges with that of Twinkle, a new Indian bride fighting to deter Sanjeev from hauling the ornament to the town dump. Rising from bubble bath suds in a blue facial mask, she emerges from a bathtub and dons a robe. Tears trickle down her cheeks as she shouts, “This is our house. We own it together. The statue is part of our property” (149). Shaken by her emotional outburst, Sanjeev apologizes; as she embraces him and stakes her claim, they compromise, displaying Mary in a subtle recess on their lawn.

The ruling presence of “This Blessed House,” Twinkle lights candles illuminating the mantel iconography and enchants the housewarming guests gathering around her. After refreshing drinks and hanging coats, Sanjeev sits alone in the empty kitchen, “eating [...] chicken out of the tray [...] with his fingers because he thought no one was looking” (153). He becomes an outsider in his own home at his housewarming party. Upon her last discovery of the thirty-pound bust of Christ, he is reduced to a devotee, “press[ing] the massive silver face into his ribs” and follows her (157), embracing not his wife but her chosen icon.

While Twinkle’s chosen treasures occupy her marriage and the household, Sanjeev himself is preoccupied with a desire for the perfect home accessories, including his wife. He had purchased their house for its “elegant curved staircase with its wrought-iron banister, and the dark wooden wainscoting, and the solarium overlooking the rhododendron” (145), hoping guests would be suitably impressed (150). Further, he had chosen Twinkle among wife prospects: “a pretty one, from a suitably high caste, who would soon have a master’s degree. What was there not to love?” (148). Finally, he decides that Twinkle’s personal adornments, “the crushed rose petals in her hair, the pearl and sapphire choker at her throat, [...] the sparkly crimson polish on her toes,” are among the reasons for the guests’ enchantment with her; primarily, he despises the silver bust because he knows Twinkle adores it (157).

From the third person narration limited to his perspective, he relates that he is no longer sure if she loves him, too. In truth, Sanjeev does “not know what love [is], only what he thought it was not” (147). Ultimately, the narrative architecture of “This Blessed House” spotlights Sanjeev’s and Twinkle’s matching fascination with home accessories, albeit different ones. Neither character probes beyond them into their relationship or relative lack. Although their story closes with his acquiescence to her aesthetics and prior residents’ artifacts, the couple’s seeming peace belies their inherent division.

Contrasting two prior stories' use of home interiors and material furnishings to articulate emotional distance, Lahiri's closing story, "The Third and Final Continent," depicts primarily a conceptual journey culminating in the construct of an American Hindu home and identity. A nameless Bengali narrator travels first to his all-male student barracks in London, then the YMCA in Cambridge, Mrs. Croft's boarding house on Massachusetts Avenue, a furnished apartment several blocks away, then finally his own home. In "a town about twenty miles from Boston, on a tree-lined street," he and his arranged bride own a house with a garden that spares them from buying tomatoes and holds a room for guests (197). While the description of his family house occupies no more than a single sentence, this story houses his homecoming, his process of defining his America through observations, rituals, imaginings, storytelling, and realizations.

Launching his journey, the first person narrator details observations comparable to the way in which critic Laura Karttunen describes the narrative style of the title story "Interpreter of Maladies"—in a near "parody of anthropological writing with its penchant for detailed descriptions of everyday items and over-use of attributives" (433). For example, Lahiri's narrator in "The Third and Final Continent" over-specifies prices and locations in a kind of defensive verification of his account: "During the flight I read *The Student Guide to North America*, a paperback volume that I bought before leaving London, for seven shillings six pence on Tottenham Court Road, for although I was no longer a student I was on a budget all the same" (174). While Karttunen finds the "detail-ridden" narrative style "subject not just to ridicule but to ideological critique" (433), readers should recall the protagonist's characterization as librarian for MIT and a resident alien with "ten dollars to his name" (Lahiri 173-4), lacking the material advantages of engineer Sanjeev and Ph.D. candidate Shukumar.

No doubt the detailed language exposes the narrator as an outsider (Karttunen 434), especially as he immigrates to the U.S. However, over the course of the story, he develops a rootedness in his diction and identity, claiming his part of an American landscape, family, and dream: "We are American citizens now, so that we can collect social security when it is time. Though we visit Calcutta every few years, and bring back more drawstring pajamas and Darjeeling tea, we have decided to grow old here. I work in a small college library. We have a son who attends Harvard University" (Lahiri 197).

Further, the narrator dispels Western outsiders' naïve notions of arranged marriages by describing the evolution of marital love in unmistakable universal terms:

Although we were not yet fully in love, I like to think of the months that followed as a honeymoon of sorts. Together we explored the city and met other Bengalis, some of whom are still friends today. We discovered that a man named Bill sold fresh fish on Prospect Street, and a shop in Harvard Square called Cardullo's sold bay leaves and cloves. In the evenings we walked to the Charles River to watch sailboats drift across the water, or had ice cream cones in Harvard Yard. We bought an Instamatic camera with which to document our life together and I took pictures of her posing in front of Prudential building so that she could send them to her parents. At night we kissed, shy at first but quickly bold, and discovered pleasure and solace in each other's arms. (196)

Claiming his place within a marital relationship beyond and outside a physical house, the story foregrounds the narrator's observations. Clearly, his shared voyage of multiple discoveries into both American and family life turns the title of the first book he read while traveling to America, *The Student Guide to North America*, into a metaphor for the narrator learning his story as he composes it.

Both passages above claiming American citizenship and marital love are rich in use of a collective "we," distinguishing "The Third and Final Continent" from both prior stories about married couples' households. "This Blessed House" and "A Temporary Matter" feature minimal use of a collective "we," to state a brief mandate, argument, suggestion, or remembrance. Sanjeev argues bitterly against display of the Christian ornaments while Twinkle asserts, "But we must" (146); Shoba suggests that she and Shukumar light candles before Shukumar's memory of the "first time we went out" (13). These moments of conflict or detente do not extend a shared family voyage, unlike the homecoming inscribed in the last several pages of "The Third and Final Continent."

Temporal and physical compass points in the nameless narrator's voyage enable him to delve deeper into the heart of his America. Although the YMCA offers the first shelter, the transient population, the ambient street traffic, and "no one to talk to," these experiences disallow significance (175). Instead, the first stable compass point emerges at the single-room boarding house run by Mrs. Croft. At a hundred-and-three-years old, she is described as the longest-lived person the narrator has met and, more importantly, an iconic figure conflating "Whistler's Mother" with the Sphinx:

She wore a long black skirt that spread like a stiff tent to the floor, and starched white shirt edged with ruffles [...]. Age had battered her

features so that she almost resembled a man. With sharp, shrunken eyes and prominent creases on either side of her nose. Her lips, chapped and faded had nearly disappeared, and her eyebrows were missing altogether. (177-8).

The century-old matriarch with a “fierce,” battered countenance (178) owns the first American home in which he lives and guards the threshold across which several rituals occur, helping define his concept of America, identity, and home.

After her shouts to “Lock up,” “Be punctual with the rent,” and “Sit down” (178), she and our narrator, relative strangers, sit together on the bench and establish a nightly ritual and human connection. She proclaims, referencing the 1969 Apollo moon landing, “There is an American flag on the moon!” The narrator, who refers to Mrs. Croft as “madame,” is reluctant at first and finally coaxed to response, “Say splendid!” (179-80). This ten-minute nightly ritual spans his six weeks of tenancy, inextricably interweaving the narrator’s personal landing with a globally historic one, one which he admits he thought little of except through the remarkable personage of Mrs. Croft (179).

It is in her presence that he first declares his new identity, “I am a married man, madame” (181), to her admonition against lady visitors. Asserting his old world values and showing deference to her age, he pre-emptly the splendid-moon ritual one night by handing her the rent payment rather than leaving it on the piano as instructed, sparing her an arthritic walk (184). From her daughter’s weekly visits, he learns of Mrs. Croft’s fierce independence as a piano-teaching widow supporting her household and children. Fascinated by her independent spirit and concerned about her fragile age, he sits with her long after she’s dropped off to sleep on the bench, imagining her once youthful fingers striking piano keys, or checks to ensure she’s safely ensconced in bed before going himself. In truth, with both his parents long dead, he acts towards her as a son would a surrogate elderly mother, one who identifies him as the first boarder who is “a gentleman” (183).

Even after he leaves the boarding house for a furnished apartment large enough for him and his newly arrived wife, he seeks out his former landlord. By imagining what she must see through her century-old vantage point, the narrator conceives meaning in his life. The newlyweds’ first excursion into America together leads them to the door of Mrs. Croft, who not only remembers the narrator but also insists on inspecting his new wife up and down. Anticipating how Mrs. Croft might view an Indian woman in a sari, the narrator for the first time feels sympathy for his wife Mala, estranged from all she knew to become his wife. Once Mrs. Croft

pronounces Mala “a perfect lady!” (195) with the same “delight and disbelief” reserved for her exclamation of “A flag on the moon! Isn’t that splendid!” (185), merging an older ritual with a new excursion, the man and wife look upon each other and exchange a first smile (195). That validation, a blessing, from the personage who first anchors the narrator in America, begins to dissolve the emotional distance between man and wife.

Dissolving the distance, the two “explore” and “discover” Boston together, the joys of married life, with the narrator finding in Mala someone to talk to (175), beyond “saying splendid.” He tells his story to her and then to their son, always making sure to drive past Mrs. Croft’s street, his first American home—these narratives are the family photos and mementos on their family’s figurative mantel. Instead of the imposing silver bust, a relic of prior occupants’ history of belief, Mrs. Croft rests in the center, having blessed Mala and the narrator with their first shared laugh as a couple and expressed regard to a “perfect lady” and “gentleman” in their new homeland.

In the conceptual home the nameless narrator and Mala build, no objects, rooms, or deaths bar their intimacy. Instead, family stories recur, shared discoveries unfold, and Mrs. Croft’s death connects them. In the last depicted family excursion, Mala points to the boarding house, smiling at her husband and stating one word, “Remember?” She shares the narrator’s amazement “that there was ever a time that [the two] were strangers” (197). By story’s end, the narrator recalls the historic moon landing, having found his own Sea of Tranquility: “While the astronauts [...] spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. [...] There] are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal [...] eaten, each person [...] known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination” (198). He realizes that his imagination composes part of the landscape of his American journey.

As a story sequence, Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* constructs an architecture across the three newlyweds’ household stories. Each extends and inverts the others, articulating variations of unions and disunions. While a darkened room hides and holds a transformative grief in “A Temporary Matter,” iconic home furnishings define another marriage in “This Blessed House.” Finally, the virtual absence of a physical home and material accessories in “The Third and Final Continent” casts shared memories, discoveries, and stories as the hearth of a home, a conceptual journey built together. According to the armature elaborated in Lahiri’s novel, the frontier of the American home lies within.

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