EXPLORING CHILDHOOD AND MATURITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI’S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES*

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INTRODUCTION

Readers move through time and space, ensconced in and catapulted out of comfort zones as they turn the pages of Indian-American author Jhumpa Lahiri’s 1999 short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. Vibrant life lessons of gold and orange swirl around the subtle nuances of the young and the old, the innocent and the experienced, as Lahiri deeply examines the ideas of childhood and maturity. Through her characters and their strikingly human experiences, she unravels the troubles and successes of life which span nations and generations. Lahiri employs simple imagery motifs of everyday essentials like food and education. She entices readers to see these adventures innocently, “filtered through the juvenile consciousness,” and through the eyes of adults grappling with intense situations (Dubey 24).

Most critics focus solely on the adult aspects of *Interpreter of Maladies*; for example, marriage, sexuality, the immigrant experience, and “bridging the gap between Eastern and Western culture” (Karim 207). Yet Lahiri’s treatment of maturity arcs beyond what has been considered thus far, moving past the obvious subject matter and engaging deeper levels of consciousness and the human experience. Additionally, childhood, present in eight of Lahiri’s nine stories, emerges as one of her most complex and pervasive ideas. Though some critics (Ashutosh Dubey and Judith Caesar, for example) have examined several of Lahiri’s child characters in depth, there is little scholarship focusing on the presence of immaturity and childlike traits in her adult characters. The concepts of childhood and maturity feature in eight of Lahiri’s nine tales, providing two distinct viewpoints from which readers are able to imagine the world she has created. Her stories trace younger characters’ paths to maturity and follow the journeys of those who are already adults as some devolve and some grow further than they may have thought possible. Lahiri’s work focuses on the collision of Indian and American culture, as
many critics have discussed. Yet her examination of cross-cultural relationships extends beyond the traditional concept of culture, treating youth and age as separate cultures. With an analysis attentive to these complex, intimate ideas, a new understanding of the way youth and age affect wisdom, relationships, and the human experience can be unearthed. Academic investigation into *Interpreter of Maladies* which goes beyond what has already been explored provides essential insight into Lahiri’s work not only as literature, but as a piece of culture which affects more than just scholars and students.

Exploring the world through eight-year-old eyes situated four feet from the floor allows Lahiri to achieve within her stories “a remarkable sensitivity” to which readers are able to easily connect (Dubey 24). By her child characters’ bold statements and astute observations, Lahiri requires that her adult readers “be willing to rethink and reconceptualize what they think they know about the child and childhood” (Cannella and Viruru 84). Following the idea that “the multiple ways that younger human beings influence the world will never be understood and are certainly infinite,” Lahiri endows her youngest characters with the most intense maturity (Cannella and Viruru 83). The curiosity, imagination, and perceptivity of children shape readers’ perception of youth and age through subtle metaphor, striking discomfort, and insightful observation. From Rohin, the insightful seven-year-old from “Sexy” who perceives the concept of *sexy* in a fresh and touching way, to young Lilia of “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” who cannot see political differences through cultural similarities, Lahiri’s child characters are not only mature beyond their years, but teaching life lessons to the adults they encounter.

Judith Caesar argues that “Lahiri imagines an American world not just through American eyes but through eyes that have seen other cultures and a mind that has understood other ways of
thought” (Caesar 52). This opinion then begs the question of whether the eyes of the children of *Interpreter of Maladies*, many of whom have not seen the real India but only the transplanted culture of their parents or acquaintances, see this same imagined American world. It can be argued as well, though, that these children, despite their American surroundings, still possess “a mind that has understood other ways of thought” – ways of thought that have less to do with their culture than to do with their youth (Caesar 52). Cox elaborates upon this same idea when he notes that “Lahiri’s child observers, untainted by the effects of prolonged enculturation, bring to the narrative forefront those conflicts or core issues – maladies, perhaps – that arise between and among native and immigrant groups” (Cox 120). Children, childhood, and the process of maturing mean for Lahiri and her characters the ability to bridge gaps, see with new eyes, and create a sort of cultural harmony – ideas that will come to life in chapters one and two as they are explored in more depth.

Several of Lahiri’s adult characters – from Shoba and Shukumar of “A Temporary Matter” who slide from self-sufficiency after the death of their baby to Mr. and Mrs. Das who have never left childhood – function as adults who are unable to escape an infantile perspective. Quite often, men and women tend to think that they have finished learning, that once they have passed a certain age they are now ‘grown-up’ and wise. Lahiri’s stories teach a contrast to this assumption, in very subtle ways, and awaken the fact that not only do adults continue their education and evolution as humans until the day they die, but often they learn these lessons from those far younger than themselves. Many of these characters have been analyzed as immigrants and considered in mature ways by critics and scholars such as Madhumparna Mitra and Eva Tettenborn; however, characters like Mrs. Sen and Shoba and Shukumar display an immaturity
and descent into childhood that deserves consideration, especially juxtaposed with the maturity of several of Lahiri’s child characters. *Interpreter of Maladies* also presents a host of adult characters who have reached adulthood in both age and maturity – and yet they continue to learn. Mr. Kapasi and Bibi Haldar, along with many others, find themselves growing and maturing as Lahiri examines the contexts of their lives and their responses to the human experience. Chapters three and four examine many of Lahiri’s post-adolescent characters – from Mrs. Croft, at the impressive age of 103, to twenty-two-year-old Miranda – as they find themselves still learning and growing, on a journey toward maturity that never really ends.

Childhood, in its purest sense, is almost synonymous with imagination. Adolescents, often in possession of wisdom far beyond their years, can make any possibility come alive. Expanding upon this idea, Caesar notes that in Lahiri’s stories, “the difference is in the imaginations of the characters or in their inability to find the space in which to imagine one another and construct a set of values for themselves that respects the humanity and the differentness of others” (Caesar 66). Able to ignite those values, Lahiri has created within *Interpreter of Maladies* models of humanity which challenge conventional understanding. Though her writing pulses with talent and polish, Lahiri’s storytelling also holds a brilliant childlike quality in that “the plot is almost incidental to the story’s meaning, which resides in the images, metaphors, interconnecting patters, and emblematic moments” (Caesar 65). Resting within this unique and fitting structure, Lahiri’s examination of childhood and maturity flourishes.

Ashutosh Dubey notes that all the characters of *Interpreter of Maladies* – both young and old – “learn and grow from the experience of each other” (Dubey 23). *Interpreter of Maladies*
allows readers to share in Lahiri’s “double perspective – between the ancient traditions of her ancestors and the sometimes baffling prospects of the new world” (Dubey 26). This twofold view juxtaposes the newness of childhood and the experience of adulthood, recognizes the ability of youth to teach their elders, and often shows the gaps and overlaps between the experiences of being young and being old. Those who are small in age somehow possess an “awareness of the immigrant world in juxtaposition to the particulars of an American childhood” and are thus able to provide a “largely judgment-free perspective” on the world around them (Cox 121).

The extraordinary characteristics, unique ideas, and perceptive observations of Lahiri’s child characters, and the lessons learned by her adult ones, are essential ingredients for developing a new culture of Indian-Americans – and more than that, a new understanding of people in general. Some of the power behind Lahiri’s writing comes from the fact that “her stories record the experiences of both first and second generation Indian immigrants and majority of her characters, like her, have relatives in India but their home, in unambiguous terms, is northeastern United States” (Dubey 22). By choosing these characters and unraveling their experiences, and by juxtaposing the young with the old, Lahiri weaves a new and complex narrative applicable to both life and literature. Her “images metaphors, themes, and ideas run both with and counter to the American grain,” allowing readers Indian, American, and Indian-American alike to find connections to themselves and their past selves, to watch their own lives morph as they relate to the experiences of Lahiri’s characters (Caesar 57).

A graceful collision of American literature and Indian heritage, Interpreter of Maladies exceeds the singular effect of either culture to reach deep and wide into the human experience. By expanding her stories to encompass the questions of age and wisdom – and their relationship
to each other – Lahiri connects *Interpreter of Maladies* to every reader who has ever been young or old. In addition, Judith Caesar notices that “the story is not a film depicting an unrolling of events, but a collage of snapshots” much like the Mod-Podge projects brought home by schoolchildren and hung on the refrigerator (Caesar 84). These art works of the young are often created from cut-up bits of magazines, glossy representations of American culture. The collages of Lahiri’s stories function in much the same way as they overlap, fit together, and adhere fragments of American and Indian life. Her stories, however, lack the shiny, glossy falsity of magazine pages and instead are comprised of deep and simple honesty. By focusing so closely on the ideas of childhood and maturity and following her characters as they move forward into adulthood or fall back to immaturity, Jhumpa Lahiri creates a remarkable examination of what it means to be human.
CHAPTER ONE: ABSENT CHILDREN

Lahiri’s exploration of childhood and maturity extends beyond the characters readers see, hear, and know. In half of the stories being examined, children who are not physically present have an enormous impact on the narrative. Whether deceased, far away, or already grown, their palpable presence pervades the stories and provides depth and background for the characters readers come to know. None of these characters are given specific, individual names; yet without them the stories could not exist. Inhabiting simultaneously the periphery and the very center, Lahiri’s absent child characters sit very obviously in the forefronts of the memories of the characters they have affected. From Mr. Pirzada’s seven daughters in Pakistan to Shoba and Shukumar’s stillborn son, each missing child matters. By endowing these omitted children with such power, Lahiri not only emphasizes the importance of childhood but also illustrates the effect children have on the adults who care for them. All of the absent children are absent from their parents. By focusing the attention mainly on parents whose children have either died or are far away, Lahiri challenges her readers to consider the effect of absent children on their parents who are left behind.

“A Temporary Matter,” the first story in Lahiri’s collection, swirls around the concern of stillbirth. This beginning narrative enlightens readers about not only the end of life, but about the end of a life that never really had a chance to begin. However, their baby’s hidden existence and quickly extinguished life profoundly affect Shoba and Shukumar, forming and exposing in their marriage the cracks Lahiri examines throughout the story. Without the baby who “had been born dead,” Shoba and Shukumar would have continued on in their happy, food-filled, New England life (Lahiri 3). Instead the baby is present despite his absence and affecting every word that
passes between husband and wife. Neither had expected the experience of losing their baby – nor had they envisioned it affecting them quite so profoundly. With different schedules, Shoba and Shukumar are left to grieve in isolation. Shukumar remembers that “in the beginning he had believed that it would pass, that he and Shoba would get through it all somehow”; instead, they have both collapsed away from each other (Lahiri 5). In the wake of the loss of their baby, who never had time to grow and learn, Shoba and Shukumar have forgotten how to be functional, successful adults. With their baby died their motivation, their maturity, and their affection for each other. Yet at the very end of the story Lahiri reveals that the baby, who in the mystery of dying before being born drove husband and wife back into immaturity, may also be capable of bringing them back together. Once Shukumar has shared with Shoba that he had held their son, that he looked at him and felt his skin and admired what they had created together, “they wept together, for the things they now knew” (Lahiri 22). Lahiri uses the absent child to illustrate the rending of a marriage, but also to leave a glimmer of hope for restoration and an eventual re-growth.

Like Shoba and Shukumar, Mr. Kapasi and his wife have been profoundly affected by the death of a child. The latter parents, however, are an unnamed number of years from their loss – but still suffering. Though mentioned only briefly in “Interpreter of Maladies,” Mr. Kapasi’s absent son forms the basis for much of his father’s background. When discussing with Mrs. Das his job at the doctor’s office, Mr. Kapasi recalls that he “had taken the job as an interpreter after his first son, at the age of seven, contracted typhoid” (Lahiri 52). Mr. Kapasi began interpreting out of the necessity of paying his son’s medical bills, yet “in the end the boy had died one evening in his mother’s arms, his limbs burning with fever” and left his mother heartbroken and
father working among constant reminders of his lost son (Lahiri 52). Burying a child often causes tension and heartache between husband and wife, and for the Kapasis, the hardship is compounded by the continual reminder of their loss stemming from Mr. Kapasi’s job as the interpreter of maladies. Mr. Kapasi mulls over the fact that after giving tours he usually goes home to “enjoy the evening newspaper and a cup of tea that his wife would serve him in silence” (Lahiri 60). He and his wife have lost whatever spark of happiness formerly ignited their days, largely from the loss of their boy, and now Mr. Kapasi finds himself wishing for an emotional connection with Mrs. Das, realizing that “the thought of that silence, something to which he’d long been resigned, now oppressed him” (Lahiri 60). His interactions with the Das family – mainly Mrs. Das’ interest in his job at the hospital – have slipped him out of his grief-dulled existence and led him to once more crave the intimacy he has not shared with his wife since “the boy had died… in his mother’s arms” (Lahiri 52). Without both the presence and absence of the deceased Kapasi boy, “Interpreter of Maladies” would be an entirely different story. Lahiri gracefully incorporates absent characters in a way that allows her readers to enter the memories of present characters and more fully understand the human elements of the narration, suggesting that even those who seem most powerless are able to have voices and influence.

Mr. Pirzada, though coming to dine with young Lilia and her family in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has left his heart and mind in Pakistan. Though his wife is thousands of miles away as well, Lahiri focuses on the way Mr. Pirzada misses his “seven daughters between the ages of six and sixteen whose names all began with the letter A” (Lahiri 23). Unlike the previous parents discussed, Mr. Pirzada is not grieving but missing, his daughters alive but in danger. In America “to study the foliage of New England,” Mr. Pirzada has left his family in body but not
in heart (Lahiri 24). He cares very deeply for his daughters, though he jokes about not remembering their names, and Judith Caesar explains that “Mr. Pirzada is concerned about Lilia because his children are missing… he showers attention and candy on Lilia because he misses his own little girls” (Caesar 87). He attempts to shower the same kinds of gifts and affection on his own daughters, even from across the world, but finds himself unable to reach them as “the postal system, along with most everything else in Dacca, had collapsed” (Lahiri 24). Lilia, safe from the India/Pakistan conflict, reminds Mr. Pirzada not only of his daughters, but of a time when they too were safe, the time captured in his wallet in “a black-and-white picture of seven girls at a picnic, their braids tied with ribbons, sitting cross-legged in a row, eating chicken curry off of banana leaves” (Lahiri 23). A father devoted to his children but unable to dote on them, Mr. Pirzada finds comfort in Lilia’s presence. This connection also sparks many of the observations Lilia makes which allow her to grow and mature even further than she already has. Praying for Mr. Pirzada’s Pakistani daughters attaches Lilia to a world much greater than herself and illustrates her ability to learn without being taught.

As Lilia prepares to trick-or-treat in her witch costume, Mr. Pirzada questions whether he should go on the trick-or-treat walk as well, asking, “Is there any danger?” (Lahiri 38). Readers can imagine him worrying about his own daughters, picturing the peril they face every day in Pakistan, and projecting that care and concern onto the little girl currently present in his everyday life. When at the end of the story Mr. Pirzada is reunited with his family, he informs Lilia’s family that “his seven daughters were a bit taller, but otherwise they were the same, and he still could not keep their names in order” (Lahiri 42). By allowing her readers brief but telling glimpses of Mr. Pirzada’s daughters, Lahiri establishes the connection between Lilia and Mr. Pirzada as significant to both of their lives. Mr. Pirzada, missing his daughters, finds comfort in
Lilia’s presence and Lilia finds empathy and maturity in her prayers for girls she will never meet. In the presence of the daughters’ absence, both characters find maturity and growth.

Lahiri ends *Interpreter of Maladies* with “The Third and Final Continent” – a story not of death but of new life, not of loss but of gain and growth. Unlike Shoba and Shukumar, the Kapasis, or Mr. Pirzada, the son of Mina and the narrator is neither dead nor in danger. Rather, he “attends Harvard” and comes home some weekends to share meals and Indian culture with his parents (Lahiri 197). His parents miss him because they love him and, through raising him, have come to know and enjoy him as a person. Yet their sense of loss, unlike that of the other characters, is sweet rather than bitter. When the narrator’s wife cries for missing their son, they just “drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali” (Lahiri 197). As parents, they worry that he will forget these things, that he will become more American than Indian and end up leaving his culture behind. This absent child, no longer a child, represents a maturity on its way to development and a hope for the future. The narrator notes that when he looks at his son he sees “the ambition that had first hurled [him] across the world” (Lahiri 197). In fact, rather than being absent, the narrator’s son is merely in flight, on his way to maturity and the rest of his life.
CHAPTER TWO: ACTUAL CHILDREN

Lahiri’s actual child characters, the ones who attend elementary school and are still actively working out the world around them, are often the wisest. Judith Caesar points out that “it is the contact with what is different that causes Lahiri’s characters to mature,” and for children growing up biculturally, nearly everything is different (Caesar 90). Caesar will later point out that “to live in America, Lilia has to learn to negotiate her way through worlds that are invisible to the very adults who should be guiding her,” an idea which connects Lahiri’s characters to countless literary children before them (Caesar 85). Caesar then explores how Lahiri’s book children might fit into the American literary tradition. She notes that “much of the classic American literary fiction… focuses on an individual, often a child or adolescent, trying to develop a system of moral values without the help of either trustworthy conventional morals or outside guidance”; rather, the guidance of Huck Finn and his literary compatriots comes from within (Caesar 89). For Lahiri’s bicultural characters, their guidance comes from some sort of spark produced by the meeting of the cultures. Caesar goes on to explain that many of these characters possess “a falsely remembered childhood to which [they] need to return because something went wrong in the process of becoming an adult” (Caesar 90). For many of the children of Interpreter of Maladies, though, something is going right as they grow up. Learning from more places than just school, they make observations and from there create their own connections. Referencing Lilia’s prayers for Mr. Pirzada’s family, Caesar notes that “she has learned to become this not because her parents have consciously taught how to do this or guided her through her worlds, but in part because her awareness of the simultaneous existence of these different systems of thinking has expanded her knowledge of what it means to be human”
(Caesar 88-9). Each of these children has learned life lessons by paying attention to the world around them and creating their own connections. For Lilia of “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” and Rohin of “Sexy” especially, “being bicultural requires both intelligence and a capacity for empathy,” which each character possesses and which leads each to an “intellectual and emotional maturity” often lacking in the adult characters of *Interpreter of Maladies* (Caesar 90-1). Eliot, the eleven-year-old American of “Mrs. Sen’s” finds difference not within being bicultural, but from his interactions with the newly immigrated Mrs. Sen, while the Das children experience a culture clash as they return from America to their grandparents’ homeland of India.

Lilia, of “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” functions as one of the wisest and most mature characters of *Interpreter of Maladies*, learning from maps, through observation, and by making her own connections. When Mr. Pirzada begins coming to Lilia’s home for dinner and the news, she describes him as Indian, not understanding the India-Pakistan conflict of 1971, around which the story revolves. “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” unfolds as a story of growing, but unlike others in the collection, the character maturing is a ten-year-old, right on track to grow up. Unique among the stories of *Interpreter of Maladies*, an adult Lilia tells the story of herself as a child but possesses the added lenses of adulthood and decades. Because of this, Cox writes that “Lilia not only observes for difference, but, as the adult narrator, is also able to comment on what she saw as a child and to articulate the conclusions that she reached” – conclusions which have allowed her to mature and come into her own as an Indian-American adult (Cox 126). Her adult narrator self acknowledges that the concept of the India-Pakistan boundary difference was foreign and notes that it “made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same…”
Nevertheless, my father insisted that I understood the difference” (Lahiri 25). When he brings out a map and puts his finger to Pakistan, yellow on the map, child Lilia has trouble imagining a world so far away from mere colored spaces carefully outlined in black. As he explains the new difference between the two nations, she becomes interested, noting “now that I had learned Mr. Pirzada was not an Indian, I began to study him with extra care, to try to figure out what made him different” (Lahiri 30). She comes to the realization that Mr. Pirzada’s family, living at the time kept by his extra watch, experienced life eleven hours before she did (Lahiri 30). Her world expands a little, even if in her mind everyone half a day early in Dacca exists on the yellow patch of map: “Every now and then I studied the map above my father’s desk and pictured Mr. Pirzada on that small patch of yellow, perspiring heavily, I imagined, in one of his suits, searching for his family” (Lahiri 41). Seeing her come to a new understanding, her father shakes his head and wonders what she learns in school if she does not follow current events and world geography. As the narrator, grown up, she remembers in answer that:

We learned American history, of course, and American geography. That year, and every year, it seemed, we began by studying the Revolutionary War. We were taken in school buses on field trips to visit Plymouth Rock, and to walk the Freedom Trail, and to climb to the top of the Bunker Hill Monument. We made dioramas out of colored construction paper depicting George Washington crossing the choppy waters of the Delaware River, and we made puppets of King George wearing white tights and a black bow in his hair. During tests we were given blank maps of the thirteen colonies, and asked to fill in names, dates, capitals. I could do it with my eyes closed. (Lahiri 27) Later, listening to her parents and their culturally-identical-but-politically-dissimilar guest, she
remembers that “each night as I drifted off to sleep I would hear them, anticipating the birth of a nation on the other side of the world” (Lahiri 34). She sees “separate and mutually invisible worlds bump,” worlds which she had thought of as one, and “the result is not conflict but understanding” – an unexpected course of events that seems impossible from an adult perspective (Caesar 87).

Out of physical harm’s way, Lilia has been endowed with the safety of ignorance, should she choose it. Her parents are first generation immigrants and meant this safe American life for her, proven when her mother reminds her father that “we live here now, she was born here” (Lahiri 26). Her father, however, strives to ensure that Lilia remembers and comprehends her heritage. Much like Lahiri herself, Lilia receives a new culture and new education in America, but she loses that with which her parents grew up in India. Speaking of the idea of missingness, Lahiri says: “I’ve inherited a sense of that loss from my parents because it was so palpable all the time while I was growing up” (Farnsworth 1). Though loss existed as a permanent part of the immigrant experience and permeated her parents’ lives, this loss of her ancestral culture was a loss of her own. It is that same loss from which her child characters, especially Lilia, learn and which her adult characters seem so unable to understand. The most often cited example of Lilia’s extraordinary maturity is her great concern about Mr. Pirzada’s daughters who are “little girls just like herself who might be homeless – or dead” (Caesar 83). This maturity shows itself in Lilia’s reaction to the edible gift she receives each night: “It was inappropriate, in my opinion, to consume the candy Mr. Pirzada gave me in a casual manner” (Lahiri 29). Careful with what she is given, Lilia cares for others more than for her own instant gratification. Caesar notes that “she has a kind of compassion rare even in adults: the ability to feel concern and sympathy for someone who is facing problems she has never faced herself,” a disquiet deep enough that she
constructs her own spirituality in an attempt to ease the troubles of Mr. Pirzada’s family (Caesar 87). Rather than devour her precious gifts, she “takes care to save up the candy,” keeping it in a sacred box handed down from her grandmother in India and “treating it like an offering in her prayers for Mr. Pirzada’s family” (Brada-Williams 455). Though Lahiri provides no mention of the family’s religious background – except to note that they spend Christmas with friends in New Jersey – Lilia plucks from somewhere the idea of prayer. She has gleaned an awareness of not only the physical and intellectual world around her, but also the spiritual. Not only that, but she uses this powerful connection she has found to show care and empathy for others rather than merely asking for a pony. “Careful not to brush her teeth afterward for fear that this will brush away the prayer as well,” Lilia also manages to retain her childlike innocence (Caesar 83). She learns from her own experience after Mr. Pirzada returns home “what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months” – and she cherishes the lesson as a sort of moral message (Lahiri 42). Karim describes Lilia as a “perceptive child-narrator” and notes that the story suggests – and Lilia learns through her parents, her candies, and her answered prayers – “people’s need to connect with one another during moments of crisis in their lives” (Karim 206).

Rohin, though he is younger than Lilia, also possesses extraordinary knowledge and can also recite geography. Laxmi explains that Rohin will not be affected by missing a few days of school as “he’s something of a genius. He has a Punjabi mother and a Bengali father, and because he learns French and English at school he already speaks four languages. I think he skipped two grades” (Lahiri 84). When Rohin arrives at Miranda’s apartment, the first thing he says to her is “Ask me a capital,” so that he can practice for his informal competition with
another boy at school (Lahiri 100). He insists that Miranda quiz him, scoffing when she asks questions he deems too easy. Rohin hands her his almanac and the two work through nation after nation, she asking a country and he providing the capital. Even though Miranda is the adult, the one with the book and the answers in her hand, Rohin possesses more knowledge because he holds it within himself. Yet Lahiri reminds her readers of his small age by noting that “when they reached the last of the countries in Africa, Rohin said he wanted to watch cartoons” (Lahiri 103).

Where Lilia dresses up like a witch for Halloween and goes to bed early, Rohin is forced by his environment and the inability of his mother to be more adult in his everyday behaviors. As Rohin enters her apartment, Miranda observes first “his eyes, which had dark circles under them…[and] made him look haggard, as if he smoked a great deal and slept very little, in spite of the fact that he was only seven years old” (Lahiri 100). Wearing what could be a school uniform but seems more like business attire, Rohin displays very adult characteristics on his young form. Even the way he walks seems old to Miranda, who watches as “he [marches] away, his arms swinging like a toy soldier” (Lahiri 101).

Unlike Lilia’s, Rohin’s knowledge encompasses more than merely school-sanctioned colonial American geography – it is individually motivated and spans the entire globe. His facts and worldly understanding counter Miranda’s ignorance of everything beyond her front door. She has no idea where India is and cannot distinguish Dev’s nationality, Bengali, from a religion. Upon learning this, he brings an issue of The Economist to show her the location of India because “she did not own an atlas, or any other books with maps in them” (Lahiri 84). Rohin has traveled with his mother from their home in Canada to Miranda’s in Boston on their way to California, his history lies in India half a world away, and “the farthest Miranda had ever been was to the Bahamas once when she was a child” (Lahiri 91). Despite the decades more life
experience Miranda possesses, Rohin trumps her in every area of intelligence. Everyone in the
story talks to Miranda as though she herself were a child, someone without knowledge and
without the capability thereof. Everyone that is, except Rohin, who merely shares his innocent
wisdom – one excellent example of the way Jhumpa Lahiri goes “beyond the adolescent
sensibility to show the character’s development of meaningful adult values” (Caesar 90).

From the incomprehensible adult chaos swirling around him, Rohin makes patterns and
connections and forms his own definitions. Looking at Miranda’s beauty supplies and asking for
their purpose, he receives an infantilized answer of “puffiness.” But this information does not
remain stagnant in his mind. Rather, he connects it with his real-life experience, telling Miranda:
“My mother has puffiness. She says it’s a cold, but really she cries, sometimes for hours.
Sometimes straight through dinner. Sometimes she cries so hard her eyes puff up like bullfrogs”
(Lahiri 104). Aware that cosmetics are for covering up, he also knows that adults hide other
things from children – but he puts the pieces together. His mother, though alert to the idea that
affairs and lust may be too mature for a seven-year-old still “always takes her clothes off in front
of me… She doesn’t even pick them up afterward. She leaven them all on the floor by the bed,
all tangled” (Lahiri 106). She covers up what Rohin needs to know – why his father has not
returned – but finds nothing wrong with undressing in his presence. And though he is precocious,
Rohin no longer has any adults in his life save his inconsolable mother and therefore has trouble
determining what should and should not be hidden. He pokes around Miranda’s closet, finding
her mistress cocktail dress in folds on the floor and asking that she put it on for him. “You’re
sexy,” he tells Miranda when she has donned the dress, stockings, and shoes (Lahiri 107). Taken
aback, Miranda attempts to rationalize his words, to explain to herself why as seven-year-old
would know and use that phrase. Eventually though, she asks him what it means. At first he
refuses to tell, saying that it is a secret, but then whispers “it means loving someone you don’t know” (Lahiri 107). Miranda then unfolds in her mind Rohin overhearing a phone conversation between his mother and father, defining the word in terms of the happenings in his world. Like Lilia, Rohin comes up with “amazingly mature insights” – though unlike Lilia, he vocalizes his stunningly simple connections and they are recognized by an adult (Caesar 87).

Eliot possesses fewer blatantly mature traits than Rohin, and may actually be less mature than his mother would like to believe. “Eliot is eleven,” she tells Mrs. Sen over the phone, “he can feed and entertain himself; I just want an adult in the house, in case of an emergency” (Lahiri 111). What she does not realize is that Eliot does need more than just someone older sitting in the other room; he needs guidance. Despite the fact that he must be dropped off at her university apartment, Eliot finds himself under the care of Mrs. Sen and “develops a liking for her, not only because Mrs. Sen’s apartment is warm but also there is warmth of affection” which he desperately craves (Dubey 23). He and his mother live in a New England beach house, not merely for vacation but through the cold grey winter as well. Mrs. Sen comprehends Eliot’s youth much better than does his mother, telling him: “When I was your age I was without knowing that one day I would be so far. You are wiser than that, Eliot. You already taste the way things must be” (Lahiri 123). As is subtly indicated by her use of the word “taste,” she also understands much more fully Eliot’s need for food and satiation, and the heart of “Mrs. Sen’s” lies piled among the vegetables on the living room floor. From the moment she meets him after school, Mrs. Sen feeds Eliot: “As they walked back from the bus stop she produced a sandwich bag from her pocket, and offered Eliot the peeled wedges of an orange, or lightly salted peanuts, which she had already shelled” (Lahiri 119). In stark contrast even to Mrs. Sen’s snacks, Eliot’s
mother does nothing more than phone out for pizza every night and sit “at the table as he ate, drinking more wine and asking how his day was, but eventually she went to the deck to smoke a cigarette, leaving Eliot to wrap up the leftovers” (Lahiri 118). Mrs. Sen, on the other hand, does virtually nothing but prepare and cook food. She spends her days shopping, chopping, searing, steeping, and simmering to feed not only herself and her husband, but Eliot and his mother as well. While Mrs. Sen works, she relegates Eliot safely to the couch, occupies him with “the comics section of the newspaper,” and feeds him yet again with “crackers spread with peanut butter, and sometimes a Popsicle, or carrot sticks sculpted with her blade” (Lahiri 115). Mrs. Sen insists on serving traditional Indian dishes to Eliot’s mother, an American woman who silently dislikes everything on her plate, when she comes to collect her son. “It is no trouble,” Mrs. Sen replies to the protestations, “just like Eliot. No trouble at all” (Lahiri 118).

Michael W. Cox notices that, as the narrator gives voice to Eliot’s observations of the two women in the room, his “mother’s style of dress and hair… in juxtaposition with Mrs. Sen’s, suddenly [strike him] as strange” (Cox 121). It is if, even at the age of eleven, Eliot possesses an awareness that perhaps his quiet, gray life with his mother does not align exactly with the rest of the world. He makes connections and deductions about Mrs. Sen and his mother, links around which the pair of adult women seem to flit as “they do not know what exactly to make of the other” (Cox 122). His experience runs somewhat parallel to Rohin’s, as the boys watch both their mothers and a woman whose ways are foreign, attempting to connect the two cultures into a more regular reality.

Loneliness, or the idea of being left alone, cuts its way through “Mrs. Sen’s” like the blade of the Indian woman’s knife through kilos of vegetables. Though many critics focus on the aloneness of Eliot at the end of the story, when he becomes a ‘latchkey kid,’ the loneliness Lahiri
creates pricks under her readers’ skin arcs beyond childhood to affect every other character in the story. Ashutosh Dubey picks up on this, noticing that “Mrs. Sen’s loneliness emanates from being so far from home,” before going on to describe the difference between Mrs. Sen’s loneliness and that of Eliot: “the boy’s loneliness comes from living in suburbia… he does not know his father and hardly knows his mother” (Dubey 23). Here, an idea that engenders fear in adults when in regard to children, applies not only to the immature in age but also to the young in culture and experience: “It was the last afternoon Eliot spent with Mrs. Sen, or with any babysitter. From then on his mother gave him a key, which he wore on a string around his neck. He was to call the neighbors in case of an emergency, and to let himself into the beach house after school” (Lahiri 135). His mother removes him not only from cultural difference, but from any culture at all.

Lahiri’s lines of race and ethnicity and those of personality and behavior are not always congruent. The American children in *Interpreter of Maladies*, by ethnicity, are Eliot and Dora; Lilia, Rohin, Ronny, Bobby, and Tina are the Indian children. But even though Eliot finds his only contact with India in Mrs. Sen, his personality is far more Indian than those of the highly Americanized Das children. The “American” children possess far less depth and receive less exploration, but they provide several points important to their stories.

Lilia’s friend, Dora, who has not seen the news reports every night, who does not know of the danger swirling on the other side of the world, asks her of Mr. Pirzada, “Why did that man want to come [trick-or-treating] with us?” (Lahiri 39). Lilia explains that Mr. Pirzada misses his daughters, whom he does not see because they are far away. She realizes that she possesses some knowledge outside of Dora’s when her friend fails to comprehend her explanation, gravitating
instead to the American conception of missing – children snatched by pedophiles from suburban playgrounds. “Dora can’t imagine a world where children could be war refugees,” proving that not all children are lit from within by a multicultural awareness and giving Lilia a knowledge and an understanding that come only from her mind and set of circumstances (Caesar 87).

The Das children are not the focus of “Interpreter of Maladies,” and they receive rather little attention in the story. However, Ronny, Bobby, and Tina function as reflections of their parents and as significant representations of what can happen if bicultural children are raised monoculturally. “Ronny and Bobby, who appeared very close in age and had teeth covered in a network of flashing silver wires” are stereotypical pre-adolescent American brothers (Lahiri 43). They rough-house, antagonize animals, and talk back to their parents. It does not seem to faze them that they are on vacation thousands of miles from anywhere they have been before, in a place bursting at the seams not just with any history, but with their history. Tina, the youngest and the only girl, “was holding to her chest a doll with yellow hair that looked as if it had been chopped, as a punitive measure, with a pair of dull scissors” (Lahiri 45). She has yet to become as stereotypically Americanized as her brothers, but as she receives no guidance from her parents, she is well on her way. Clearly she is allowed to do whatever she likes, from cutting her doll’s hair to clicking the window lock. Her parents can barely be bothered to take her to the bathroom; the likelihood that they will invest effort into her mind and intellect is slim. As Ashutosh Dubey points out, the Das “children suffer from their having been westernized,” and will continue to suffer as they follow in their parents’ footsteps and grow but do not mature (Dubey 25).

The children of Lahiri’s stories foster, unknowingly, a wide and sweeping “transcendence of the boundaries” that encircle their parents, their neighbors, and both their cultures (Caesar 82).
Each “Indian” child creates his or her own bridge across cultures – be it candies, capitals and sexy, or kilos of vegetables. Dora and the Das children have grown up with one culture, knowing one way, and have not benefited from the spark of difference that would ignite their curiosity and enable them to make connections and learn lessons of their own. Judith Caesar examines the different wars waging in the eyes of the adults in Lilia’s life, and the one her parents see lies about 7,000 miles east and two hundred years later than the one Mrs. Kenyon sees: “The War of Independence is the war that took place in America two hundred years earlier, not the war then going on between East and West Pakistan” (Caesar 85). And for Lilia, Rohin, and Eliot, as well as Dora and the Das kids, though they do not know it, the War of Independence is neither. Rather, their independence will come from slow and careful composition of conclusions concerning the world around them. There is a war going on for their minds, and they are winning as they picture maps, define words, and teach life essentials to the adults in their lives. Mrs. Kenyon scolds Lilia because, “to her, the world outside America simply doesn’t exist, and Lilia is just playing when she is supposed to be working” – though in fact just the opposite is occurring (Caesar 85). The real work, the intellectual exertion which will end up benefiting Lilia for the rest of her life, is that of pushing her brain beyond 1776, beyond the Atlantic, and beyond cultural constriction. Lilia, Caesar notes, “is in the process of forging for herself an identity that transcends the identities the outside worlds seek to project onto her” and the beauty and grace lies in the fact that she does this subconsciously (Caesar 86). She, along with Rohin and Eliot, has managed to make cultural connections that reach far outside themselves to touch and teach the adults around them. This unintentionality throws wide the doors of children maturing with the grace of a sunrise, providing a comparable level of illumination for their world.
CHAPTER THREE: ADULTS REGRESSING

Lahiri’s collection of short stories carries themes, ideas, and metaphors of childhood, but not all are positive. In fact, many attributes of youth can be found in Lahiri’s adult characters – often mannerisms and methods of reasoning which children are expected to grow out of as they mature. For Shoba and Shukumar of “A Temporary Matter” and the title character of “Mrs. Sen’s,” crushing circumstances cause a striking reversion from adult maturity, self-sufficiency, and independence to curiously childlike behavior and mentality. Raj and Mina Das of “Interpreter of Maladies” display similar characteristics, though aggravated not due to a traumatic experience but as a result of having been “born in America… born and raised” and westernized into perpetual infancy (Lahiri 45). In endowing adult characters – people with careers, children, education, and responsibilities – with the mindsets and actions of preadolescents, Lahiri not only provides a contrast to her child characters who possess adult capabilities and reasoning but also adds depth to her consideration of youth and maturity. She expands her readers’ concept of growing up by bending the ideas of maturity and childishness. For Shoba, Shukumar, and Mrs. Sen, childhood has gone and come again – new, unwelcome, and frightening. And for Raj and Mina Das, a type of youth which refuses to mature or think outside of itself has never left.

Lahiri’s first story in Interpreter of Maladies, “A Temporary Matter,” finds Shoba and Shukumar’s quiet suburban house, where darkness surrounds tiny bits of light. Two shadows of humanity sit opposite each other, both lost in their respective minds, their respective emotional dusks. The only light comes from birthday candles pushed into the pot of an ivy plant, thin and fragile and tilted. Each night for a week, the lights shut off and the truth turns on. Six months
after the loss of their firstborn son, Shoba and Shukumar are still shattered. Now, rather than entertaining and cooking and living together, the couple’s their marriage has fragmented and they merely orbit each other – two individuals inhabiting the same environment. Once happy, thriving, and thoroughly independent together, this couple are now emotionally separate and quickly falling out of mental adulthood. The loss of their child has triggered a loss of their own maturity, and “A Temporary Matter” chronicles an unconscious attempt to regain their life as thriving young adults.

Though the present scenes of “A Temporary Matter” are soaked in tension, many of those set in the past are drenched in warm affection. Shukumar and Shoba, before the death of their son, were happy. Shukumar attended graduate school while Shoba, a proofreader, “searched for typographical errors in textbooks and marked them… with an assortment of colored pencils” (Lahiri 4). They shopped together at a bustling market “every other Saturday,” buying “brown paper bags of artichokes, plums, gingerroot, and yams” (Lahiri 7). Though living in America, the couple managed to soak each day with references to their heritage. Every aspect of their food reflected India from purchase to pot to pantry. At the market, such an important symbol of India, Shoba “pushed through the crowd, arguing with boys too young to shave but already missing teeth” in order to make her purchases (Lahiri 7). Entertaining was spontaneous and frequent – evenings filled with friends and Shoba’s “meals that appeared to have taken half a day to prepare, [made] from things she had frozen and bottled” (Lahiri 7). And once the guests had gone, their small snug house remained redolent with cooking and canning and the stirring of chutney, “her labeled mason jars lined the shelves of the kitchen, in endless sealed pyramids, enough, they’d agreed, to last for their grandchildren to taste” (Lahiri 7). Such a little family then, the two had already planned for and joked about their future generations. Their life in
America was an aromatic combination of the new world and the old, of their past and their future. They were adults, well-adjusted to the world around them and smiling at each other.

Yet when Shoba went into premature labor without Shukumar there, their life split at the seams. Rather than rending violently, though, the threads were snapped and frayed and pulled out one by one as the months wore on. The two spiraled slowly away from each other and away from their happy, mature, and acclimated existence. It began just before Shoba went into labor, as Shukumar rode in the taxi to the conference in Baltimore: “Although Shukumar was six feet tall, with hands too big ever to rest comfortably in the pockets of his jeans, he felt dwarfed in the back seat” (Lahiri 3). Before any concrete change has even taken place, he begins to feel small and childlike despite his size, age, and life experience. Riding alone, having watched Shoba wave with her hand on her swollen belly, “he imagined a day when he and Shoba might need to buy a station wagon of their own, to cart their children back and forth from music lessons and dentist appointments. He imagined himself gripping the wheel, as Shoba turned around to hand the children juice boxes” (Lahiri 3). Here, the life they might have had was still a real and impeding possibility. The two still loved each other, still held in Shoba’s stomach the hope of the lives of which they had dreamed – both theirs and that of their child.

But the juice boxes of dreams lay squished and squirted on the floor of a station wagon that they would now never own when Shukumar heard the news that “the baby had been born dead” (Lahiri 3). They find little comfort in the assurance of the doctor that “there was nothing to indicate that she would not be able to have children in the future” but somewhat unconsciously accept this death as final and as the end (Lahiri 4). The dozens of jars colorful not only with vegetables and sauces but with history and hope were already gone: “They’d eaten it all by now” (Lahiri 7). The trauma of losing their child sent both husband and wife reeling away from each
other and back into immaturity. Lahiri emphasizes this when she writes that Shoba’s mother “came from Arizona and stayed with them for two months… cooked dinner every night, drove herself to the supermarket, washed their clothes, put them away” (Lahiri 9). Her son-in-law and daughter were no longer adults, no longer independent or self-sufficient but fully relying on someone whose active parenting days should have been through. Lahiri never mentions any interaction between Shoba and her mother, yet points out that in his mother-in-law Shukumar finds no comfort as “she never talked to him about Shoba; once, when he mentioned the baby’s death, she looked up from her knitting, and said, ‘But you weren’t even there’” (Lahiri 9). It is as if Shukumar is being punished for his absence – an occurrence which sends him further from adulthood. Silence descends upon their home and with it an estranged sort of politeness which leads Shukumar to fear “that putting on a record in his own house might be rude” (Lahiri 5). Once full of vitality and culture, now their lives consist of little more than the uncomfortable monotony that plagues many American marriages.

One of the sorest spots in Shoba and Shukumar’s splintered marriage, the baby’s room, now occupies more space in their house than should be physically possible. When Shukumar began working at home, “he set up his desk their deliberately, partly because the room soothed him, and partly because it was a place Shoba avoided” (Lahiri 8). This choice provides an excellent example of Shukumar’s slip from maturity. His choice to work in the former nursery shouts childishly, a choice made to allow him as little contact with his wife as possible because being with her has become uncomfortable. Yet, Lahiri writes, once each night Shoba would find him on purpose, drag herself up the stairs and through the door frame and into nothing but pain. It was here that Shukumar sat, staring at his computer or reading a novel, avoiding his dissertation. When Shoba arrived, “she would look around the walls of the room, which they had
decorated together last summer with a border of marching ducks and rabbits playing trumpets and drums” (Lahiri 8). Readers’ imaginations slip easily into warm evenings spent creating a nursery – open windows, the smell of fresh paint mixing with that of newly mown grass. Laughing, dabs of yellow livening up their old college t-shirts, Shoba and Shukumar work together and dream about the life their baby will have. Once the paint dries, the two move in “a cherry crib under the window, a white changing table with mint-green knobs, and a rocking chair with checkered cushions” (Lahiri 8). But the image shatters as the narrator reveals that “Shukumar had disassembled it all before bringing Shoba back from the hospital, scraping off the rabbits and ducks with a spatula” (Lahiri 8). And now, though Lahiri passes over the comment with no new description, one can imagine the bland space, wallpaper residue clinging in a band around the center of the room. Despite its painful associations and potential to be daily salt in an unhealed wound, “for some reason the room did not haunt [Shukumar] the way it haunted Shoba” – perhaps because he had the catharsis, the finality and closure, of dismantling the room (Lahiri 8). He was able to exert some of his anger and sadness, watch the room dissolve as he had watched it come together. Alternately, Shoba may have wanted the room to remain intact as a sort of sanctuary, a place where she could have sat and healed.

Where in the shifting lights and darks of every day the husband and wife are unable to reach around their grief to speak, “something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again” (Lahiri 19). Shoba and Shukumar break their silence not with idle chit-chat, but with secrets they have never previously shared with one another. Though the dishonesties they discuss seem pretty small scale in the grand scheme of marriage – Shoba said she had to stay late at work when really she went out for a drink with her friend, Shukumar returned a sweater vest Shoba had given him – talking about them provides significant catharsis.
Even simple things like a comparison of the darkness they have now and the unreliable electricity in India – almost childlike in nature and connection – lead to important realizations and discussions. As Shoba shares:

‘I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark. The baby just cried and cried. It must have been so hot.’ Their baby had never cried, Shukumar considered. Their baby would never have a rice ceremony, even though Shoba had already made the guest list, and decided on which of her three brothers she was going to ask to feed the child its first taste of solid food, at six months if it was a boy, seven if it was a girl. (Lahiri 11)

Here surfaces a reminder of the culture they share, though in different intensities. “Shukumar hadn’t spent as much time in India as Shoba had,” the narrator informs the reader, going on to say that “the first time he’d gone as an infant he’d nearly died of amoebic dysentery” and had thus been left behind when his parents took subsequent trips (Lahiri 12). This ethnic and cultural history they have in common is an element of their lives which would have been central to their child’s upbringing, had the baby lived. But because the baby is dead, so is the thriving Indian culture which used to permeate their marriage. Like the jars of home-canned vegetables and the freezer bags full of carefully cut meat, this connection has been emptied, broken, and abandoned. Shukumar’s wish “that he had his own childhood story of India” reflects not only his small jealousy of Shoba and the neat, driven, cultural life she used to lead, but also his wish that his son had survived to have an Indian childhood (Lahiri 12).

Though many couples who lose a child have difficulty remaining in the same sort of love they once shared, Shoba and Shukumar’s grief is intensified by the fact that they were not together during their son’s birth and death. By not sharing with each other such an earth-shaking
end to an experience the way they had shared the gradual changes swirling around the baby’s short life – conception, growth, preparation, hope – the trauma of the experience Shoba and Shukumar endured was individual rather than shared. As a result, Shoba made assumptions about Shukumar’s knowledge of and experiences with their child – ones that were ultimately extinguished with the darkness of the week of scheduled power outages and the far-reaching effects of which are not elaborated in the story. Rather than being too late for everything, as Shoba had thought, Shukumar actually “arrived early enough to see their baby, and to hold him before they cremated him” (Lahiri 22). “At first,” Shukumar remembers, “he had recoiled at the suggestion, but the doctor said holding the baby might help him with the process of grieving” (Lahiri 22). Six months later, Shukumar’s acceptance to hold his son before needing to let go seem to have allowed his parental grief to recede enough for him to manage. While Shukumar’s life has undoubtedly changed, his days becoming listless and routine, his grief stems more from the loss of his wife than the loss of his child. He has mourned their baby, “held his son, who had known life only within [Shoba], against his chest in a darkened room in an unknown wing of the hospital,” and this closeness was salve on the wound of losing the baby (Lahiri 22). But Shoba remains crushed and freshly bruised by her loss, having not known that their “baby was a boy… his skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighed almost five pounds. His fingers were curled shut, just like [hers] in the night” (Lahiri 22). But, as the story closes, Lahiri leaves a little hope. The forced night of the electric company’s “temporary matter” brought Shoba and Shukumar, hiding in their hurt and avoiding one another for months, together long enough that maybe, just maybe, they will once more be able to grow with each other. The darkness, instead of creating a childlike fear, seems to have possibly healed.

On the surface, Shoba and Shukumar seem to have little in common with the older,
childless, and newly immigrated Mrs. Sen. Yet looking deeper into the stories, one finds many common threads of both thought and action coming out of traumatic and life-changing circumstances. Like the young couple, Mrs. Sen used to have a mature, adult life in which she found purpose, community, and happiness. But following the same pattern as the parents grieving the death of their child, Mrs. Sen allows the distressing experience of immigration to remove her independence, her confidence, and her adulthood. She holds tightly to the security blankets of aerograms and Indian music, using her culture to block out the reality in which she now exists and connecting more closely with an eleven-year-old than with other adults.

Mrs. Sen exists as an example of literary “characters who are not just alienated but literal aliens, who face unpredictable problems” and situations for which she has not been prepared, about which she has not been forewarned (Caesar 90). But unlike the actual children about whom Caesar is speaking, those who “mature as they confront these problems,” Mrs. Sen was mature before she encountered them and cannot construct any reaction except fear, anxiety, and reversion back to immaturity (Caesar 90). This return to childlike tendencies surfaces vividly with “Mrs. Sen’s stubborn refusal to learn driving,” a childlike obstinance that speaks to her uncertainty and fear as an immigrant in completely new surroundings (Dubey 24). Not only does America expect her to learn to drive, she must also learn new social customs, speaking patterns, and culinary traditions if she is to acclimate to her new life – a transition she refuses to make. Eliot, the eleven-year-old-boy Mrs. Sen babysits, possesses a stronger comprehension of driving than she does. He has ridden with his mother and watched her effortlessly skim the road and slip into traffic, but when he attempts a simple explanation of the mechanics to Mrs. Sen, he finds that “that same stream of cars made her knuckles pale, her wrists tremble, and her English falter” (Lahiri 121). The trauma of driving, an activity which almost functions as an American coming-
of-age ritual, hinders Mrs. Sen’s capability to communicate: “Everyone, this people, too much in their world,” she says (Lahiri 121). Like a child, she becomes unable to form complete sentences. She represents “immigrants caught between the culture of their Indian birthplace and the unfamiliar ways of their adopted home,” and finds herself unable to loosen her ties to India, to untangle and interpret the daily elements necessary to life in America (Chotiner 1).

Mrs. Sen’s physical connection to India is weak, though her mind lives on the streets and rooftops of her hometown. She relies on aerograms from her family, which are few and far between, to inform her of the flooding, the market prices, and the family dynamics. Yet even regarding this communication she displays childlike behavior when “she would ask Eliot to reach inside, telling him what to look for, and then she would shut her eyes and shield them with her hands while he shuffled through the bills and magazines that came in Mr. Sen’s name” (Lahiri 121). Her behavior is that of a kindergartner hoping for her mother to find for her a birthday card with a five dollar bill inside – and the roles have reversed, with she as the child and Eliot functioning as the adult. “My sister has had a baby girl,” she tells Eliot one afternoon by the university pool, going on to lament that “by the time I see her, depending if Mr. Sen gets his tenure, she will be three years old. Her own aunt will be a stranger. If we sit side by side on a train she will not know my face” (Lahiri 122). The aerograms, rather than providing support for her transition to immigrant life in America, push her into a world that may as well be imaginary. She relies so much on the letters to keep her in her past, but the post is slow and the papers are small, so she also takes comfort in the tape her family made for her before she left for America. She listens desperately to the voices, speaking in her native language, to drown out the silence of America, an act that somewhat imitates a small child covering her ears and shouting to avoid something she does not like. Mrs. Sen “as a sensitive immigrant finds… herself perpetually at a
transit station fraught with the memories of the original home which are struggling with the realities of the new world,” and she remains wholly unable to adapt to her surroundings (Dubey 22). Unlike Shoba and Shukumar, however, her story ends not with a glimmer of hope for maturity and readjustment but with a car crash and a grown woman hiding in her room, crying.

Raj and Mina Das of “Interpreter of Maladies” are childish and immature in a much different way than either Shoba and Shukumar or Mrs. Sen. Rather than growing to adulthood in both body and mind and then becoming once again childlike as a result of some trauma, the husband and wife have never experienced intellectual or emotional maturity. The first sentence of the story reveals their adolescence, disclosing that “Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered about who should take Tina to the toilet” and going on to say that once Mrs. Das had been convinced that it was her turn to care for her child, “she did not hold the little girl’s hand as they walked to the restroom” (Lahiri 43). Mrs. Das’ interest in her children is superficial at best, for in one of the only instances when she cares for any of them she coos to her son, who has just been attacked by monkeys, “Come here a second. Let Mommy fix your hair” (Lahiri 68).

Lahiri’s descriptions of their physical appearances are blatantly telling of their underdeveloped thoughts and actions. As he watches Mr. Das, Mr. Kapasi observes “a clean-shaven man, [who] looked exactly like a magnified version of Ronny. He had a sapphire blue visor, and was dressed in shorts, sneakers, and a T-shirt” (Lahiri 44). The choice to leave Mr. Das without facial hair give the reader an impression of baby faces and perpetual youth. His clothes, casual and young, stand out in stark contrast to the practical maturity pressed into Mr. Kapasi’s outfit of “gray trousers and a matching jacket-style shirt, tapered at the waist, with short sleeves and a large pointed collar” (Lahiri 45). Mr. Das’s body movements are much like those
of his sons— he lacks the dignity of more reserved and adult gestures. As for Mrs. Das, Mr. Kapasi notes that “she wore a red-and-white-checkered skirt that stopped above her knees, slip-on shoes with a square wooden heel, and a close-fitting blouse styled like a man’s undershirt. The blouse was decorated at chest-level with a calico appliqué in the shape of a strawberry” (Lahiri 46). She has not grown out of the childlike habit of choosing whatever clothes she likes, regardless of their appropriateness for the occasion. Though she has children of her own, she continues to wear the checkered, appliquéd outfits which are cute in miniature but gaudy when sized for an adult.

Even more than their appearance, however, Raj and Mina’s actions betray their juvenescence. Noelle Brada-Williams notes that “their carelessness is most often evoked in their treatment of their three children,” whom they are responsible for and should be guiding in both thought and action (Brada-Williams 457). This nonchalance, this lack of responsibility, shows in everything from Raj’s declaration that he should not have to take Tina to the bathroom because “he had given the girl her bath the night before” to Mina’s trail of puffed rice that leads the monkeys to her unsupervised son (Lahiri 43). As the mother, Mina should have purchased the snack for her children, reminding them as they ate not to spill any on the ground. Mr. Kapasi notices this as well, commenting that “they were all like siblings… Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves” (Lahiri 49). Examples of their irresponsibility about throughout the story, but are especially explicit on the car ride: “The little girl began to play with the lock on her side, clicking it with some effort forward and backward, but Mrs. Das said nothing to stop her. She sat a bit slouched at one end of the back seat, not offering her puffed rice to anyone” (Lahiri 47). Not
only does she fail to discipline her daughter, but she acts with blatant immaturity when Tina wants her fingernails painted as well: “‘Leave me alone,’ Mrs. Das said, blowing on her nail and turning her body slightly. ‘You’re making me mess up’” (Lahiri 48). Though they are Indian in heritage, Raj and Mina function as “American characters…[who] are all well-meaning enough, but annoyingly and embarrassingly ignorant of the world outside the United States” (Caesar 89). They seem unaware that they are visiting the place their parents call home, viewing their trip instead as something no more important or influential than a quick errand to the grocery store.

When Mr. Kapasi finds himself left alone with Mrs. Das as her family goes in search of “the hills at Udayagiri and Khandagiri,” he ends up finding out even more the extent of her immaturity and childishness (Lahiri 60). She tells him of her history with Mr. Das, how the two have known each other since they were very young and “were sent up stairs to play together while our parents joked about our marriage. Imagine! They never caught us at anything, though in a way I think it was all more or less a setup” (Lahiri 63). From the very beginning of their time together, Mr. and Mrs. Das have been treated as children – because they were children when they met – and not allowed to make their own decisions. It was decided for them that they would marry each other, and they obeyed. Now, as adults with their own children, they are unable to act maturely but instead demand small wants and keep big secrets, like the one Mrs. Das spills to Mr. Kapasi. “I’ve kept it a secret for eight whole years,” she whispers of her affair with one of Mr. Das’s friends who came to stay at their house (Lahiri 62). The way Mrs. Das adds the word “whole” to her sentence emphasizes her immaturity and focuses the readers’ attention on her perceived magnitude of the time she has spent with her secret, and how proud she is of having kept it. She makes excuses for her infidelity, telling Mr. Kapasi that “she was left at home all day with the baby [Ronny], surrounded by toys that made her trip when she walked or wince when
she sat” (Lahiri 64). She goes on to tell, through the narrator, that “Bobby was conceived in the afternoon, on a sofa littered with rubber teething toys… while Ronny cried to be freed from his playpen” (Lahiri 64). Not only did Mrs. Das willingly commit adultery, she did so at the expense of her son. Even if she did not love her husband enough to remain faithful, a mature woman would have realized that a baby’s needs must come before its mother’s wants. After she spills her story, loading Mr. Kapasi with her burden with no regard for the position in which it might put him, she demands advice from him, wanting him to fix her problems: “Well, don’t you have anything to say?… About my secret, and about how terrible it makes me feel. I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible” (Lahiri 65). She cares nothing about the way her actions may make other people feel, how this information would impact her family – a fact that Mr. Kapasi points out when he asks whether her terrible feeling might be more guilt than pain.

At the end Mr. Kapasi, as the only proper adult in the story, is able to see the true Mrs. Das: “a woman not yet thirty, who loved neither her husband nor her children, who had already fallen out of love with life” (Lahiri 66). Because she has never grown up, never moved beyond intellectual and emotional childhood, she finds herself tired of living because she cannot get what she wants. Brada-Williams elaborates on this when she notes that “Mrs. Das is a woman with a life of relative comfort and ease who yearns to be freed of the responsibilities of marriage and children” (Brada-Williams 458). She possesses the desire of a child who wants nothing more than to grow up, yet cannot speed up time.
CHAPTER FOUR: ADULTS MATURING

Though a few of Lahiri’s adult characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* regress from adulthood back to childhood, several more mature throughout their stories. These characters are the ones who grow as the pages turn, who take their observations and experiences and learn from them. Some begin thoroughly ensconced in or well on their way to maturity, while others face a longer journey – but by the last line of each story, the reader holds confidence that each character will arrive eventually. Mr. Kapasi of “Interpreter of Maladies,” the tour guide and saver-of-lives who interacts with the Das family, has established himself in the adult community. Though he slips for a moment, falling back to irrational adolescence, he finds his maturity again. “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” finds the three most mature and grown-up adults in the entire collection, yet even they have more learning to do. Raj and Twinkle of “This Blessed House” find growing pains hidden next to every Jesus object in their new home. Bibi Haldar leaps from being taken care of to being a caretaker, Miranda of “Sexy” both seeks out mature knowledge and has it thrust upon her, and the narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” is eased into adulthood by maturity in its most seasoned form – 103-year-old Mrs. Croft, whose ideas are also still expanding. Many in number, wide in breadth of experience, and varied in their maturity, these characters all connect through learning and growing. Lahiri artfully arcs her theme of childhood through characters decades removed from their adolescent years, teaching her readers that no one ever stops growing.

As Mrs. Croft is the oldest character in *Interpreter of Maladies*, readers might expect her to be cranky, antiquated, and set in her ways – and that certainly seems to be the case when the narrator moves into her upstairs room. The ancient landlady has an unvaried routine for herself, strict rules for her tenants, and high expectations for society. At 103, Mrs. Croft is so old that
Lahiri describes her daughter Helen as “an elderly woman” (184). Despite her own age, Helen sasses her mother about being old-fashioned, saying, “For your information, Mother, it’s 1969” (Lahiri 186). Having lived for over a century, Mrs. Croft sits on her piano bench as the most mature character in the story. Though she can no longer open soup cans herself and “stopped eating solids after she turned one hundred,” these few childlike elements of her character are overpowered by her age and wisdom (Lahiri 187). She not only manages to be surprised by life, she also continues to learn as the story progresses. Her biggest astonishment comes from the fact that “there is an American flag on the moon!” (Lahiri 179). In her all her years she clearly never expected this kind of technological advancement, this entrance into another world, and she finds herself fascinated by it – as well as by her new boarder. The narrator, an Indian man who has come to the United States to be a librarian at MIT, intrigues her. In sharing her news of a flag on the moon, she demands that he “say splendid!” (Lahiri 180). He obliges, and soon, he notes, “it became our routine” (Lahiri 183). Lahiri never makes clear why exactly Mrs. Croft so enjoys hearing the narrator say ‘splendid,’ but the word connects landlady and tenant across boundaries of race, gender, and age. The narrator’s insistence on handing Mrs. Croft his eight dollar rent each week also closes those gaps, forging a formal intimacy from which both characters grow.

Mrs. Croft’s age and stubbornness show, however, in her expectations of society. Though she acts somewhat childish in this regard, telling her daughter that were she to see a woman in a miniskirt she would “have her arrested,” she matures in other, more significant ways (Lahiri 186). Her most meaningful maturation surfaces when the narrator, having moved out of Mrs. Croft’s house and into an apartment with his wife, Mala, brings her to visit Mrs. Croft. Upon meeting Mala, “a woman in a sari, with a dot painted on her forehead and bracelets stacked on her wrists,” Mrs. Croft declares her “a perfect lady!” (Lahiri 195). This quick announcement,
made after just minutes, breaks down all the walls between the narrator and his wife. In learning to accept difference, in the form of an Indian woman if not a woman in a miniskirt, Mrs. Croft allows maturity not only for herself, but for the narrator and Mala as well. By bridging gaps and taking leaps, even in her old age, she expands Lahiri’s ideas of learning and maturity.

Though over a half-century younger than Mrs. Croft, Mr. Kapasi possesses much of the same maturity. In stark contrast to the other adults in “Interpreter of Maladies,” Mr. Kapasi’s physical appearance, clothing, and gestures are adult and refined. Lahiri describes him as having “receding hair that had gone completely silver,” and his clothes as “gray trousers and a matching jacket-style shirt, tapered at the waist, with short sleeves and a large pointed collar, made of a thin but durable synthetic material” (Lahiri 45). Not only does his ensemble appear polished and professional, however, it is also practical and considered: “He had specified both the cut and the fabric to his tailor–it was his preferred uniform for giving tours because it did not get crushed during his long hours behind the wheel” (Lahiri 45). Lahiri’s description invites readers to like and trust him–to feel his stability, intelligence, and a maturity much more developed than that of Raj and Mina Das.

In fact, as Noelle Brada-Williams notes, Mr. Kapasi “is a man who has given up his dreams to support his family and who only yearns for some recognition and interest in his life” (Brada-Williams 458). He had aspired to be a translator and “in his youth he’d been a devoted scholar of foreign languages, the owner of an impressive collection of dictionaries,” dreaming of “resolving conflicts between people and nations, settling disputes of which he alone could understand both sides” (Lahiri 52). Yet now, his knowledge of Western languages has largely left him and his linguistic talents are put to use at what his wife considers a menial job as an
“interpreter of maladies.” Merely in acquiring the position, however, he demonstrates his maturity, since “he had taken the job as an interpreter after his first son, at the age of seven, contracted typhoid” (Lahiri 52). In order to provide for his family, Mr. Kapasi pushed his dreams even further aside.

Mr. Kapasi is not, however, perfectly mature. He allows Mina Das’ bare legs and mindless curiosity to ensnare his thoughts and imagination. As the young woman includes him in family photographs and asks for his address, he conjures up images of an affair-by-mail, secret and romantic. Walking around the temple, he finds himself “anxious to be alone with her… yet he felt nervous to walk at her side” – somewhat like an adolescent boy struck with a crush for the first time (Lahiri 58). He has even tallied the number of weeks – allowing time for her return, her sweet and careful writing, and the slow Indian post – which will elapse before he receives her letter (Lahiri 59).

The monkeys, as the attack Bobby Das, jerk Mr. Kapasi out of his day-long daydream. He observes the family with the clearest vision he has had all day: a father too afraid for his own safety to save his son, a mother who expects her demands and hysterics to get her what she wants, and children disobedient because they have never been taught otherwise. And as “the slip of paper with [his] address on it fluttered away in the wind,” Mr. Kapasi’s immature thoughts are carried away with it, leaving him a little wiser than when the day began (Lahiri 69).

Like Mr. Kapasi, both Lilia’s parents and Mr. Pirzada not only hold adult roles in their own lives, but are also capable of caring for their families. The men work, while Lilia’s mother keeps house and looks after Lilia. Her parents pay attention to her education and even see to it that she learns in more places than just her public school classroom. They are attentive to their
daughter’s needs, both physical and mental, which shows as Lilia’s mother lightly chides her guest as he gives candy to her daughter, saying, “Really Mr. Pirzada… Night after night. You spoil her” (Lahiri 29). Lahiri easily places in her readers’ imaginations a mother who lovingly implores that there be no candy before dinner, and who cares for her daughter enough not to give the girl everything she desires. Here she interacts with Mr. Pirzada, a father of seven, who knows well-bred children from those who lack discipline, responding to Lilia’s mother by saying, “I only spoil children who are incapable of spoiling” (Lahiri 29). Lilia’s parents have raised her well thus far, and Mr. Pirzada sees that.

Cooking food, watching the news, and even playing Scrabble are appropriate, adult activities engaged in by Lilia’s parents and their guest. More significant, however, is the fact that Mr. Pirzada, as a Pakistani, has found refuge with Lilia’s Indian family. He enters their house saying, “Another refugee, I am afraid, on Indian territory” and accepts their hospitality by commenting that, “One can only hope… that Dacca’s refugees are as heartily fed” (Lahiri 28, 29). Not only that, but the adults engage in political conversation, seemingly heedless of the fact that they fall on opposite sides of the conflict taking place on the opposite side of the globe. They are able to offer each other wisdom, knowledge, and comfort without expecting anything in return. At the very end of the story, the family “received a card from Mr. Pirzada commemorating the Muslim New Year, along with a short letter” informing them he had found his family and thanking them for their warmth and welcome (Lahiri 41). From as grand a gesture as Lilia’s parents hosting a guest so different from themselves to one as simple as Mr. Pirzada’s thank you note, these three characters exist in Interpreter of Maladies as the most stable and most consistently mature adults.
The narrator of “The Third and Final Continent,” new to America and whose “parents are both dead,” finds himself an orphan in more than one way (Caesar 52). He has not only lost his human parents, but also has been removed from his parent country and culture. Unlike Mrs. Sen, though, he does not find himself floundering in the newness and aloneness – though he must grow into maturity. As the story begins, he notes that even at thirty-six years old, “I ate cornflakes and milk, morning and night, and bought some bananas for variety,” unable to enjoy any other American food (Lahiri 175).

His age and experience are only one-third that of Mrs. Croft’s, and she treats him like a grandchild: “‘Lock up!’ she commanded… ‘Fasten the chain and firmly press that button on the knob! This is the first thing you shall do when you enter, is that clear?’” (Lahiri 178). He acts toward her with the respect her age deserves, addressing her as “madame” and dressing up for his interview at her home. When she demands that he say “splendid,” as she has, he notes that it “reminded me of the way I was taught multiplication tables as a child, repeating after the master, sitting cross-legged, without shoes or pencils, on the floor of my one-room Tollygunge school” (Lahiri 179). The man and Mrs. Croft develop a routine for when he returns from work, like mother and child with after school milk and cookies: “She slapped the bench, ordered me to sit down, declared that there was a flag on the moon, and declared that it was splendid. I said it was splendid, too, and then we sat in silence” (Lahiri 183). Eventually, Mrs. Croft’s unique presence and extensive life experience outweigh this almost patronizing treatment and give the narrator the push into maturity he needs.

He does not, however, achieve that maturity alone. Along for the ride comes his wife, Mala, who appears during the few nights the two spent together before he left for Cambridge even more childlike than he. Though twenty-seven years old, in bed each night she “wept; she
missed her parents” (Lahiri 181). When she first arrives in America, her interactions with the narrator (her husband) as his wife are strained and awkward. But when he takes Mala to visit Mrs. Croft, the old woman shouts her complete approval of the young Indian woman, sparking “the moment when the distance between Mala and [the narrator] began to lessen” (Lahiri 196). It was then that the two immigrants, both childlike as they adapted to a new country and new culture, began to grow and mature together.

At the very end of the story, about twenty years have elapsed. The narrator “reflects in gratitude and amazement on [not only] his ownership of a house and his success in raising a son who goes to Harvard,” but also the path his arranged marriage has taken (Karim 208). He and Mala, from the day their walls came down in Mrs. Croft’s antiquated living room, have become adults together. They have held jobs, faced troubles, and brought up a successful son. Their maturity not only as people and parents but also as immigrants gleams in the surfacing of a nagging worry, “a sense of uneasiness about the next generation which is born and brought up in America and is culturally displaced” (Dubey 24). This fear, which Lahiri herself has faced, shows concern for the continuation of a culture, a history, and a way of life too valuable to lose. Mala and the narrator spend time with their son, “bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali” not only because they love him, but to impart their knowledge and assuage their “worry he will no longer do [these things] after we die” (Lahiri 197). Both have come far, from cornflakes and crying, and have reached a robust maturity blooming with culture, care, and success.

Though Bibi Haldar’s maturity seems, on the surface, less impressive than that of Mala and the narrator, her success becomes far more admirable when one realizes that at her
beginning, “Bibi could be trusted neither to cross a street nor board a tram without supervision” (Lahiri 159). Stricken with illness and requiring constant care, Bibi is incapable of caring even for herself, let alone anyone else. She moves about in “cracked plastic slippers and a housecoat whose hem stopped some inches below the knee, a length we had not worn since we were fifteen,” her immaturity contrasting darkly with that of the community of women narrators (Lahiri 159). Bibi dreams and plans her wedding in the way of very young girls, in awe of the marriage ceremonies of the women around her: “She made guest lists, dessert lists, listed lands in which she intended to honeymoon” (Lahiri 162). Wanting nothing more than a man to love her, to take care of her and spoil her, “she sulked, pouted, protested, and cried… ‘Who takes me to the cinema, the zoo-garden, buys me lime soda and cashews?’” (Lahiri 161). The communal narrator – that is, the voices of the nameless women in Bibi’s apartment building – muse and cluck that “Bibi had never been taught to be a woman” (Lahiri 163). Her mother died in childbirth, leaving her father to raise her. And Bibi’s father had cared about her, protected her, and made every effort to find a cure for her mysterious illness. But when he died she was left alone and still so childlike, unable to take charge of herself. Though the women around her kept her company, murmured words to ease her fears, and watched over her when they could, her father’s carefully collected “chart of her symptoms with directions for calming her… were eventually lost, or turned into sailboats by [their] children” (Lahiri 166). They combed her hair, took her for walks, applied her makeup, and Bibi remained a child – but one who was kept away from children truly young in years due to their parents’ fear that she would infect them with her madness. As Bibi’s illness wore on, her immaturity stagnant and seemingly unending, life continued as usual for the women and their families: “We bought our children balloons and colored ribbons, purchased sweetmeats by the kilo, paid calls in taxis to relatives we had not seen
throughout the year” (Lahiri 169). When exiled to the roof for ‘causing’ the illness of her cousin’s baby, Bibi shrunk from the world like a child sent to her room without supper.

Months after her displacement, during which she “drank little, ate less, and began to assume an expression that no longer matched her years,” the women narrators investigate and find Bibi with child – a very adult experience for someone who has yet to mentally grow past adolescence (Lahiri 171). The father a mystery, Bibi “carried the baby to full term” and was assisted by the women in the birth of her son (Lahiri 172). Still so childlike herself, Bibi needed the women’s help yet again as they “showed her how to feed him, and bathe him, and lull him to sleep” (Lahiri 172). Once she had been taught, however, she learned and knew and experienced a “magical cure by motherhood” (Brada-Williams 461). Not only had giving birth to a child smaller than herself cured Bibi of her seizures, but it also healed her wound of persistent childhood and allowed her to mature, supporting both herself and her son. Unlike many of the true children in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Bibi Haldar spends the majority of her story being taken care of. She has never been able to be independent, and “flourishes only once she is *without* the continual care of others and yet is herself given the responsibility of caring for another” (Brada-Williams 462). Though the community of women steps in to parent Bibi and protect her after her father’s death, Bibi’s ability to mature eventually comes from being allowed to do so. The spark of difference which occurs when she is permitted to be the caretaker rather than the cared for ignites Bibi’s fledgling independence and makes room for her to grow on her own. Her single motherhood forces her to abandon her dependence on the women around her and caring for her son enables her to become sovereign of herself.
Much like Bibi Haldar, Miranda of “Sexy” has spent all of her twenty-two years being taken care of, existing in the sameness of her hometown in Michigan. Yet as the story begins, she lives in Boston, working for a radio station and being alone. Despite moving away and supporting herself, Miranda has yet to truly mature, yet to leave behind the ignorance and selfishness of childhood to become an authentic woman whose views extend beyond herself. Over the course of the story she entangles herself in a very grown-up affair, only to learn true wisdom from an overly intelligent seven-year-old who teaches her more than just geography.

Meeting Dev at the cosmetics counter begins for Miranda her passage to adulthood, though not in the way she at first intends. Miranda fails even to have a mature understanding of the affair in which she is involved. Her transformation does begin with the affair, though, as she “shows considerable interest in Indian foods, Bengali language, and culture, caused by her affair with Dev, a Bengali” (Karim 207). Ashamed of her assumptions and her fear, Miranda searches for knowledge outside what she already knows. Going to “a bookstore in Kenmore Square,” she attempts to learn Bengali from self-instruction books (Lahiri 96). Like a child, she practices writing the “unfamiliar directions, stopping and turning and picking up her pen when she least expected to” (Lahiri 97). She extends out of her small-town ignorance, at first so profound that she confuses nationality with religion and does “not own an atlas, or any other books with maps in them” (Lahiri 84). Bringing over the *Economist* and expanding her intellectual knowledge a little, Dev sweeps Miranda off her feet, exotic and unusual, “unlike the boys she dated in college, who were simply taller, heavier versions of the ones she dated in high school” (Lahiri 89). Readers can clearly see, however, that Dev cannot be Miranda’s escort to maturity as he remains so childlike himself, illustrated when he “told her stories about his childhood, when he would come home from school and drink mango juice served to him on a tray” (Lahiri 94). He has
never outgrown this self-centered mentality, evidenced by the fact that he cheats on his wife so thoughtlessly. As Dev picks up his wife from the airport, Miranda shops for “things she thought a mistress should have,” items and garments straight out of a romance novel or a sensual film (Lahiri 92). Yet when their lovemaking resumes, several days after his wife’s return, the mistress’s costume so carefully chosen goes unnoticed by a silent Dev. Miranda’s alluring affair begins to satisfy her less and less, but she remains unable to break free of it until Rohin enters her life. As Ashutosh Dubey points out, Miranda has become so blinded by Dev’s peregrine sensuality that “the futility of this relationship dawns on her only through the child of an estranged Indian couple whose father has abandoned his mother” (Dubey 25). In the presence of this small, book-smart being wise beyond his years, Miranda learns, intellectually, the capitals of every nation in Africa and, emotionally, comes to realize the juvenile selfishness of her affair. It takes Rohin’s youth and strikingly innocent definition of ‘sexy’ to shed a significant – if somewhat painful – light on the immaturity and fantasy of her affair with Dev.

As Eva Tettenborn notes, “Through Rohin’s declarations, Miranda faces the fact that both she and Dev are attracted to their fantasies, not to each other” – a fact which spurs her even further along on her journey to maturity (Tettenborn 12). Miranda’s attempt to see maturity through an illicit affair fails, and Lahiri uses crayon drawings and a small boy with a backpack to bring her character out of youthful ignorance and selfishness. Through Rohin’s observations, she chooses to end her affair with Dev, to “tell him the things she had known all along: that it wasn’t fair to her, or to his wife, that they both deserved better, that there was no point in dragging it on” (Lahiri 110). And though she may have known it all along, it takes Rohin’s youthful wisdom to show her that she knows it.
Unlike Miranda, whose childishness manifests itself in a very adult way, for Twinkle and Sanjeev, protagonists of “This Blessed House,” immaturity comes hidden in the nooks and crannies of their new house—slowly, subtly, and next to the Jesus paraphernalia. Rezaul Karim describes the couple as “well educated and westernized but… also Indian in their arranged marriage as well as in their taste in food” (Karim 208). The couple moves through the story, uncovering not only knick-knacks of a religion to which they do not belong, but also their own childishness and need for time and growth to achieve a maturity which Sanjeev so desperately seeks and Twinkle quite obviously needs. Though neither character actually reaches maturity in the space allowed by Lahiri’s story, they fit the league of adults maturing in that they are on their way to becoming grown-ups, even if they achieve it only in readers’ imagination.

Twinkle and Sanjeev are newlyweds, and have just moved into their first house. There they find not only arrant differences in their personalities, but also the need to compromise and to work at their arranged marriage. At the very beginning of the story, in the midst of cleaning and organizing their new home, Sanjeev muses that “lately he had begun noticing the need to state the obvious to Twinkle” (Lahiri 137). He fancies himself mature because “at thirty-three he had a secretary of his own and a dozen people working under his supervision who gladly supplied him with any information he needed” (Lahiri 138). An engineering graduate of MIT, he has worked his way to consideration for vice-president of his company; having now married, he considers himself fully grown. However, several traits of his appearance and personality betray the fact that the road to maturity still stretches before him; for example: “Though he was of average build, his cheeks had a plumpness to them; this, along with the eyelashes, detracted, he feared, from what he hoped was a distinguished profile” (Lahiri 140). As Sanjeev remains overly concerned with appearances and social conventions, his marriage to the lively and frivolous
Twinkle promises conflict and compromise, promising eventual maturation for both characters.

Where Sanjeev strives to be reserved and sophisticated, Twinkle waves her cigarettes and smiles, “excited and delighted by little things, crossing her fingers before any remotely unpredictable even, like tasking a new flavor of ice cream, or dropping a letter in a mailbox” (Lahiri 142). “Nicknamed after a nursery rhyme,” Twinkle flits around the story, taking little seriously, and as the narrator notes, she “had yet to shed a childhood endearment” (Lahiri 142). She does not have a workplace, but instead works from home doing something vague which involves typing. Her lack of a specific career points to her immaturity and seems to fit “her face… [which] had not grown out of its girlhood, the eyes untroubled” (Lahiri 142). Her lighthearted approach to everything she does bothers the routine-minded, neatly organized Sanjeev. Twinkle functions with the mindset of a young teenage girl, heedless of the demands of owning a house or the responsibilities of marriage. Sanjeev, away from the house all day at work, cannot understand Twinkle’s shrugging statement that “she was in bed in the middle of the day… [because] she was bored” when all around her lay so many undone chores (Lahiri 141). Yet the Christian knick-knacks tucked into various corners of the house and yard prove to be the bigger point of contention for the two. An argument over a lawn statue of the Virgin Mary causes Twinkle to rise out of her bath,

letting the book fall into the water, bubbles dripping down her thighs. ‘I hate you,’ she informed him, her eyes narrowing at the word ‘hate.’ She reached for her bathrobe, tied it tightly about her waist, and padded down the winding staircase, leaving sloppy wet footprints along the parquet floor. (Lahiri 149)

Careless with both her words and her actions, she irritates and disturbs all aspects of everyday life that Sanjeev holds close as markers of his ‘maturity.’
For Twinkle, though, “every day is like a treasure hunt” as she ignores Sanjeev’s protests and continues searching for more biblical baubles (Lahiri 153). She loves the adventure, the tiny mystery that comes from searching for the Christian paraphernalia and at the housewarming party – an event so important to Sanjeev and meant to establish him as a mature, married man – his nursery-rhyme wife seduces all the guests to join in her adolescent game. While Sanjeev admires the sophisticated hats with feathers, suit coats, and high heels of his partygoers, Twinkle sees nothing but prospective playmates. Her carefree nature is infectious, and eventually the guests have all abandoned their mature manner as small search parties “scampered, giggling and swaying, up and down the winding staircase” (Lahiri 154). Left out of the laughter-fueled, Sanjeev finds annoying the mess everyone has made, like a father supervising a preteen slumber party. At first glance, it seems as though any trace of childhood has left him but upon closer inspection he possesses merely different characteristics of youth than the giggling Twinkle. While listening to everyone tramp around in the attic, he realizes that “with one flick of his hand he could snap the ladder back on its spring into the ceiling, and they would have no way of getting down unless he were to pull the chain and let them” (Lahiri 155). Rather than play along with Twinkle’s treasure hunt, he finds it immature and insipid and therefore reduces himself to entertaining petty ideas of control. Were he to trap them all upstairs he would be able to throw away “Twinkle’s menagerie,” eat, drink, and listen to his classical music in peace (Lahiri 155). But he spends too long contemplating his freedom, the possibility of it removed as everyone rushes down the ladder with their fantastic prize. Twinkle carefully, laboriously, triumphantly holds “a solid silver bust of Christ… sporting Nora’s feather hat” (Lahiri 156).

And, at the end of the narrative, it will be the Christ bust that leaves readers with a feeling that Twinkle and Sanjeev will someday reach maturity. As Sanjeev carries the bust, “careful not
to let the feather hat slip,” he pictures “the rest of their days together” and seems to accept not only his wife’s youthful quirks but also his position as her husband (Lahiri 157). Twinkle may have farther to go on her road to womanhood, but her childlike manners that will doubtless remain stand out as more of a relish for life than a hindrance to growth. Lahiri leaves readers with the feeling that, were she to write another story of Sanjeev and Twinkle, the couple would exist in that one as mature, well-adjusted, and successful.
Having followed Lahiri’s characters through *Interpreter of Maladies* and finished the last sentence, readers have encountered sexuality and geography, sustenance and disappearance, struggle and hope. Nine different stories bring nine separate sets of characters in nine distinct situations – and yet, there are still ties that bind, ideas that transcend boundaries, and connections to each other and to the world beyond the book. Arcing from “A Temporary Matter” straight through to “The Third and Final Continent” are the themes of childhood and maturity, explored subtly, diversely, and yet incredibly intimately. Occasionally uncomfortable and always thought-provoking, *Interpreter of Maladies* examines these ideas with an unusual breadth and depth. Lahiri challenges readers not only about their own maturity, but also deepens their understanding of a marginalized culture and, surpassing that, the human experience as a whole.

Critics Gaile Cannella and Radhika Viruru recognize that readers of postcolonial literature must “be willing to rethink and reconceptualize what they think they know about the child and childhood” to understand the way children figure into post-colonization (Cannella and Viruru 84). Lahiri, already stepping outside the parameters of postcolonial literature into an as-yet-undefined genre, writes beyond this idea as she expands upon not only childhood but also maturity. By bringing the old and young together in much the same way that she juxtaposes Indians and Americans, Lahiri extends the idea of cultural disparities beyond the traditional conception of culture. Her characters encounter intense situations (deaths of children, severe illnesses, extramarital affairs, and immigration) and are involved in significant relationships. Their experiences extend past those of immigrants, Americans, or Indians and transcend traditional boundaries. The boundaries Lahiri crosses, then, are those of youth and age, immaturity and maturity, and wisdom and ignorance.
Lahiri ends *Interpreter of Maladies* in an extraordinarily fitting way for an analysis concerning children and maturity, adults and childhood, and the vast amounts of learning of which all people – from ages seven to one-hundred-and-three – are capable. Having considered birth and death, illness and virility, education and ignorance, Lahiri has created with her short story collection a learning opportunity which opens the world to all who read it. Where other critics analyze Lahiri’s work solely from an adult, academic point of view, an examination of her characters as people, as young and old who experience maturity and immaturity independent of their age, uncovers a much deeper meaning in *Interpreter of Maladies*. The ending of each story comes much like the ending of any occurrence in real life – not quite hemmed in, but with a feeling of closure and growth. *Interpreter of Maladies* allows its readers to grow along with its characters; as Miranda of “Sexy” sits on a bench with her coffee, readers feel their own maturity and understanding opening like “the clear-blue sky spread over the city” and cherish the lessons they have learned, colored in Rohin’s blue crayon (Lahiri 110). Upon stepping out of the shadow of traditional criticism and analysis and directly into the story, readers and scholars find more than just excellent prose – they find humanity in the ink on the page. As the narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” looks back on his life, lived on three continents, over decades and within relationships, celebrating successes and surpassing failures, he considers himself blessed. From India to England to America, he has grown from a scared, stony childlike ‘adolescent’ into a man of maturity, full of love, culture, and wisdom. “As ordinary as it all appears,” he notes, referring to his education, accomplishments, and relationships, “there are times when it is beyond my imagination” (Lahiri 198).

Having examined these themes and traced childhood and maturity through characters one could find in the house next door, Lahiri approaches humanity in a way that transcends culture,
nationality, and background. Academic investigation into *Interpreter of Maladies*, having gone beyond what has already been critically explored, provides essential insight into not only Lahiri’s work as literature, but as an element of new culture with a profound impact outside of libraries and classrooms. In reminding both her readers and her characters that all are humans who begin young and grow old, Lahiri challenges stereotypes, evokes emotions, and in less than two hundred pages begins to teach people how to deal with being human.
WORKS CITED


