

Labeling Lahiri: Authenticity In The American Literary
Sphere

by

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Class of 2018

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in General Scholarship

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Acknowledgments

To Indira and Khachig, both of who supported me tirelessly not only throughout the birth and actualization of this thesis, but also of my University Major. It is a daunting thing to stray from the institutionalized path, but your guidance and genuine belief that this plan was well within my capabilities gave me a strong ground upon which to stand. You taught me that professors are first and foremost teachers, and inspiring ones at that. Thank you.

To Matthew Garrett for introducing me to the world of critical analysis and theory, and for having an open door for me during those young years.

To Hirsh Sawhney for sharing his experiences Indian-American author.

To Dean Renee for searching for answers alongside me, and never allowing me to feel lost or forgotten.

To my family for allowing me to be irritable during for the better part of my final winter and spring breaks. Thank you for the perfect blend of curiosity and neurosis that you have nurtured in me.

To Nila, Sallie, Cat, and Sanam, for being the most loving and annoying housemates for whom I could have ever asked. Thank you for reminding me to come home, and for not commenting on the rapidly deteriorating state of my room. To Owen for providing comfort, Oh's, Netflix, and the title of this thesis. To Paula for being my unwavering support system for about ten years now. To Christian for going through it all before me and being endlessly willing to pass down wisdom.

To all the people in my life who lift me out of my own head and help me to hold perspective.

Introduction

For non-white minorities in the United States, such as South Asians, there exists gatekeepers in popular culture that have the power to hold South Asian representations at bay. These gatekeepers, in the literary world, take the form of heads of publishing industries, literary magazines, critics, and scholars. They determine not only who gets published and when, but also how published works will be labeled and thus received.

Though times are slowly changing, white Americans have historically filled these roles,¹ and as such, representations of South Asian voices have been small. This selectivity may be exposing a problem of blatant xenophobia, colorism, or a whole host of “isms,” but it is important to consider: how do some non-white authors make it through the additional trials placed in front of them? How did Jhumpa Lahiri, the chosen case study for this thesis, experience and sustain such a meteoric rise to fame? I argue that the silent pulse that courses along beneath the selection of “minority art” and who is considered “good enough” to enter mainstream American fiction, is the guiding force of authenticity.

South Asians in America stand almost 4 million strong. Their population size has increased by 81% in the first decade of the 21st century, and has only been steadily increasing still.² And yet, they are not included of common understandings of “Americanness,” “whiteness,” “blackness,” and even of “Asianness.” They fall

¹ Ho, Jean. "Diversity In Book Publishing Isn't Just About Writers - Marketing Matters, Too." NPR. August 09, 2016. Accessed March 10, 2018.

² "A DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT OF SOUTH ASIANS IN THE UNITED STATES." Saalt.org. July 2012. Accessed March 12, 2018. <http://saalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Demographic-Snapshot-Asian-American-Foundation-2012.pdf>.

through the cracks of the racial binary. This lack of representation in popular culture and media is created and perpetuated by a lack of space for South Asians in the American imaginary,³ and a need to force them under an ill-fitting label. Even when given space, it is often a small one that is committed to certain authentic ideals, as is the case with Jhumpa Lahiri.

Her success in as an author in the American literary sphere must be explored in order to understand how Americans have come to define authenticity for in-group and out-group members, and how it treats minority authors who are often times both. The idea of the authentic South Asian American text has changed along with shifting political and social foci in the nation, but this dominant understanding both inspires and is inspired by shifts in literary reviews. The said reviews create unspoken parameters for authenticity, but these parameters are, however, continuously in flux.

In order to properly explore the treatment of South Asian writers in the United States, we must first understand the basic history of the South Asian diaspora. Since Lahiri, the chosen case study, is of Indian descent, this background and following thesis will focus heavily on diasporic Indians, though there are other facets of South Asia upon which I will touch because of the common conflation between all South Asians in the United States. In discussing pre-partition history, I will refer to the region as the “South Asian” as to not exclude areas like modern day Pakistan and Bangladesh, to which I am also referring.

³ Mishra, Vijay. "The Diasporic Imaginary and the Indian Diaspora." Lecture, New Zealand, Wellington, November 2015.

I. Background

The South Asian diaspora has been in motion for centuries, far before large parts of the region came under the rule of first the British East India Company, and later the Crown itself.⁴ The subcontinent's location was a nexus for the trade of spices and textiles, and thus its exposure to different people and cultures is the perfect impetus for movement. Early on in its history, both people and goods were traveling throughout Europe and Asia, but their ability to move freely throughout the British Empire under the Raj after 1858 greatly added to the magnitude of their mobility.

The first mass movements of South Asians however, were those of indentured servitude. This forced mobilization set the tone for South Asians in the World because they moved not as willing participants, but rather as subordinates being thrust into unfamiliar landscapes and creating problems of triangulation and classification. Triangulation refers to the relationship between the impoverished locals, the foreign indentured servants, and the invisible presence of the white colonizer. These indentured servants largely worked in the Caribbean Islands, and created transnational communities there, with strong links back to their home countries. This link allowed for a continued migration to these colonies, even after the abolishment of indentured servitude in 1920.

Here, in the throes of indentured servitude, we see the first major muddying of South Asian identity. While families were kept together, markers of race, ethnicity, and religion were not considered. The process of *jahanji bhai*, which refers to the washing of previous identity and the relationship formed between those who

⁴ This statement and other similar material in this section surrounding background information on the South Asian Diaspora draws on in-class remarks by professor Indira Karamcheti.

experienced this trauma together, allowed a new intermixed class of South Asians abroad. Once mixed, however, they were unable to cross back across the *kala pani*, or “black water,” as the journey from India to the Caribbean was known, and return to their homelands. This confusion surrounding the identity of diasporic peoples is never-ending, and has perhaps only intensified. South Asian authenticity is constantly in flux, but it was not clear *to what* they are meant to be authentic.

The American naturalization cases of the late 18th and early 19th century spoke to this confusion, as South Asian bodies created a perplexing problem. What the courts served to do was essentially to take the concept of ethnicity, and out of it, create race. With the idea of race, they were able to apply insinuations, such as character traits or assimilation abilities, to large groups of people.⁵ As the South Asian case proves, race, above all else, is political, and it assigns the dominant and subordinate positions of peoples. The fluctuation of South Asian categorization, amongst many other cases, has led critical race theory to acknowledge the fact that race is a social construction at least partly fashioned by law.⁶

The law however, is does not operate merely of its own accord, but rather, it mirrors and perpetuates what society puts forth, as seen in the case *United States vs. Thind*. As a backdrop, the courts were “vacillat[ing] over the Whiteness of petitioners from Syria, India, and Arabia,”⁷ and Indians in particular felt themselves falling between the cracks in the black/white binary. Mostly, Indians were ruled as nonwhite, and yet they “...were ‘white persons’ in 1910, 1913, 1919, and 1920, but not in

⁵ Haney-López, Ian. *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. p.7

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. P.1

1909, or 1917, or after 1932.”⁸ Bhagat Singh Thind discovered the personal pain of such ambivalence as he was mercilessly denied citizenship on account of him not fitting the average understanding of whiteness.

The important *Thind* case signaled a breaking of the court’s previous position, in that it was still relying on a “scientific” understanding of Caucasian, but also - rejecting it in favor of popular sentiment.⁹ It also led to the denaturalization of about 65 already naturalized Indians. American society at the time did not see Indians as authentically white, or rather authentically American.¹⁰ Were they then considered to be authentically South Asian? I argue that such a concept did not even hold prominence at the time, since it was only whiteness that needed to be defined, and this was done through the denial of others. Race consciousness now ran rampant amongst Americans, and pre-1960s South Asians were relegated largely in to economically depressed areas and lived in ethnic enclaves. This disinterest in assimilation came to be attributed to the old diaspora.

Later however, after the Luce/Celler Act of 1946 and the Hart/Celler Act of 1965, also known as the Immigration and Reform Act, many more South Asians at large found their way to the US via new quotas. These quotas explicitly preferred professional class immigrants who arrive with both degrees and more privileged backgrounds. The race consciousness quickly turned into class-consciousness, as the majority of South Indians now residing in the US were coming either from more privileged backgrounds or held advanced degrees. These then, became the South

⁸ Haney-López, Ian. *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. P. 42

⁹ Ibid. P.56

¹⁰ Ibid. p.173

Asians that made up the new diaspora and dominated the popular imaginary.¹¹ This 1965 influx was largely characterized by their ability to achieve highly and also to travel freely back home as a result of their money. They then, the more transnational class of South Asians, and specifically Indians, became slowly cemented as the “model minority” in this new America.

Model or not, the South Asian inability to fit into either an authentic notion of either end of the racial binary characterizes their experience in the country. They are relegated to supporting characters, and footnotes, rather than the focus of expansive exploration in popular literature. This self-perpetuating cycle is painful because having a space in the popular imaginary means having a political voice, and a distinct and unquestioned authenticity.

As a result of the inability to fit easily into one designated category, both the government and Indians themselves could manipulate Indian classification by law. A perfect example of this phenomenon would be in 1970 when Indians were classified as white on the U.S. census for the first time in six decades,¹² and the only time thereafter. While most Indians would certainly benefit from and enjoy the privileges of being *legally* designated as “white,” “[t]he governing rationale for [these] decisions was to deny them specific rights and benefit – to citizenship in the former and minority status in the latter.”¹³ Here, in particular, Indians being classified as white meant losing a chance to be included in new affirmative action laws. Though they were only classified as white for this one year, the after effects were damning and

¹¹ Mishra, Vijay. "The Diasporic Imaginary and the Indian Diaspora." Lecture, New Zealand, Wellington, November 2015.

¹² Koshy, S. "Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness." *Boundary 2* 28, no. 1 (2001) P.158

¹³ *Ibid*, P.182.

created "...a gradation [being] established whereby some Asian national groups were seen as being more like whites than others." It also led to Indians and South Asians at large being excluded from the category of "true Asian" by East Asians, white Americans, and South Asians themselves.

It is important to note that this background is a reductive one. I here speak broadly of South Asia as a collective unit, when in fact, South Asia is contemporarily considered to include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. All of these countries have incredibly rich and diverse histories and experiences with the Western world, colonialism and their particular diaspora within the United States. Within nations themselves, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical features, and religion, among many other things, work to shape unique experience. Any notion of South Asian, or even Indian, "authenticity" is fraught from the start.

II. Terms and Scope

The project to be outlined here in this introduction is a large one. Thus, its scope will be narrowed by a focus on a few key terms and ideas presented below.

Authenticity. I base my research and writing on the paradigmatic understanding that there is no one definition of the term. Rather, what holds importance for future scholarship is a careful tracking of how authenticity continues to regulate people's actions and thoughts. The confusion surrounding the term occurs because authenticity is contextually specific in practice, and yet theorized in broad terms. Identity is overwhelmingly intersectional, and so any notion of essentialism,

while an interesting thought experiment, is largely useless and untrue to human experience. Attempts to define authenticity are not innocent, but rather either subconsciously or consciously political, and most certainly armed with a purpose. Authenticity, in a psychological, cultural, and aesthetic sense, is a powerful tool.

Minority Author or Minority Literature. Though the precise definition of “minority” relies on the notion of hard numbers and statistics, I argue that minority label has more to do with who looks and behaves differently from the Eurocentric cultural core. As such, the term is a loaded one that places the burden of minority representation on those lucky few, like Lahiri, who are able to fight their way through. This form of othering is a painful and somewhat meaningless one – much like that of racial categorization, because while its inception holds no factual truth, its implementation in practice has dramatic consequences.

The Western dominated publishing world. I posit the idea that limited representations of South Asian American people in popular diasporic literature paves the way for a select few notions of authenticity that are widely disseminated and thus considered valid in the world at large. This idea becomes a complicated one however, when considering the self-perpetuating cycle in which the Western-centered publishing industry has immense power in introducing new frameworks for South Asian identity, but often chooses works that already comply with the invisible and omnipresent rubric.¹⁴ Publishing is an industry, and thus the driving force is, of course, money. Familiarized authenticity sells; radical and nuanced authenticity is a

¹⁴ Moretti, Franco. "Evolution, World-Systems, Weltliteratur." In *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, 399-420. Princeton University Press, 2009. P.401-402

risk. It is essential then to consider the modes of canonization, and how and why certain authors are given the powerful title of “authentically South Asian.”

Book Reviews. These can be written by anything from a prominent scholar, to a newspaper columnist, to a blogger. Though there is little formal scholarship done on the process of assigning reviewers and the selection of books for review, it is a process that is understood to be both biased and powerful in its ability to shape popular literary reception. These reviews tell the reader what to expect and what to pay attention to when reading a book. They guide the popular reading experience.

Postcolonial Literature. The field of Postcolonial literature, at its most basic level, begins by addressing the aftershock of decolonization, and the system of oppression that remains in its place. This lens looks at the world through the structure of colonial power dynamics, and is broadened to encompass the discussion of many related phenomena, such as universality, representation, resistance, nationhood, hybridity, indigeneity, ethnicity, race, feminism, language, the body, history, place, education, and countless others.¹⁵ The complexity with Postcolonial Studies comes from the fact that colonialism did in fact set up so many of the realities that exist today, and thus the field could in many ways be endless. Literature is important in this debate because it has been a space of colonization, and more recently, empowerment. In this new literary agency, those from the once-colonized sites can find their voice and place. It is important to note here that those who have the ability to participate in this literary culture are often the elite who have been educated and

¹⁵ Ashcroft, Bill, Helen Tiffin, and Gareth Griffiths, eds. *Postcolonial Studies Companion and Reader*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2014. P.v-xxi.

trained in the Western literary tradition.¹⁶ Against this backdrop, literature that is read through the postcolonial lens will work to highlight the unequal flows of power as they manifest themselves in the authenticity of both past and in present day.

World Literature. Different theorists have taken different approaches to this ever-confusing category, and have explored everything from the “masterpiece” approach, which focuses on the best of every category, to the “anthology” approach, which focuses on a cross section of the available texts tied together by a particular strand, to the “window” approach which merely is a collection of stories from as wide a range as possible, so as to merely expose the reader to more.¹⁷ This breakdown is high reductive, but I am choosing to understand the term as more of an umbrella under which the postcolonial falls. It is different in its approach because it focuses on the relationships between seemingly disparate works and centers the effects of neoliberalism and neocolonialism. Many world literature theorists like to stress that the dominant powers are no longer simply the colonizers, but instead, they are a new kind of global elite that feeds on global monoculture: that of the West.

All of these terms will be further illuminated in the body of this thesis, but they are essential to keep close, they constitute the backbone of my analysis.

III. Research Objectives and Questions

There has been plethora of work done on defining authenticity, constructing identity through literature, the power of publishing, World Literature, Postcolonial

¹⁶ Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2008. P.5

¹⁷ Damrosch, David. *What is world literature?*. Princeton University Press, 2003. P.110.

Literature, reception theory, canonization, and lastly diaspora. This study is not new in the elements it draws upon but it is new in the way it packages its purpose.

Much of the work done on South Asian representation as of late has chosen to focus on television. This interest is born out of the recent spike in diverse characters, such as Mindy Lahiri from *The Mindy Project*, Dev from *Master of None*, and Dinesh Chugtai from *Silicon Valley*. This trend is a promising one that will hopefully leave unintelligent stereotypes like Raj from *The Big Bang Theory*, and Apu from *The Simpson*. I, however, choose to return literature as the medium through which I will explore the shifting parameters of authenticity. My decision to do so rests on both continuity and practicality. First, travel writing and its dependence on the imperial gaze was the key factor in crafting South Asian identity in the 18th and 19th centuries,¹⁸ and so I wish to remain critical of this original medium. Second, literature provides content for a greater comparative chronological study, as minority authors, such as Lahiri, have been shaped by authenticity for decades in America.

Literature continues to be wildly powerful in its ability to create and strengthen labels, which sets the stage for my exploration into how those like Lahiri move through the world of Western publishing and reviewing, and what the implications of such movement are for South Asian diasporic authenticity. Who we are seen as determines what we are treated as, by society, and by the law. As such, academic institutions and the publishing and reviewing industries have a direct hand in the furthering and shaping of society. My core questions thus become:

¹⁸ Arnold, David. "Itinerant Empire." In *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze*, 11-41. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2006.

1. How did the American framework for understanding authenticity as arduous struggle come into being?
 - a. How is this framework challenged by non-white minority figures?
2. How does authenticity determine the labeling of Lahiri as an artist?
3. What can we learn about authenticity from exploring its inconsistencies?

IV. Hypothesis

Although the literary world no longer uses authenticity as a concrete standard of judgment, the term still implicitly controls the reception of minority authors, such as Lahiri, through genre categorization and reviews. These constraints are applied not only because she is one of the few representations of Indian writers in popular literature and but also because art is inherently tied to the American conception of authenticity. Her success is thus dependent on her work and her image remaining universal enough that innumerable versions of authenticity may be placed upon her.

V. Outline and Methodology

The first chapter will serve as an introduction to the literary powerhouse that is Jhumpa Lahiri. I will begin exploring why she functions as a fruitful case study for the construction of South Asian authenticity by looking at her biography, and prolific career. I will also provide an alternate analysis of agency she and her agent have in this situation by considering the paratext of her first novel.

The following chapter will allow for an exploration into the history of authenticity, with regards to its use in a personal, cultural, and aesthetic sense, in

order to help us to understand its lasting hold on American society and American art. The resulting understandings are applied to Lahiri in an effort to understand how authenticity comes to be so integral to not just her art, but also her entire brand.

The third chapter will be focus on the misclassification of Lahiri as a postcolonial author, when in fact she should be considered part of the World Literature canon. It speaks to a great desire to understand her through the American framework for authenticity and highlight minority oppression and self-creation through arduous struggle. I will examine the tie between minority authenticity and postcoloniality, as well as discuss the why she clearly does not belong in this category. I will use discuss both “genres” – though World Literature is more of a grouping than a genre – in order to analyze Lahiri’s career and her own classification.

In my final chapter, I will move to a close reading of reviews written about Lahiri in major U.S. publications in order to walk through the establishment of her authentic brand. In looking directly at the reviews written during a 20-year period, the coded ways in which they adhere to different kinds of authenticity at different times reveals a need to attach her to some concept of deeper truth. The actual entity to which she is authentic itself is far less important than being authentic itself. I will present my findings after having read fifty reviews, beginning in 1998 and ending in 2017. The intention is to pay attention to what reviewers are highlighting as important about her writing at particular, and to attempt to understand why. These repeatedly emerging themes expose not only a paradoxical expectation for Lahiri’s authenticity to be both specific to arduous struggle as a minority, but also widely universal.

VI. Conclusion

It would be overconfident and preposterous to make broad statements about what authenticity is, so I will instead be focusing examples in which specific ideas surrounding authenticity came to light with regards to the treatment of Lahiri. From this, I hope to understand the forces that guide the ever-fluctuating status of authenticity, and gain a greater sense of the factors at play. My hypothesis focuses on authenticity as tied to the American idea of rugged self-creation, and my research largely confirms the way in which this idea is translated into pressure placed upon the minority artist. By this I do not mean that Lahiri is pressured to be American, but only that she is pressured to be universal enough to consume a long list of inconsistent labels, through an American lens. Deviations from this idea do occur in the early part of her career when Lahiri is firmly considered a foreigner, and thus not subject to American ideas of authenticity. I have collected moments, such as her common classification as a postcolonial author, and the reviews written about her, in which Lahiri's reception is being guided by authenticity. I will analyze these moments through a deeper exploration into the "authenticity," "World Literature," "Postcolonial Literature," and Lahiri's personal history.

There is much to be discovered here about our need to admire and authenticate not only art, but also the artist herself.

Chapter One: The Birth of An Authentic Diasporic Icon

In the Fall of 2008, the popular HBO series, *In Treatment*, a show starring two therapists working with patients and on their own relationship, premiered its third season. Jhumpa Lahiri received a very curious credit on this season, titled: “cultural consultant.”¹⁹ Though she had the experience of her popular 2003 book, *The Namesake*, being transformed into a movie, television was not a medium into which Lahiri had previously traveled.

This season of *In Treatment* focuses Sunil, a middle-aged Bengali man who is dealing with the loss of his wife and also with his immigration from Calcutta to Brooklyn, and into the home of his son and American daughter-in-law.²⁰ Irrfan Khan, who also starred in the film adaptation of *The Namesake*, playing Sunil, and Lahiri appears to play the Bengali psyche. She was brought on to the project to advise the writer, Adam Rapp, on how a 50-year-old Bengali man might interpret his alarming and abrupt transition to a foreign American environment. Lahiri is neither a middle aged man who lived first in Bengal for 50 years, nor is she widowed, but she is considered here to be the authority figure on both of these topics, because they fall under the umbrella category of “South Asian-ness.”

It is not at all strange or somehow incorrect for authors to write about experiences they have not personally had, but most good ones compensate for this by doing research and conducting interviews with people who actually have lived through such things. It is notable that Rapp and the writing team saw hiring Lahiri as

¹⁹ Stanley, Alessandra. "The Doctor Is Back in Session on HBO." *New York Times*, October 24, 2010. Accessed November 10, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/25/arts/television/25treatment.html>.

²⁰ Ibid.

a reasonable substitute to doing so, and that Lahiri so readily embraced this role. In speaking about the project, Lahiri remarked: “Once I understood the scenario, the mood of the piece, I was able to tell Adam a lot about the attitude toward the family and what the character might be seeing in Brooklyn.”²¹ Lahiri is applying her own experience to a fictional character, but as an official “consultant” because she is being considered an all-encompassing authority on the South Asian immigrant experience.

It is, of course, far easier to criticize than it is to commend. I look not to condemn but rather to examine the various agents of authenticity that work together to create her brand and allow it to succeed. Lahiri is certainly an element of the equation that leads to practices as reductive as hiring a “cultural consultant,” but there are also other factors at play here. Why does Rapp feel that he can rely heavily on watching Khan’s role in Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, in order to “lear[n] a little bit about the culture”²² and figure out how to paint his scenes and build his characters? What larger systems at play allow Rapp to feel as if he can rely solely on Lahiri in order to understand “Diasporic South Asianness” and participate in this kind of large-scale metonymy.

The South Asian immigrant experience is as diverse as every South Asian that lives through it, as clearly indicated by the history discussed in my introduction. This idea is, however, quickly forgotten as the public is only fed a few specific narratives. When so few moments of such wide-scale exposure like that of Lahiri are available, they must be studied. We must walk through Lahiri’s beginnings in an attempt to understand her rise both as an artist and as an authentic diasporic figure.

²¹ Shattuck, Kathryn. "Therapy? Not His Cup of Tea." *New York Times*, November 12, 2010. Accessed November 10, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/14/arts/television/14treatment.html>.

²² Ibid.

I. A Brief Biographical Sketch

Ninlanjana Sudeshna Lahiri was born on July 11th, 1967, in London, English. The name Jhumpa was actually a family nickname that her schoolteachers encouraged her to retain because they found Ninlanjana difficult to pronounce.²³

His father, Amar, was a university librarian, and her mother, Tapati, was a schoolteacher. The two of them had Lahiri while they were still in London, and soon after moved to the United States and settled in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. Lahiri describes her parents as being devout to their East Indian culture, and wanting to make sure they raised their children with an understanding of and appreciation for their heritage.²⁴ While her parents never sent her to any kind of Indian after-school program, as is common to do amongst Indian parents, they “sort of correctly assumed that [she] would learn things just by the virtue of being their child.”²⁵ Lahiri absorbed all that she knew about South Asia from the attitudes of her parents and a few visits. At the same time, she received a canonical Western education, and lived life as an American child, teenager, and eventually, adult.

Her extensive schooling carried her away from Rhode Island and first to Barnard College in New York City, where she received a Bachelors Degree in English Literature in 1989.²⁶ Though she never considered writing as a profession, it became an occasional habit for her in her anxious post-undergraduate state. She spent

²³ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Jhumpa Lahiri." Encyclopædia Britannica. March 08, 2018. Accessed March 15, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jhumpa-Lahiri>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Jhumpa Lahiri Wins Pulitzer." Rediff. Accessed November 20, 2017. <http://www.rediff.com/news/2000/apr/11jhumpa.htm>.
Mumbai-based news site

²⁶ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Jhumpa Lahiri." Encyclopædia Britannica. March 08, 2018. Accessed March 15, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jhumpa-Lahiri>

her first year out of college working in a bookstore, and soon after moved to Boston to work as a Research Assistant at a non-profit. It was at this job that Lahiri, for the first time in her life, found herself with constant, daily access to a computer.²⁷ And naturally, she began to write regularly.

Lahiri then earned three masters degrees, one in English, one in Creative Writing, and one in Comparative Literature, and a PhD in Renaissance Studies, all from Boston University in the 1990s.²⁸ During this time, Lahiri began to write prolifically and started sending out material to various editors and journals. She received little recognition or affirmation for many years, until her luck took a turn and she had several stories published by culturally important journals, including *The New Yorker*, *Harvard Review*, and *Story Quarterly*.²⁹

And thus a rising literary star was born. Lahiri was critically acclaimed for her talent as a cautious and thoughtful writer, but her cementation as a powerhouse of South Asian authenticity deserves further explanation. Though she was not the only South Asian author of the time, and not the only one to be canonized in such a way, the amount of attention she received from reviewers was astounding. For example, *The New York Times* Book Review covered her 2013 novel,³⁰ *The Lowland*, three separate times,³¹ all just a matter of days apart.³² This focus on Lahiri is no accident.

²⁷ "Jhumpa Lahiri." Interview by Charlie Rose. Charlie Rose. August 18, 1999. Accessed November 3, 2017. <https://charlierose.com/videos/29113>.

²⁸ "Jhumpa Lahiri." Biography.com. April 2, 2014. Accessed November 5, 2017. <https://www.biography.com/people/jhumpa-lahiri-21465687>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Deb, Siddhartha. "Sins of the Brother." *New York Times*, September 27, 2013. Accessed January 14, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/books/review/jhumpa-lahiris-lowland.html>.

³¹ Kakutani, Michiko. "A Brother, Long Gone, Is Painfully Present." *The New York Times*, September 19, 2013. Accessed February 20, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/20/books/jhumpa-lahiris-new-novel-the-lowland.html>

II. An Overview of Works and Notable Awards

Though many of her short stories were previously published in magazines and journals, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, Lahiri had to fight her way into the small space created for South Asian American writers. This space is not merely created by publishing companies or the literary awards committees, but also by scholars and reviewers. The fact that most major publications will review the same five to ten authors over and over again is no coincidence. These authors are made by the world of labeling and reviewing as much as they are by their writing.

Lahiri, once accepted into this fold, became a prolific writer, and continued to publish short stories and essays in periodicals before publishing them as cohesive volumes. The remainder of this section will briefly chronicle Lahiri's publications and awards as an effort to establish her as firmly within the canon of diasporic South Asian writers and to track her ascent.

While still in grad school, Lahiri won the TransAtlantic Award from the Henfield Foundation, her first major institutional award, for her early writing. She then went on to win the fiction prize from the Louisville Review in 1997. With this official backing, Lahiri was able to get a residence in the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Cape Cod, where she worked on her first short story collection from 1997-1998. The resulting work, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) was released in 1999, by Houghton Mifflin, and quickly rose to prominence.³³ With it by her side, she

³² "Jhumpa Lahiri: By the Book." *The New York Times*, September 5, 2013. Accessed February 20, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/08/books/review/jhumpa-lahiri-by-the-book.html>

³³ "Jhumpa Lahiri." Biography.com. April 2, 2014. Accessed November 5, 2017. <https://www.biography.com/people/jhumpa-lahiri-21465687>.

officially won seven awards, but the lasting effects would be innumerable. The awards included the O. Henry Award for the short story “Interpreter of Maladies,” the PEN/Hemingway Award (Best Fiction Debut of the Year), a spot on the list of 1999 *Best American Short Stories* for “*Interpreter of Maladies*,” the Addison Metcalf Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a spot on the list of 2000 *Best American Short Stories* for “The Third and Final Continent,” *The New Yorker’s* Best Debut of the Year for “Interpreter of Maladies,” and lastly, the Pulitzer Prize in fiction for *Interpreter of Maladies*.³⁴

Even though Lahiri did not have many publication credits to her name, by the end of 2000, she was both a critically acclaimed favorite, and a household name, which is a rare a sought after combination for authors in today’s day and age. Lahiri was now firmly slated as a South Asian American diasporic author. She had been comfortably labeled in this regard, and her fame only increased.

In 2000 itself, she won the James Beard Foundation’s M.F.K. Fisher Distinguished Writing Award for “Indian Takeout” in *Food & Wine Magazine*. Soon after, in 2002, Lahiri won a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, and her short story “Nobody’s Business” was selected as one of *Best American Short Stories*.³⁵

In 2003, Lahiri published her first full-length fiction novel, *The Namesake*, which quickly rose to fame as the quintessential immigrant experience. Though it did not win any literary awards, it was selected in 2006 to become into a feature film, so in a way, it won the most important award of all time: visibility.

³⁴ "Jhumpa Lahiri." Biography.com. April 2, 2014. Accessed November 5, 2017. <https://www.biography.com/people/jhumpa-lahiri-21465687>.

³⁵ Ibid.

Lahiri then went on to write a few introductions for other writers, a true sign of institutional cementation, for other relevant authors, and a few personal essays, including the famous “Cooking Lessons: The Long Way Home” for *The New Yorker*, and the “Rhode Island” chapter in *State by State: A Panoramic Portrait of America*. The “Rhode Island” chapter is particularly interesting, because while everything else Lahiri had been commissioned or inspired to write up until this point was somehow related to South Asian identity, this chapter was her first published work devoid of that diasporic tie. Was she still, then, a diasporic writer? How do we classify Jhumpa Lahiri and her work? This thesis works to further explore that tension.

Her return to short stories was marked by the 2008 publication of *Unaccustomed Earth*. The collection won the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award, the Asian American Literary Award, and the Premio Gregor von Rezzori for foreign fiction translated into Italian – Frederica Oddera Guanda did the translation.³⁶ This love affair Lahiri has with Italian was only blossoming at this point, and would soon return in full force. Before then, however, Lahiri wrote several other personal essays and guest chapters, as well as the short story “Brotherly Love” in 2013 for *The New Yorker*. In the same year, she also published her second novel, *The Lowland*, which won the 2014 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature.³⁷ This book is particularly interesting because it was Lahiri’s first attempt at being explicitly political, and it received overwhelmingly negative attention. In 2014, however, Lahiri

³⁶ "Jhumpa Lahiri." Biography.com. April 2, 2014. Accessed November 5, 2017. <https://www.biography.com/people/jhumpa-lahiri-21465687>.

³⁷ "Jhumpa Lahiri." Biography.com. April 2, 2014. Accessed November 5, 2017. <https://www.biography.com/people/jhumpa-lahiri-21465687>.

returned to the more generic national stage in winning the prestigious National Humanities Medal.³⁸

Shortly thereafter, in 2015, Lahiri published the essay “Teach Yourself Italian” and later fully committed to the art of communicating in a language foreign to her own understanding with the publishing of her book *In alter parole / In Other Words* (2016).³⁹ This move was complete departure from the grips of her “South Asian diasporic” label, and one that will be further examined later on given its implications for authenticity.

Though a clearly talented and prolific writer, she was also able to break into a particular American idea of what being authentically South Asian means. But how? What aspects of authenticity did she hold within her, or did other people place upon her, that allowed her such a strong grip on the literary pulse of a nation struggling to identify and understand its ever-growing immigrant population?

III. The Paratext of Interpreter of Maladies

While my thesis focuses on the outside force of authenticity that guides the way Lahiri is labeled and then spoken about by reviewers, this section provides an example of a way in which *she* can control her narrative and brand. Again, this approach is not the one taken by my thesis. By looking at the paratext of her first short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, we can understand the way that Lahiri and her agent wanted to introduce her to world.

³⁸ "Jhumpa Lahiri." Biography.com. April 2, 2014. Accessed November 5, 2017. <https://www.biography.com/people/jhumpa-lahiri-21465687>.

³⁹ Ibid.

In first just looking at the original cover art, the book is adorned in soft hues of red, yellow, and orange.⁴⁰ These are colors that have long been tied to South Asian culture – since Europeans first encountered and wrote about the vibrant hues of South Asian spices⁴¹ – and immediately bring the reader to a place of exoticized difference. Behind the shadow of the colors lays the gentle red outline of two, presumably female, hands covered with the traditional henna, or mehndi, patterns.

By having the hands of a woman adorned in henna on the cover, *Interpreter of Maladies* is calling out to a essentializing stereotype of the female as the more authentic carrier of culture. This trope will hold familiar to many general readership of popular fiction in the West, and as such, they will be drawn to an idea with which they are already comfortable. Lahiri’s publisher quite smartly chose to place her within a publically outdated but still universally understood mode of Indian authenticity. This decision allows for immediate authority and popularity on her part. If the collection’s cover featured one of its white characters, as there are many, there is no doubt that it would not have been as successful.

The effort to also place the relatively unknown Lahiri within the bounds of Asian authenticity is seen in the quote from Amy Tan that appears on the cover. The quote is really the only other adornment the collection has, with the exception of Lahiri’s dedication to her family, and it reads: “Jhumpa Lahiri is the kind of writer who makes you want to grab the next person you see and say, ‘Read this!’”⁴²

Amy Tan, in 1999, was one of the most prominent Asian American writers and figures – and one of the only in mainstream literature. She worked many high-

⁴⁰ Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999.

⁴¹ Bladholm, Linda. *The Indian Grocery Store Demystified*. Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 2000.

⁴² Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999.

profile jobs that utilized her bilingual talents and service interests, and only in 1983 did she begin writing fiction. Her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, was a surprise bestseller and lived for over forty weeks on the New York Times Bestseller List.⁴³ This propelled her writing career forward, as she then edited the 1999 edition of *Best American Short Stories*, appeared on *The Simpsons* as herself, lectured at Stanford, Oxford, Jagellonium, Beijing, and Georgetown, gave a TED talk, spoke at the White House, was featured on NPR, and acted on *Sesame Street*. Before long, “her essays and stories [were] found in hundreds of anthologies and textbooks, and they [were] assigned as required reading in many high schools and universities.”⁴⁴ All this is simply to say, Tan had, by this point, been cemented and canonized as an Asian American writer who had clout.

By highlighting Tan’s praise on the collection’s front cover Lahiri’s publishers are attempting to place Lahiri under the same umbrella of authenticity, and allude to her impending position in the greater order of canonized diasporic writers. They are trying to highlight that not only is she authentic, but that there is already a spot for her in the tradition of Asian Americans who provide a comfortable exposure to difference by being nonwhite but also raised within American ideological constraints.

IV. Conclusion

Lahiri is able to enjoy status as authentically both an insider and an outsider. Her brand relies on this ability to be “universal,” and thus authentic to Western

⁴³ "Bio." Amy Tan. Accessed November 13, 2017. <https://www.amytan.net/about.html>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

practices, but also to be part of a more specific South Asian conversation. In interviews, she stresses “writing allowed [her] to observe and make sense of things without having to participate. [She] didn’t belong. [She] looked different and felt like an outsider.”⁴⁵ This image that she perpetuates allows her to remain as the intriguing other that attracts the Western eye and points to her authenticity as an outsider who, despite being born and brought up in London and Rhode Island, “[was] always looking back, so [she] never felt fully at home.”⁴⁶ Lahiri is be relatable in her construction of her own unique authenticity and identity, and is thus, as we will explore in the next chapter, authentically American.

In a famous Charlie Rose interview – one that Lahiri now probably regrets – Rose compared the young author to the aforementioned Phillip Roth, an author known for speaking for the young Jewish population in America. He asked her if she “[saw herself] in some way as being an interpreter of these experiences,” or rather, of these maladies, and if “that’s part of the reason why this book seems to have resonated?” After a brief pause, Lahiri responds: “I’m trying,”⁴⁷ alluding to her diasporic Indian authenticity and ability to represent the masses.

Lahiri does have agency in taking on this role as interpreter, with her “informed cultural chiseling,”⁴⁸ but it is important to consider the forces at play that make this kind of reductive authentic stance possible. These same forces allow for Lahiri’s astounding authority as “the” South Asian American immigrant, when in

⁴⁵ Newsweek Staff. "The Maladies of Belonging." *Newsweek*, September 19, 1999. Accessed November 13, 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/maladies-belonging-166262>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ "Jhumpa Lahiri." Interview by Charlie Rose. Charlie Rose. August 18, 1999. Accessed November 3, 2017. <https://charlierose.com/videos/29113>.

⁴⁸ Aguiar, Arun. "Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri." *PIF Magazine*, August 1999. Accessed November 13, 2017. <http://www.pifmagazine.com/1999/08/interview-with-jhumpa-lahiri/>.

fact, she is just one, highly educated and talented, person. Her stories are taken to represent the South Asian diaspora not only because there is such a small space for popular South Asian diasporic writers and so her version of events is what people come to associate as authentic experience, but also because of her positioning as an artist.

The coming chapters look to examine from what American ideas of authenticity are born, and how they continue to shape our understanding and reception of minority authors like Lahiri.

Chapter Two: The American Fixation On Authenticity

While in more recent days, the likes of Charlie Rose have discontinued their efforts to explicitly cement Lahiri as the authentic voice of diasporic Indian peoples,⁴⁹ these claims to authenticity now merely take a different forms. First, her overwhelming success in the face of a limited space for South Asian writers in mainstream culture paints her immediately as the “authentic” form of Indian, because she is one of the few views fed to the masses. Second, because Lahiri is again one of the few Indians allowed to the American public in this way, reviewers, interviewers, and book designers are able to determine what shape her authenticity will take. This latter idea will be further explored in the fourth chapter, but one thing is immediately clear: authenticity sells. What is it? What value does it hold for American art?

In order to understand the modern crafting of Lahiri as authentic, we must dive backwards to understand how the American conception of authenticity came to be, and the demands it then makes on the artist itself through its conception of aesthetic authenticity.

In the past decade, with the growth of area studies, Academia has slowly been moving away from the once paradigmatic “authentic / inauthentic” divide.⁵⁰ The term “authenticity” has become taboo in professional circles not only because of the recognition that the bestowment of the label removes agency from the labeled, but also because it has come to signify far too much at once, and thus nothing at all.

⁴⁹ "Jhumpa Lahiri." Interview by Charlie Rose. Charlie Rose. August 18, 1999. Accessed November 3, 2017. <https://charlierose.com/videos/29113>.

⁵⁰ Theodossopoulos, Dimitrios. "Laying Claim to Authenticity: Five Anthropological Dilemmas." *Anthropological Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (2013): 337-60. doi:10.1353/anq.2013.0032. p.343-347

Since scholars like Diana Fuss have proved that essentialist discourse, which focuses on a single trait as the determinant of identity, to be insufficient,⁵¹ authenticity becomes nearly impossible to theorize or rationalize. Authenticity was originally tied to essentialism because it was simple to say, for example, that if you engage in an athletic sport, than you are an authentic man. It must, however, reckon with personality, circumstance, and history as pieces of the authentic puzzle, and thus many new understandings of the term come to light. In the place of essentialism in America, there emerged a culture of liberalism, determined to make room for all proclamations of authentic personhood.⁵² Arguably, the only dominant guiding American ideology that remains is that of the American Dream, and thus a devotion to labor and sacrifice. This ideology can be interpreted in many ways, however, and allows the term to retain its ambiguity.

The movement away from essentialism was important and it poked a rather large hole in the idea of the authentic, which many attempted to fill. Authenticity's dilution, however, led to a lack of continuity past debates, so it is difficult to gather a sense of the growth in this field. The laxity with which "authenticity" is now used highlights the fact that it does offer validation, but that it is also a weak category.

The negative connotation and cheapened value of the term also has the possibility of crafting a view of Lahiri as a less serious author. Authenticity today is often associated most explicitly with blissfully ignorant tourism, and millennial narcissism, both of which involve a quest to "discover oneself." Locals often give guided tours in order to show tourists the essentialized versions of the foreign lands

⁵¹ "Reading like A Feminist." Diana Fuss, *differences*, Summer 1989

⁵² Taylor, Charles 1931-. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. P.17-18

that misrepresentations in media have depicted as the “authentic experience.”⁵³ Because the American conception of authenticity is often believed to be a quality buried deep within a person, that must be arduously earned and discovered,⁵⁴ the idea of travel to foreign and less technologically developed lands is very popular. It is a form of chronological racism because many Americans view these nations as “behind the times” and thus situated in the exotic past and closer to the intimate understanding of true authenticity. People often think of authenticity as thwarted by progress and technology,⁵⁵ and so the “Eat Pray Love” brand of tourism and escapism has become wildly popular. This phenomenon is mutually beneficial, because it funnels inordinate amounts of money into the economies of nations like India. In December of 2016 alone, foreign exchange earnings from tourism in India amounted to approximately 2.44 billion U.S. dollars.⁵⁶

There are three schools of authenticity into which we will dip in order to explore the stated thesis: authenticity in the psyche, cultural authenticity, and aesthetic or artistic authenticity. The first is specific to the *I* subject, and relies on an ambivalence, or a desire to question, being introduced into the construction of identity – which can be either historical or existential – and selfhood.⁵⁷ The second refers to authenticity within a larger cultural context, and the specific dialogical, physical, and contextual signifiers that allow for this label. The final variation refers to an earlier

⁵³ Theodossopoulos, Dimitrios. "Laying Claim to Authenticity: Five Anthropological Dilemmas." *Anthropological Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (2013): 337-60. doi:10.1353/anq.2013.0032. p.343

⁵⁴ Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980. P.99, P.133

⁵⁵ Taylor, Charles 1931-. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. P.23

⁵⁶ "India: Monthly Foreign Exchange Earnings From Tourism 2012-2017 | Statistic." Statista. Accessed February 08, 2018.

⁵⁷ Weigert, Andrew J. "To Be Or Not To Be: Self and Authenticity, Identity, and Ambivalence." In *Self, Ego, and Identity*, 263-82. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1988. P.269-270

period in which degrees of authenticity were used as a means of literary judgment, though this method is not formally part of any school of literary criticism.⁵⁸ It, however, also applies to the fascination surrounding artists, and works to explain our attachment to the entire Jhumpa Lahiri brand. These three elements work together in order to craft an explanation not only for our acceptance of her authenticity, but also for the way in which her authenticity appears to shift given the particular moment.

Regardless of its weakening in academic circles, authenticity still manages to hold an unbelievable power and weight in modern society because of its deep roots in American ideology. The 21st century quest for authenticity has reshaped the American political sphere by placing a focus on the politics of the recognition of all the many forms of authentic identity. Authenticity has developed largely as an internal construct, and it is thus reliant on recognition by outside actors for validation.⁵⁹ This is the paradox of authenticity. Regardless, the growing number of ever-specified labels of authenticity to which people subscribe endlessly complicates such recognition.

An important indicator of this phenomenon can be seen in the way that politicians, both liberal and conservative must find a way to keep up. It is not uncommon to hear politicians repeating over and over again: “I hear you. I see you.” In the 2016 election campaigns of Donald Trump, he selected a group of Americans who felt that their brand of American authenticity was being ignored, and he recognized them as valid. Through an emphasis on declaring lower-middle-class white people to be the authentic heart of the nation, then-candidate Trump was able to

⁵⁸ "Literary Theory and Schools of Criticism." Purdue Writing Lab. Accessed March 10, 2017. <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/01/>.

⁵⁹ Taylor, Charles 1931-. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. P.23

portray himself as one of them, regardless of his extremely privileged background.⁶⁰

This is not to say that these people were being ludicrous, but only that the appeal of a powerful figure recognizing their authenticity was so powerful that it drastically changed history.

What weight then, does Lahiri's authenticity carry? Where does it come from, and what fate does it seal for diasporic Indians in America? While looked down upon, authenticity still sits as a major determinant of culture and art, and seals the fates of artists across the nation, especially those who are not white. It is, however, a concept even further complicated by diasporic peoples like Lahiri because it is unclear to what they are meant to be authentic. Authenticity appears to be a focus just for authenticity's sake, but there exists a deeper history of the term that must be explored in order to understand its tie to art, and especially to Lahiri's position as an artist.

I. Personal Authenticity

The creation of and attachment to Lahiri as an – and *the* – authentic Indian figure must first be understood by exploring what authenticity means to individuals, and how this then translates to authenticity on a large scale.

Though as recently as the early 2000s, there was “no bedrock of knowledge”⁶¹ about the role authenticity played in psychology, the term was commonly accepted and used. The 2006 positive-psychology movement brought about a renewed interest

⁶⁰ Cohn, Nate. "Why Trump Won: Working Class Whites." *New York Times*, November 9, 2016. Accessed December 10, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/upshot/why-trump-won-working-class-whites.html>.

⁶¹ Wood, Alex, Alex Linley, John Maltby, Steven Joseph, and Michael Baliousis. "The Authentic Personality: A Theoretical and Empirical Conceptualization and the Development of the Authenticity Scale." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 55, no. 3 (2008): 385-99. Accessed January 2, 2018. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.55.3.385. P.388

in empirical research on the topic, and thus a wealth of articles and books were published.⁶²

Given that the search for authenticity is expected to be a winding and arduous journey, authenticity itself cannot be the base of human existence and experience.⁶³ There must be something that exists prior to this search that is able to both name what it believes to be the authentic, and to desire it.

The base level then, is considered to be the self. The self is “that aspect of the actor which aware of self as transcending the empirical situation.”⁶⁴ This definition means that in any given the moment, no matter how widely complicated or mind-numbingly small, a person can have the self-reflexive thought: “I know what I am doing and I am doing it.”⁶⁵ It is not a completely detached act, because our recognition of a situation and our role in it is filtered through the paradigmatic moral discourse to which we subscribe.

Identity on the other hand, is far more reliant on historical circumstance. Identity is often defined as a “typified self situated in a network of social relationships,” and its production is a direct descendent of “historical processes.”⁶⁶ This specification only means that identity is often the result of understandings that

⁶² Wood, Alex, Alex Linley, John Maltby, Steven Joseph, and Michael Baliousis. "The Authentic Personality: A Theoretical and Empirical Conceptualization and the Development of the Authenticity Scale." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 55, no. 3 (2008): 385-99. Accessed January 2, 2018. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.55.3.385. P.388

⁶³ Weigert, Andrew J. "To Be Or Not To Be: Self and Authenticity, Identity, and Ambivalence." In *Self, Ego, and Identity*, 263-82. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1988. P.270

⁶⁴ Ibid. P.264

⁶⁵ Ibid. P.264

⁶⁶ Ibid. P. 264

are cemented by the past and put into play in the future.⁶⁷ It is wholly dependent on outside sources, in a way that the concept of self is not.

A simpler explanation is that the self is understood through the lens of a particular historical moment, while identity is “reducible to empirical instances”⁶⁸ which help to craft our position in relations to the world. These elements work together to create an understanding of who the individual is as person, but they serve largely different functions, and in many ways, fill in the gaps for one another.

Through inference, however, it is easy to understand how the pluralistic or monistic nature of being is affected by the “empirical potentialities of the historical context,” based on assigned gender, race, class and a multitude of other markers.⁶⁹ A person has always been “a self and sets of multiple identities,” and given the context of modern and mainstream liberal American society, this multiplicity of identity has exploded. There are now primary and secondary and tertiary identities – the list goes on and on. It is left to the modern individual to make sense of it all.

And thus were born, about a century ago, the concepts of authenticity and ambivalence.⁷⁰ Ambivalence captures human life in the modern age by speaking to the disillusionment born out of the many misaligned identities that one can hold within oneself. From this confusion is born a fascination with the discovery of authenticity, which is used in a wide sense to “refer to the self and the sense of historical reality that envelops it.”⁷¹ Authenticity and identity are then closely related,

⁶⁷ Weigert, Andrew J. "To Be Or Not To Be: Self and Authenticity, Identity, and Ambivalence." In *Self, Ego, and Identity*, 263-82. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1988. P.266

⁶⁸ Ibid. P.266

⁶⁹ Ibid. P.267

⁷⁰ Ibid. P. 269-270

⁷¹ Ibid. P. 269-270

because they rely on the combination of multiple identities in order to create a greater understanding of oneself. A multitude of scholars since, including Lionel Trilling, Viktor Gecas, Roy Baumeister, and Arlie Russell Hochschild, have all provided audiences with varying definitions of the term, which only speaks to how dependent on the moment its use really is.⁷² At its core however, authenticity has been taken to be an element of the “modern condition” which generates a “personal and collective search for the meaning that derives from being aligned with the moral forces that make life worth living,”⁷³ and that make the person themselves meaningful.

II. Cultural Authenticity

In order to craft our own authenticity, we turn to cultural markers and symbols of importance.⁷⁴ Whether we view ourselves as part of that symbol’s in-group or not, having a handle on what “authenticity” means with regards to another group helps us to cement our own relative positioning. In order to cement Lahiri as the voice of the Indian and South Asian Diaspora, we must think reductively with regards to both Lahiri herself, and to whatever it is that we are determining South Asian diasporic culture to be.

Labeling something as a concrete “culture,” is inherently reductive because it “attempts to bring man’s actions and meanings down to the most basic level of significance, to examine them in universal terms”⁷⁵ so that we may categorize and understand them. Cultural authenticity is a tricky concept that relies upon universally

⁷² Weigert, Andrew J. "To Be Or Not To Be: Self and Authenticity, Identity, and Ambivalence." In *Self, Ego, and Identity*, 263-82. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1988.

⁷³ *Ibid.* P.270

⁷⁴ Taylor, Charles 1931-. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. P. 38

⁷⁵ Wagner, Roy. *The Invention of Culture*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016. P.2

recognized ideas of culture, but the power of recognizer is not evenly distributed and often falls along imperial lines. These power dynamics are perpetuated by the publishing industry that creates literary powerhouses, like Lahiri, who will come to epitomize what the American readership sees as South Asian American.

I argue that in order to understand the strict demands for authenticity placed on minority artists and celebrities like Lahiri, we must first understand what American authenticity is, and its birth out of the concept of “sincerity.” The cultural transition from sincerity to authenticity is mirrored in aesthetic value judgments.

Sincerity was an English ideal in the 18th and 19th centuries, which was the time during which England held a large amount of power and influence in the world.⁷⁶ The transition to authenticity occurred alongside a shift in power away from a Eurocentric hold and towards the newly formed American nation. The two concepts came to define two different dominant cultures, and are fascinating to compare. Both the Protestant Reformation,⁷⁷ and establishment of American democracy⁷⁸ serve as a backdrop for the diminishing value of being sincere to a culture, and a movement towards being authentic to it.

The two concepts are distinctly different, as sincerity is tied to a sense of moral order, and commands that we must not be untrue in any social interaction.⁷⁹ It is focused on relationships between people and greater society, rather than internal dialogue. This morality relied on the strict class structure of the time, which allowed for people to know exactly what was expected of them, and how to go about fulfilling

⁷⁶ Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980. P.6-7

⁷⁷ Holmes, David Lynn. *The Faiths of The Founding Fathers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. P.3

⁷⁸ Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980. P.112-113

⁷⁹ Ibid. P.6

these expectations. There was a focus on duty, and it was seen as immoral to not happily and sincerely complete a task that maintained social order and balance. The focus here was on external surroundings, and internal satisfaction was to be achieved by playing the part properly.

In brief, the Protestant Reformation of 1517 sowed the seeds for sincerity's downfall. The reformation attempted to "restore what it viewed as lost central teachings of early Christianity,"⁸⁰ which inspired further reformations and the creation of plethora sects of Christianity, most of which were considered to be valid. One of the later reformations that is born out of the movement in Germany was the splitting of the Puritan separatists from the Anglican Church of England, which upset the structured order of sincere life in England. They were largely persecuted for their challenges to the Church and chose to immigrate to the newly founded American colonies.⁸¹ The Puritans felt as if they were proving something to the Anglicans that they had left behind by building their world from nothing in the new world, and thus this idea of a rugged return to nature and arduous self creation became the core of the eventual American Dream ideology, and American authenticity.

The politics of the new world as well helped to shape the American understanding of authenticity. Under this new democratic system, any white man could theoretically rise to prominence in society, and thus the opportunities for crafting one's own authentic self were never-ending. The English notion of pre-determining position was not quite so clear here, and thus there was no sincerity to a

⁸⁰ Holmes, David Lynn. *The Faiths of The Founding Fathers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. P.3

⁸¹ McConnell, Michael W. "The Origins and Historical Understanding of Free Exercise of Religion." *Harvard Law Review* 103, no. 7 (1990): 1409. doi:10.2307/1341281. P.1422

role to be maintained. For the English, one is to be “sincere *and* authentic, sincere *because* authentic,”⁸² because they have a script to follow. Americans, however, as a young and democratic nation, have devalued sincerity to the level of “innocence of heart”⁸³ and instead asserted the supposedly masculine struggle of crafting and determining internal authenticity.⁸⁴ A society somewhat devoid of scripted roles leads to anxiety “over the credibility of existence.”⁸⁵ If not to fulfill a designated purpose, then why do we exist? This individualized struggle for self-actualization comes to define the American mindset and perception of art.

The external forces at play become an even greater threat with the development of capitalism, which Karl Marx references by labeling money as “the principle of the inauthentic human existence.”⁸⁶ Capitalism, for Marx, furthers and alienation from self, which in turn leads to a greater inauthenticity.⁸⁷ This development then leads to the idea that the authentic is in some way, at odds with industrial modernity, and that machinery and technology cause us to further deviate from whatever it is that our true selves may be.

In a modern industrial society built around capital, mobility becomes key.⁸⁸ As industries and jobs move, people must also be willing to move from city to city in order to continue in their career path. As such, relationships between people become less important, as the focus is instead on the individual who will eventually be placed

⁸² Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980. P. 115

⁸³ *Ibid.* P. 6

⁸⁴ Taylor, Charles 1931-. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. P. 63

⁸⁵ Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980. P. 93

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* P. 124

⁸⁷ This statement comes from an in-tutorial remark made by Professor Khachig Tölölyan, Wesleyan University, February 2018

⁸⁸ Taylor, Charles 1931-. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. P. 19-20

in many different societies. They must be a solidified individual person in order to survive.

As the focus turns inward towards self-creation, things become complicated. If authenticity is truly unique to each person who attempts to craft it, then do we simply exist in a culture without any semblance of moral hierarchy? This, of course, is untrue. The soft relativism of authenticity is not only unsustainable, but also inaccurate. If we are determining that there are aspects of our lives that define who we are, then there must exist “a horizon of important questions”⁸⁹ that has been decided by outside forces. For nonwhite minorities in the U.S., such as diasporic Indians, these horizons are particularly strong, and particularly pre-determined. Authenticity then, must actually take into account much of society’s values and historical context. After all, as John Locke says, authenticity and individualism “must offer some view on how the individual should live with others.”⁹⁰

Thus modern authenticity, while it is self-interested, is also simply a means of understanding our relationship to society. Though it does rely heavily on the self as a means to discover it, it is eventually realized through interaction with others, expression to others, and recognition by others.⁹¹ A paradoxical reliance on recognition by those in search of the authentic self comes into being, and, in fact, becomes a part of American culture and art.

Lahiri then, as a mass-consumed artist, received more recognition as a “valid” Indian than nearly any other Indian in the diaspora – but why does this lead to her being seen as the most authentic? While we must consider the limited representation

⁸⁹ Taylor, Charles 1931-. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. P. 40

⁹⁰ Ibid. P. 45

⁹¹ Ibid. P. 48

and thus Lahiri being taken as the ultimate example, there is also a deeper connection between authenticity and art that encourages us to latch on to her.

III. The Artist As The Authentic Hero

Authenticity was indeed once a metric that critics explicitly used to categorize and analyze both art and the artist.⁹² Though we now see a transition towards implicit uses of authenticity, it is worthy to examine this link in order to understand why the entire Lahiri brand, rather than just her work, is the focus of such scrutiny.

To call a work “sincere” is no longer the highest possible commendation that one can give. In democratic American society, devoid of explicitly established class hierarchy, “sincere art” came to be seen as somehow earnest but lacking in real depth.⁹³ It was the criterion of authenticity that took its place. The search for authenticity was seen as formidable struggle, and an effort to build and create and wrestle with the distractions of the world in order to determine a true self. The authentic then, came to be synonymous with the masculine, the strong, and the daring. The sincere on the other hand, was merely beautiful, and an imitation of the world it around it. Sincere literature and art created nothing.⁹⁴ The authentic however, is on a warpath towards continuous cultivation.

The new focus on crafting meaning frees art from having to continuously please.⁹⁵ While Immanuel Kant does indeed align the simply beautiful with a sense of “intrinsic fulfillment” that is akin to an authenticity, it still lacks the element of

⁹² This statement draws on in-tutorial remarks by professor Khachig Tölölyan.

⁹³ Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980. P. 6

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* P. 95

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* P. 98

formative struggle.⁹⁶ The authentic, then, is not always the most aesthetically pleasing. The quest for self-fulfillment prioritizes not the subject of a story or a painting, but rather, the feeling that said artwork inspires in its audience.⁹⁷ To call something authentic was once the highest form of praise, as it signified that the work pushed the audience to realize something about their own selves.

The important function of art in society then creates a unique role for the artist and allows people like Lahiri to be modern heroes. The idea that self-expression was a means through which rugged authenticity was acquired put art on a pedestal. If authenticity and identity can only truly be negotiated through dialogue and the different voices we take on in order to create an understanding of self,⁹⁸ then Lahiri, the artist, is taken to be the ultimate human form of strength and self-definition. The fact that she does not control the kinds of authenticity that is then placed on her is ignored. All that matters is that she is *the most authentic form of authenticity*,⁹⁹ and thus readers will look to her as a universal example when crafting their own.

There exists then, a modern conflation between authentic art, and the authentic artist that cannot be so easily entangled. Whether or not the artist intends to be a subject in their own work, the audiences will, either consciously or subconsciously, see them as such.

Lahiri then, as a person and a public figure, is absolutely tied up in the reception of her work. Reviewers do not only focus on her writing, but also on “her languages, her exile, her bewilderment and joy, and above all [her] tale of great

⁹⁶ Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980. P.98

⁹⁷ Ibid. P. 99

⁹⁸ Taylor, Charles 1931-. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. P. 32-33

⁹⁹ Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980. P. 100

love.”¹⁰⁰ Lahiri’s brand encompasses the entire authentic minority diasporic package that Lahiri, her publicist, publishers, reviewers, scholars, and readers have crafted together.

Tyler Cowen, a world-renowned economist, cultural commentator, and host of the podcast *Conversations with Tyler*,¹⁰¹ once opened his interview with Lahiri by saying: “How do I frame you?”¹⁰² That appears to be the true question with regards to Lahiri, because the focus really is on her image as much as it is on her writing.

Lahiri is not explicitly referred to as authentic because the term itself as fallen apart. Does it describe a return to the core? Does it describe a return to the past? Or, as a Friedrich Nietzsche discusses, a split from the traditional Christian ethos?¹⁰³ Today, instead, reviews and interviews rely on coded implications of authenticity rather than explicitly proclaiming it.

IV. Multiplicity of Authenticity

While culture does determine the “horizons of significance”¹⁰⁴ that lead people designate certain choices and elements of themselves as contributing to their authenticity, the individual focus of the “quest” has allowed for an unbounded number of authenticities. People combine multiple identities into their understanding

¹⁰⁰ Pellas, Francesca. "What Am I Trying to Leave Behind?" An Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri." Literary Hub. August 31, 2017. Accessed February 15, 2018. <https://lithub.com/what-am-i-trying-to-leave-behind-an-interview-with-jhumpa-lahiri/>.

¹⁰¹ "Homepage." Conversations With Tyler. Accessed April 16, 2018. <https://www.conversationswithtyler.com/>.

¹⁰² "Jhumpa Lahiri on Writing, Translation, and Crossing Between Cultures (Ep. 17-Live at Mason)." Medium. January 11, 2017. Accessed April 1, 2018. <https://medium.com/conversations-with-tyler/jhumpa-lahiri-books-novels-in-other-words-6271de0ac8d9>.

¹⁰³ Taylor, Charles 1931-. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. P. 55

¹⁰⁴ Taylor, Charles 1931-. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. P. 38

of self, but this all depends on which identities are prioritized in a particular situation. Authenticity can no longer be boiled down to a single category or trait, which is liberating, but it also further complicates understands of being “true” to a culture.

Lahiri then faces a unique pressure because she is held to whatever the authentic Indian standard may be in a historical moment, but this is highly reductive of the many identities she holds.

The increased movement of peoples in today’s age of globalization and immigration is the perfect case by which we can study the way ideas of authenticity interact and work with and against one another. Diasporas are commonly defined today as the either voluntary or involuntary dispersal of a particular ethnic group that maintains “a variety of implicit and explicit ties with their homelands,” and “consciously maintains a collective identity,”¹⁰⁵ even if said identity is the result of an ethnic myth of some kind. Diasporic people challenge notions of a fixed identity, and even the myths of assimilation and acculturation.¹⁰⁶ The South Asian diaspora is an excellent case in that regard, given the size of the region, the diversity in phenotype of people, the multitude of belief systems, the differing social values, and perhaps more importantly, the large class divides that exist.¹⁰⁷

Lahiri herself, as all reviewers comment on, was “born in London to Bengali parents and then raised in the United States” and recently “decided to move to Rome”

¹⁰⁵ Vertovec, Steven. "Three Meanings of "Diaspora," Exemplified Among South Asian Religions." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*6, no. 3 (1997): 277-99. Accessed February 3, 2018. doi:10.1353/dsp.1997.0010. p. 278

¹⁰⁶ Bhatia, Sunil, and Anjali Ram. "Culture, Hybridity, and the Dialogical Self: Cases From the South Asian Diaspora." *Mind, Culture, and Activity*11, no. 3 (2004): 224-40. doi:10.1207/s15327884mca1103_4. P. 224

¹⁰⁷ This statement comes from in-tutorial remarks made by professor Indira Karamcheti.

and write exclusively in Italian.¹⁰⁸ How do we account for the many different aspects of place, ethnicity, race, privilege, education, gender, etc. that weave through her narrative? Second generation diasporic immigrants like Lahiri, especially with their strong ties to the homeland via social media, film, music, food, and travel¹⁰⁹ are not able to adhere to any one notion of authenticity.

Depending on the setting and situation, some voices – or forms of identity – “will be privileged over others”¹¹⁰ as the truly authentic, as a result of institutionalized power dynamics. The movement between these voices varying in power will involve “negotiation, disagreement, power, play, negation, conflict, domination, privileging, and hierarchy.”¹¹¹ Thus, their ability to negotiate their own internal voices in order to determine their authenticity, depends largely on the context in which they are currently situated, and which identities of theirs are important here.

Lahiri herself notes that: “Writing is an internal dialogue,” and that is she cannot “give the reader something truly authentic” unless she allows her “writing...[to be] a selfish act”¹¹² by privileging her voice over the voices of the readers and publishing industry. What then is Lahiri’s voice? I argue that even as people we do not have just one voice, and that it is deeply contextual.

¹⁰⁸ Pellas, Francesca. "What Am I Trying to Leave Behind?" An Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri." Literary Hub. August 31, 2017. Accessed February 15, 2018. <https://lithub.com/what-am-i-trying-to-leave-behind-an-interview-with-jhumpa-lahiri/>.

¹⁰⁹ Bhatia, Sunil, and Anjali Ram. "Culture, Hybridity, and the Dialogical Self: Cases From the South Asian Diaspora." *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 11, no. 3 (2004): 224-40. doi:10.1207/s15327884mca1103_4. P. 224-225

¹¹⁰ Ibid. P. 229.

¹¹¹ Ibid. P. 229

¹¹² Pellas, Francesca. "What Am I Trying to Leave Behind?" An Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri." Literary Hub. August 31, 2017. Accessed February 15, 2018. <https://lithub.com/what-am-i-trying-to-leave-behind-an-interview-with-jhumpa-lahiri/>.

For example, since we do not have intimate access to Lahiri's life, let us take a look at second-generation Pakistani American lesbian Surina Khan, the subject of an anthropological study. Growing up, she identified strongly with Pakistani culture and identity, especially since she found it difficult to meet American beauty and social standards. As a result, she felt like an authentic Pakistani girl. When she came out as a lesbian woman, however, her mother was furious and warned her of a larger enraged Pakistani community. As a result, Khan cut ties from her family and the Pakistani community. Her lesbian identity came to be equated with her American identity, but not because the two are actually aligned in any way.¹¹³ She began to think of herself as an inauthentic Pakistani and a more authentic American.

In feeling othered by the Pakistani community, Khan's idea of authenticity shifted, in the same way that American social pressures made her feel more Pakistani when she was growing up. Khan's sexuality is as important to her as any one of these other elements, and so she must negotiate the three, on top of countless other identities, in order to create for herself an "authentic sense of self." Her diasporic authenticity is not solely to a particular national identity, but rather, is shaped by a multitude of actors and determinants, working with and against one another.

In applying this example to Lahiri and her brand, we can see how the label of "authentic artist" is both reductive and also very broad. It does not account for nuances in her various identities, but rather, attempts to connect the dots in an effort to create an overarching and familiar storyline. Lahiri's authenticity has received overwhelming recognition from the public, but perhaps not on her own terms.

¹¹³ Bhatia, Sunil, and Anjali Ram. "Culture, Hybridity, and the Dialogical Self: Cases From the South Asian Diaspora." *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 11, no. 3 (2004): 224-40. doi:10.1207/s15327884mca1103_4. P. 234

V. Conclusion

Authenticity has taken many shapes and served many purposes since its rise to prominence in American culture. It has, overall, come to symbolize the struggle to understand and create oneself in a manner that is not reliant on anything but the self. That, however, is idealistic because authenticity relies on culturally determined signifiers, as well as the recognition by outside sources in order to be validated.

Art then, as the most consumed form of authentic self-expression, becomes a focus in American culture. People do not separate Lahiri from her work, but rather rely on particular points from her personal biography in order to more clearly define her authenticity. Because limited space for Indian American writers gives us very few Indian American writers in the mainstream reading world, then this crafted narrative surround Lahiri as the “interpreter of maladies”¹¹⁴ is allowed to persist.

Any idea, however, of “collective authenticity” while it may be a powerful political tool, is mere myth. Given today’s understanding of the term, Lahiri cannot be authentic to anything other than herself, let alone a vastly spread and ever growing group of people. Thus Lahiri’s true “authentic power” comes from the ability of millions of readers to see themselves uniquely in her own story. She represents no grander entity beyond a universality mildly tempered by ethnic difference.

Much of this debate surrounding Lahiri’s authenticity comes to fruition in the mislabeling her as a postcolonial author, as evidenced by her “Postcolonial genre” tag on the popular collective knowledge forum Wikipedia,¹¹⁵ and countless scholarly

¹¹⁴ "Jhumpa Lahiri." Interview by Charlie Rose. Charlie Rose. August 18, 1999. Accessed November 3, 2017. <https://charlierose.com/videos/29113>.

¹¹⁵ "Jhumpa Lahiri." Wikipedia. April 15, 2018. Accessed April 16, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jhumpa_Lahiri.

articles on the matter. Postcoloniality, I argue, is associated with the minority struggle to recreate oneself as apart from the colonizer, and thus appeals to the American demands of both authenticity and art. A desire to see Lahiri as a postcolonial author makes sense given her position as one of the few mainstream South Asian writers, and thus wanting her to attain “the highest level” of authenticity. We will continue to explore this in the coming chapter.

Chapter 3: World-Minded, Postcolonial Colored

As discussed in the previous chapter, because of the limited representation of South Asians in popular literature and because of the ties between art and authenticity, Lahiri is thought to be and expected to be the authentic diasporic Indian American. This implicit pressure placed upon the American minority artist to be authentic, as explained by the tie between art and self-creation,¹¹⁶ manifests in the labeling of Lahiri as a postcolonial author when she is more aptly labeled as world literature author, because she chooses not to engage in tense colonial power struggles.

In discussing Postcolonial and World literature, I must note a 2014 article in which postcolonial scholar Elleke Boehmer criticized the shift from a postcolonial critical focus to a more apolitical and world-centric one.¹¹⁷ It is, however, important to realize that while Anglophone works themselves may be apolitical, the act of defining what is world literature is incredibly political.¹¹⁸ Thus the anxiety surrounding a growing body of World Literature is a misattributed anxiety that actually surrounds a growing number of mobile minority writers who are not so clearly focused on tethering their writing to the injustices of colonial power structures. How is the American literary industry to understand them?

The world literature category is growing broader because of the need to place non-white diasporic writers, who cannot be clearly tied to a nation, within a marked category that still exudes difference. Though she is not completely devoid of agency

¹¹⁶ Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980. P. 98

¹¹⁷ Boehmer, Elleke. "The World and the Postcolonial." *European Review* 22.02 (2014): 299-308. 299.

¹¹⁸ Damrosch, David, Theo D. Haen, and Djelal Kadir. *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2014. P.xvii

in this situation, because authenticity is marketable, Lahiri is the perfect example of a minority author who falls prey to this need to categorize difference, and also to authenticate it. She explains the anguish associated with this phenomenon by saying:

This sense of expectation is a heavy burden, and takes away my appetite for writing. I would rather find another job. Because to me, writing means freedom, and therefore when I find myself in a cage, in a trap, or in front of someone who tells me “No, you have to write like this, in this language, about these subjects and conditions,” I get a very unpleasant feeling. Of course, one always has to expect to be judged, but some judgments can be damaging.¹¹⁹

While she does not go so far as to explore *why* she may be faced with such a burden, it is evidently explicitly tied to an American desire to understand her as postcolonial, and thus an authentic American minority.

As a brief introduction to these two genres, which are by no means mutually exclusive, we must return to the genesis of novel, which was a European invention, with its origins in Greek and Roman romances.¹²⁰ The first novels and novelists then – many scholars believe the first significant novelist to be Miguel de Cervantes, author of *Don Quixote*,¹²¹ were European. It is in these locales, Paris, London, and Frankfurt that large-scale publishing houses were born and the cultural value of the novel cemented. As a result the authentic standard of writing was understood to be phenotypically white, educated, and European.

The form of the novel was both perpetuated and dispersed by the rapidly enlarging scope of Imperialism because people from the European colonies began

¹¹⁹ Pellas, Francesca. "What Am I Trying to Leave Behind?" An Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri." Literary Hub. August 31, 2017. Accessed February 15, 2018. <https://lithub.com/what-am-i-trying-to-leave-behind-an-interview-with-jhumpa-lahiri/>.

¹²⁰ Doody, Margaret Anne. "Introduction." *The True Story of The Novel*. London: Fontana, 1998.

¹²¹ Ibid.

engaging with it. This development, though important in the process of imperial indoctrination, complicated the idea of the national literatures, and of Eurocentric writers. What follows the discovery of the difference of a social and cultural “Other,” is the desire to classify and taxonomize it, and make it into a “Known Other.”¹²² As such, discussions of the concept of “World Literature” emerged as early as the late 18th century,¹²³ as a means of understanding, cataloguing and managing difference. New imperial conceptions of literature continued to celebrate national European literatures, while also devising ways of studying the emergence of difference within the changing novel genre

World literature, which can also be referred to as Anglophone or Francophone literature depending on the region, is a broad theoretical categorization, as opposed to postcolonial specificity, that has posed problems from its very inception.¹²⁴ The likes of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Rabindranath Tagore, Maxim Gorkey, Franco Morretti, Pascale Casanova, Shu-mei Shi, and countless others have offered their own interpretation of what constitutes this system, and what power it can wield on behalf of what cultural entity. It has been largely accepted by scholars that the concept of a “world” is not to be precisely defined, and that it will remain in motion as a way of mirroring and questioning the politics of the current time.¹²⁵ It has long been thought of as a method that finds unifying threads amongst diverse cultures, but a complication emerges from the definitive tone of the phrase “World Literature.” It

¹²² Arnold, David. "Itinerant Empire." In *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze*, 11-41. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2006. P.8

¹²³ Yadav, Alan. “Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) on *Weltliteratur*.” *George Mason University Press*, 2009. P.2

¹²⁴ Damrosch, David, Theo D. Haen, and Djelal Kadir. *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2014. P.xvii

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* P.xx

seems to be definitive.¹²⁶ The discussions surrounding world literature are not so much about individual works themselves, but rather, the placement of works in relation to one another.

While Postcolonial works can be included under the world literature umbrella, it is also a far more specific endeavor. Postcolonial literature does not merely mean all literature that arises after the fall of colonialism, but rather, it refers to literature that engages heavily with history and power structures created by agents of colonialism.

Postcolonial works are often times understood to be the literatures of “African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka,”¹²⁷ though I am averse to the idea that a work is postcolonial simply because its author is from one of the aforementioned countries. The term, however, is often used loosely today as a marketing tool, a sign of minority status, or a symbol of intellectual worth.¹²⁸ As a result of this casual usage, the term has been readily muddied. If an Indian author, say, Jhumpa Lahiri wrote a book about characters of Indian descent engaged in rescuing a public library, then would that be a postcolonial novel simply because it is written by Lahiri and focuses on other brown peoples? My stance is that the answer is no.

¹²⁶ Damrosch, David, Theo D. Haen, and Djelal Kadir. *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2014. P.xix

¹²⁷ Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2008. P.2

¹²⁸ Watts, Richard. *Packaging Post/Coloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity In The Francophone World*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005. P.2

Popular culture, however, has continuously described Lahiri as a postcolonial author. This association is cemented by book jackets,¹²⁹ epitomized by her classification on Wikipedia,¹³⁰ and perpetuated by the lists and anthologies in which she is included.¹³¹ While the plots of her books and short stories are far more nuanced than the example given, they often do hold the same level of accessible universality and are devoid of history and politics. Lahiri is not at fault here, because minority writers should be allowed to write freely about whichever topic they choose, but her categorization as a postcolonial author is blatantly incorrect.

Postcolonial literature necessitates an engagement with oppressive power structures and because of this, appeals to the American framework of authenticity because it requires intense struggle in order to create oneself. World Literature, on the other hand, while it is political in the way it highlights relationships between works, is a far more open-ended category that allows authors to discuss whatever they choose, and as such, has no direct marker of authenticity. Lahiri makes a clear decision not to focus on heavily political topics, and thus cannot be considered postcolonial. She is only given such a label because it appropriately highlights what *kind* of other she is, as a well suits the American framework of authenticity through struggle.

¹²⁹ Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999.

¹³⁰ "Jhumpa Lahiri." Wikipedia. April 01, 2018. Accessed April 08, 2018.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jhumpa_Lahiri#Literary_career.

¹³¹ "Best Postcolonial Literature (159 Books)." Goodreads. Accessed April 10, 2018.
https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/8821.Best_Postcolonial_Literature.

I. Postcolonial Literature and Its Authentic Appeal

The astounding reality of colonialism is that more than three-fourths of people today have “had their lives shaped by colonialism,”¹³² whether they may be the colonizer or the colonized. When thinking about it in those terms, it is nearly impossible to imagine how anyone could escape being touched by it at all. How then, can anything *not* be postcolonial?

In fact, quite easily. Although Lahiri is often branded as a Postcolonial writer, perhaps as a smart marketing tool on the part of her agent, her choices not to engage with politics and history clearly make her a candidate for American or World Literature. Postcoloniality is not merely a time period, but rather, refers to a far more specific kind of critical engagement with the world.

While colonialism was an ill – and in some ways a gift of cultural exchange and innovation – that plagued much of the world, the experiences that fall under this umbrella term are wholly unique and cannot be so readily grouped. There are many different types of colonialism including, but not limited to: settler colonialism, planter colonialism, extractive colonialism, trade colonialism, transport colonialism, imperial power colonialism, legal colonialism, rogue colonialism, missionary colonialism, and romantic colonialism.¹³³ Therefore, it would be inaccurate to attempt to describe the experiences of all colonized peoples by means of the same rubric. They do, however,

¹³² Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2008. P.1

¹³³ "A Typology of Colonialism." American Historical Association. Accessed April 13, 2018. <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2015/a-typology-of-colonialism>.

tend to share certain overarching and basic similarities, which go on to serve as the roots of postcolonial literature.

These similarities can be loosely grouped into imperial education systems, tension between the colonizer and the colonized, and the displacement of language.¹³⁴ The tension between the colonizer and the colonized seems like a fairly clear dynamic, given its devastating effects, but it is actually incredibly nuanced. It is perhaps best described by diasporic scholar Homi Bhabha as a process a process of hybridity of identity between the colonized and the colonizer, as well as a rebellious mimicry of the colonizer by the colonized.¹³⁵

Language too, proves to be powerful as a marker of difference. The institutionalization of English – and elsewhere of French, Portuguese and Spanish¹³⁶ – as a discipline and proper language, creates a painful split for the colonized in which they lose their ability to communicate properly in their mother tongue.¹³⁷ This phenomenon is perpetuated through the establishment of imperial education systems, which indoctrinate an elite class of native peoples into systems of Western thought and disciplines.¹³⁸ Institutionalized education practices allow for the colonizers to have psychological and linguistic roots in a place long after they have physically left.

Even amidst similarity, given the breadth of the postcolonial label, it is important to rely upon limits and specific definitions.

¹³⁴ Ashcroft, Bill, Helen Tiffin, and Gareth Griffiths, eds. *Postcolonial Studies Companion and Reader*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2014. P.55-56

¹³⁵ Bhabha, Homi K. "Of Mimicry and Man." *Postcolonial Studies*, 2016, 53-59. doi:10.1002/9781119118589.ch3.

¹³⁶ This statement is an in-tutorial comment made by professor Khachig Tölölyan.

¹³⁷ "The Inheritance of Postcolonial Loss, Asian American Compensation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, 27-50. 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. P.29

¹³⁸ Ashcroft, Bill, Helen Tiffin, and Gareth Griffiths, eds. *Postcolonial Studies Companion and Reader*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2014. P.283-284

Recent scholarship has loosely defined imperialism as referring to “the authority assumed by a state over another territory.”¹³⁹ A Marxist-Leninist idea of imperialism allows me to see it as economic power, which allows nations armed with more developed systems of trade and transport to readily overpower those that are locally focused.¹⁴⁰

Next, colonialism “is manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation of development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands, often by force.”¹⁴¹ In applying it to literature, the term can be broken down into colonial literature and colonialist literature. A work of colonial literature is one that generally is “concerned with colonial perceptions and experience” and is written by locals during the periods of colonial rule.¹⁴² Colonialist literature, on the other hand, is more specifically written “by and for colonizing Europeans about non-European lands dominated by them.”¹⁴³ Those writings were obviously informed by the discerning power of the traveller’s gaze as they encountered foreign lands and tried to understand them in terms of with what they were already familiar to them.

After colonialism, Postcoloniality is often understood to be a powerful movement in which “colonized people seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical agents in an increasingly globalized world.”¹⁴⁴ This process is a painful one, but often it relies heavily on writing as a means of nation and identity formation,

¹³⁹ Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial And Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. P.2

¹⁴⁰ Gatung, Johan. "A Structural Theory of Imperialism." *Perspectives on World Politics*: 81-117. doi:10.4324/9780203300527_chapter_3.1. P. 81

¹⁴¹ Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial And Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. P.2

¹⁴² *Ibid.* P.2

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* P.3

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* P.3

much in the same way that European nations did just a century or so earlier. This idea of “crafting nation” sits closely to the American idea of crafting authenticity.

Based upon these definitions, we can then look at the two waves of postcolonial literature that emerge. The first wave is known as “imperial period writing”¹⁴⁵ and was created by the literate elite class that was educated by colonizers. Regardless of ethnicity, they are bound to identify most strongly with the colonizers. These texts could not be the basis of any kind of psychological rebellion or national identity, because they are too reliant on the terms of the invader. The second wave is then more significant one, in which “literature produced ‘under imperial license by ‘natives’ or ‘outcasts’, for instance the large body of poetry and prose produced in the 19th century.”¹⁴⁶ Self-educated people writing in English, the language of the colonizer, lead this movement. By doing so they have temporarily entered a privileged class and begun a slow process of subversion.

These literatures, which wrestle with hierarchy, race, ethnicity, national belonging, language, and the after-effects of mercantilism,¹⁴⁷ have been exceedingly important in increasing the agency of marginalized peoples. The struggle, however, to overhaul colonial enterprises will continue because of the inequalities that persist between former colonies and the former imperial powers. As such, postcolonial literature requires a specific focus in order to serve its specific purpose of dismantling

¹⁴⁵ Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2008. P.5

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. P.5

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. P.5

historical structures. Its emphasis has never been on solely aesthetic or thematic qualities, but rather on the goal towards which it strives.¹⁴⁸

The connection between the idea of struggle and authenticity is the reason why America often sees postcoloniality as requirement of minority writing. It is attractive to think of every minority writer who manages to break through to the American public as a vigilante, aiming to create change in the world. Because we tie self-expression and authentic personhood together, we thus tie Lahiri and authenticity together in a belief that her art is her claiming both her agency and self-created authenticity. It is not quite so simple, however, and Lahiri as a talented writer and mere individual, writes about the range of topics that speak to her, not ones that are necessarily determined to question and push.

Postcoloniality is thought to be a marker of minority identity because it connects authors to both foreign and domestic authenticities. In actuality, however, it requires an engagement with tense politics and historical realities in order to reimagine a world without a white hand at its throat.

II. The World Literature Umbrella

World literature, as opposed to the postcolonial, is a grouping rather than a label. By this I mean that it focuses on texts in relation to one another rather than any one text, and is guided by particular themes. It has come under scrutiny recently with the rise of globalization, cosmopolitanism, and transnationalism, but it has, been a

¹⁴⁸ Young, Robert J.C. "World Literature and Postcolonialism." In *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, edited by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, 213-21. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2014. P. 216

theoretical concept in existence for over two centuries.¹⁴⁹ The ongoing debates surrounding it have changed accordingly with the political moment, but it has long existed as a means of recognizing difference through a supposed universality that can unite us. Its quest for universality is often times problematic given that those in power will always dictate the universal standard, but scholars have begun to focus on the politics that shape world literature canons. While postcolonial author could easily belong to a World Literature canon, I argue that Lahiri is *not* postcolonial, and rather simply belongs *only* in World Literature canons.

A few key scholars of World Literature, Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, David Damrosch, and Franco Moretti, and have all offered the influential guiding views that should be parsed through. They are by no means the only scholars who have spoken on the subject or changed the course of conversation, but they provide three foundational ideas that are referred to time and time again by scholars today. The common critique of the discipline has long been that a global canon at the same time both impossible, and entirely too simple. These scholars seek to address that claim through their ideas for categorizing literature.

One of the earliest definition of world literature can be seen in Goethe's late 18th century analysis, though it ultimately proves to be handicapped in its Eurocentric focus, and constrictive approach. For Goethe, world literature is by no means apolitical and in an interesting twist, serves to resolve the "the differences that prevail within one nation...through the understanding and judgment of the rest."¹⁵⁰ With this,

¹⁴⁹ Damrosch, David, Theo D. Haen, and Djelal Kadir. *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2014. P.xvii

¹⁵⁰ Yadav, Alan. "Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) on *Weltliteratur*." *George Mason University Press*, 2009. P.2

Goethe, while believing that “the world at large...is only an expanded homeland”¹⁵¹ also posits the notion that other countries – perhaps more specifically non-Western countries – exist for the benefit of the further solidification of the national spirit of the major European players. This view of world literature is ultimately paradoxical in its attempt to both highlight and devalue the global dimension. He sees world literature as a means of putting countries in conversation with one another, and as such, “the aim is simply that they shall grow aware of one another...and at least tolerate one another.”¹⁵² Though he continues to remain focused on the power, might, and potential of his native Germany, he believes that a world emphasis will allow for “conflict [to] decrease, [and for] war [to] become less cruel and victory less arrogant.”¹⁵³ This belief is seductive, but the time period from which he writes, as well as his German patriotism, makes his theoretical framework less applicable today.

In thinking about who controls the standards of a supposed global universality, Damrosch’s idea of the two main ways to approach the crafting of a World Literature discipline becomes relevant. His approach is an unabashedly optimistic one. He acknowledges problem of prioritization by saying: “a category from which nothing can be excluded is essentially useless,”¹⁵⁴ and attempts at a solution. He knows that “world literature may in some sense exist as an ideal order, a hypothetical mental construct, but in practice, it is experienced as what is available to read,”¹⁵⁵ so he chooses to focus on the manner in which works are chosen for

¹⁵¹ Yadav, Alan. “Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) on *Weltliteratur*.” *George Mason University Press*, 2009. P.5

¹⁵² *Ibid* P. 4.

¹⁵³ *Ibid* P. 6.

¹⁵⁴ Damrosch, David. *What is world literature?*. Princeton University Press, 2003. P.110.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid* P.111.

anthologies. The first of these options is a “masterpiece approach” and the second is a “window to the world approach.” He begins with a discussion of the *Norton Anthology* and its focus on certain masterworks of world literature.¹⁵⁶ This approach is naturally stunted in that definitions of “masterpiece” are so heavily tied to western canonical literature and also western culture, that it cannot accurately interpret the world at large. He then moves to his preferred approach, and “jettison[s] the ‘masterpiece’ approach in favor of briefer selections from a wider range of writers,”¹⁵⁷ or what can be known as the “windows to the world” approach. Though he leaves this largely unexplained in terms of methodology, he is advocating for anthologies that attempt to indeed expose its readers to as much diverse material as it can, possibly organized by category.

Moretti, on the other hand, answers this question of prioritization with a call for focused distance reading, which is a macro-level study of the way books circulate and are read. He suggests this tactic in the hopes that it will reduce the prioritization of solely Western canonical literature because “you invest so much in individual texts *only* if you think that very few of them really matter,”¹⁵⁸ and this omnipresent view will force everything into consideration. He explains his rationale for how this will most certainly happen through an application of sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein’s World Systems Theory to literature. In doing so, he defines the core countries as the dominant capitalist-countries that exploit the peripheral countries, the peripheral countries as dependent on the core countries for capital, and the semi-peripheral as

¹⁵⁶ Damrosch, David. *What is world literature?* Princeton University Press, 2003. P.127.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 128.

¹⁵⁸ Moretti, Franco. "Conjectures on world literature." *New Left Review* 1 (2000). P. 57.

those with both characteristics.¹⁵⁹ This spatial view of the world allows him to set up what he understands as the tertiary zones of a world literature system that is both “one, and unequal”¹⁶⁰ in its selection of which texts are allowed to flourish and which will remain untouched. Moretti sees distance reading as a way to prioritize everything at once by using inequality as a lens through which he can view migration of literary form and technique, and also of the physical marketing of the book itself.

Goethe, Damrosch, and Moretti have all been instrumental in understanding world literature as a guiding categorization that exists powerfully and politically today. The defining of the words “world” and even “literature” prove to be an influential endeavor, steeped in politics and ideological warfare. In fact, trends in world literature canons have often “followed trends in economic and political history.”¹⁶¹ In many ways, “the discipline emerges as a study of the struggle for symbolic-hegemony across the world.”¹⁶² Scholars today have noted that there are certainly looming dangers in this construction, given that it can be as a very powerful tool used merely to further the interests of the structurally dominant group.

Even so, because World Literature focuses on grouping literature in different ways, it has the potential to unite literary traditions, allow for slippages in how we see strict difference, and increase accessibility to the foreign world. Though the notion of the universal is certainly polluted by power structures, it still holds a unique power in forcing readers to question constructions of difference. For this reason, scholars today

¹⁵⁹ Moretti, Franco. "Conjectures on world literature." *New Left Review* 1 (2000). P.55

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Bahun, Sanja. "The Politics of World Literature." In *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, edited by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, 373-382. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2014. P. 376

¹⁶² Ibid. P. 376

note that World Literature often “consists of literary works that successfully circulate internationally beyond confines of their own borders by typically wearing its own original cultural context ‘rather lightly.’”¹⁶³ This is not always the case and it does not make these works any less important, but it is notable to recognize that the World Literature label serves a different purpose than the Postcolonial. The works are also not necessarily rich with discussions of ethnic struggle, though they may be, and as such, can be seen as the less authentic route for Lahiri to take. Since postcolonial literature falls under the umbrella category of world literature, there is obviously much overlap between the two modes. The key difference with World Literature, however, is that while it often mirrors and perpetuates politics, the pieces themselves are not serving a specific function in dismantling and recreating society in the name of previously colonized peoples.

III. Where does Lahiri fall?

While there is no innate need to classify the prolific Lahiri and her works as either one or the other, the literary world leaves little room for those classified as minority writers to sit unmarked. While these writers can, of course, fall into the category of whatever their national literature may be, Lahiri’s diasporic status as an Indian American makes this label a complicated one. In many ways, it is exactly her diasporic status that allows her such fame, because she is seen as a natural authentic link between the American and the Indian world. The limited number of diasporic Indians in the popular literary conversation forces upon Lahiri a heavy crown of

¹⁶³ Young, Robert J.C. "World Literature and Postcolonialism." In *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, edited by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, 213-21. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2014. P.221

authenticity. This need to authenticate her arises in many forms, and especially in her categorization as a postcolonial author. Lahiri is often forced into postcoloniality by an American desire to have one of the few popular literary representations of Indian-ness be authentic, and to further the belief that the artist is inherently authentic.

Lahiri follows in the footsteps of several other successful late twentieth-century Indian writers, including the likes of Ved Mehta, Salman Rushdie, and Bharati Mukherjee, and yet she stands apart. She is the first Indian American author to receive such overwhelming praise in both “mainstream and minority audiences,” and from both “the general public and academic scholars.”¹⁶⁴ While the works of these other authors have been canonized as prime examples of “immigrant literature,” Lahiri is the first South Asian American writer to be included in *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, and “explicitly acknowledged as a [universal] canonical presence.”¹⁶⁵ Her appeal runs both far and wide.

As a woman raised in a “highly literate, bi-cultural atmosphere,”¹⁶⁶ Lahiri does not fit any easy classifications of nationality, and thus literary pigeonholing, but her tinted – though very light – skin and dark hair afford her the immediate status of minority writer. Lahiri herself has mentioned that she “would like to see [herself] as an American writer,”¹⁶⁷ and yet this is rarely how simply she is perceived or marketed. The treatment of Lahiri by most readers mirrors this quote from literary

¹⁶⁴ “Introduction: Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Bengali, Asian American, Postcolonial, Universal?” In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, xi-xxvi. 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. P.xi

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. P.xi

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. P.xi

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. P.xiii

critic Robert J.C. Young, from his article entitled “World Literature and Postcolonialism”:

Reading an Indian-American novel such as Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* will give the American reader information about Indian culture, from a quasi-anthropological point of view: here the novel’s main function is to represent the diversity of literary cultures and to act as a form of cultural translation for Western readers. This may work just so long as the other culture is not represented as too different, which may account for a common preference for the use of diasporic writers who may write in English or other European languages, rather than local ones who write in their own indigenous languages and do not write for Western audiences...¹⁶⁸

Lahiri and her marketing team are by no means innocent in this, but it is an unfortunate reality that minority writers will be expected to serve as bridges, rather than be allowed to stand alone. She is seen to be an “indigenous ethnographer”¹⁶⁹ The American people are expecting to learn from Lahiri about Indian life and culture and struggle, and yet that is not at all what Lahiri putting forth.

Largely, with a few minor exceptions, Lahiri’s short stories focus on a very specific group of people, and yet they are taken to be a depiction of the whole. These people are upper class Indian immigrants, who are mostly second generation and “firmly grounded.”¹⁷⁰ There is, of course, no reason why Lahiri should not write about her own experiences, and a community she knows intimately. Her aforementioned predecessor, Mukherjee, received much criticism for writing too broadly about

¹⁶⁸ Young, Robert J.C. "World Literature and Postcolonialism." In *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, edited by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, 213-21. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2014. P. 214

¹⁶⁹ “Mediating the Particular and the General: Ethnicity and Intertextuality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Oeuvre.” In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, 3-25. 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. P.8

¹⁷⁰ “What Lies Beneath: Lahiri’s Brand of Desirable Difference in *Unaccustomed Earth*.” In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, 51-71. 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. P.57

different groups of immigrants and misrepresenting painful experiences.¹⁷¹ The problem arises, however, when westerners reading her work take it to be an authenticity representation of the experience of all Indian immigrants. Lahiri's characters, in fact, appear to be a curious kind of Indian Americans, described unflatteringly by literary scholar Ranjini Srikanth as "ornamental Indians."¹⁷²

Lahiri's work serves as a warm welcome to those looking to ease their consciousness about the future of a world fractured along lines of irreconcilable difference.¹⁷³ It is certainly notable, and important, that Lahiri is able to create and sustain this kind of transnational, and frankly put, aesthetically astounding, series of works. They are, however, all largely depoliticized, with the exception of *The Lowland*, which did alarmingly poorly among critics and audiences alike, and will be discussed in the next chapter. Most of her work "offer[s] a comforting version of 'difference' within the 21st century cultural politics of the US."¹⁷⁴ Though her characters are in fact brown skinned, and her families are not American, Lahiri does not force her reader into an "engagement with differences of ethnicity, religion, and race,"¹⁷⁵ and instead she often allows us to easily congratulate ourselves for reading a literature of diversity. Her literary skill neutralizes conflict and tension.

In the majority of her work, injustices and prejudices that South Asians in America face are never addressed, and problems never stem from the political climate

¹⁷¹ "What Lies Beneath: Lahiri's Brand of Desirable Difference in *Unaccustomed Earth*." In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, 51-71. 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. P.59

¹⁷² Ibid. P.59

¹⁷³ Ibid. P.57

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. P.51

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. P.53

or institutionalized racism.¹⁷⁶ The issues instead arise instead from relationships within their non-intrusive heteronormative familial models,¹⁷⁷ climate, and health. They are natural ills that are technically “universal” and could infect anyone. Grief is a simple way to craft solidarity, and as such, it is found here in abundance. In only facing neutral threats and responding in kind, her characters are encouraged to be the literary equivalent of “good Muslims,”¹⁷⁸ who prove that diversity is welcome, but leave it at that. These characters are not “confrontational and militant,” but rather, “decorous and gently titillating.”¹⁷⁹

There are some that would argue against this depiction by crying out that she does in fact discuss the Partition,¹⁸⁰ and Naxalite Rebellion, and that there are characters that have a difficult time assimilating to American life. The latter is certainly true. The difficulty of assimilation, however, is always attributed to the characters themselves, and never to greater structures or American attitudes, and thus the characters must reform themselves or remain an outsider.¹⁸¹ There are no challenges to institutionalized power structure being made here.

And as far as the Partition and Naxalite Rebellion go, they are not a historical events that forces American readers to confront uncomfortable truths because these

¹⁷⁶ “What Lies Beneath: Lahiri’s Brand of Desirable Difference in *Unaccustomed Earth*.” In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, 51-71. 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. P.65

¹⁷⁷ “Re-Rooting Families: The Alter/Natal as the Central Dynamic of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*.” In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, 181-209. 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. P.185

¹⁷⁸ “What Lies Beneath: Lahiri’s Brand of Desirable Difference in *Unaccustomed Earth*.” In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, 51-71. 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. P.58

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* P.53.

¹⁸⁰ “Affect, History, and the Ironies of Community and Solidarity in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*.” In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, 97-116. 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. P.116

¹⁸¹ “What Lies Beneath: Lahiri’s Brand of Desirable Difference in *Unaccustomed Earth*.” In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, 51-71. 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. P.65

events allows them to place blame and horror elsewhere. The partition creates a meaningful and valid sense of loss for Indian peoples,¹⁸² but by merely recounting the emotional history of it, Lahiri does not push her readers to think critically or analyze their own positioning. Even in her one political work *The Lowland*, she discusses only the Naxalite Revolution, but stops commenting on political structures once the main character travels to America.¹⁸³ The historical events she chooses to discuss is both politically and emotionally foreign to her white American readers.

IV. Conclusion

In synthesizing our understandings of Postcolonial Literature, World Literature, and Jhumpa Lahiri, it becomes abundantly clear that she cannot accurately be labeled as a postcolonial author. In fact, to label her as such, is damaging to the postcolonial category and reductive of her work, which chooses not to focus on politicized immigrant narratives. The difference between World Literature and Postcolonial Literature that can be felt in Lahiri's work is neatly summed up by this quote from Young:

Whereas world literature is conceived from a presumption of cultural free speech, in which each culture is free to express itself as it may wish, postcolonial literature is assessed from that speech act, directed to an

¹⁸² "Affect, History, and the Ironies of Community and Solidarity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*." In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, 97-116. 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. P.118

¹⁸³ Hore, Rachel. "Book Review: The Lowland, By Jhumpa Lahiri." *The Independent*. September 14, 2013. Accessed March 10, 2018. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/book-review-the-lowland-by-jhumpa-lahiri-8815361.html>.

audience, aiming to communicate with and affect the audience who will receive it.¹⁸⁴

Her countless short stories, essays, and novels face no tension of language or institutional anxiety, but rather, they focus on the careful weaving of beautiful stories of immigrants – mostly – living in the United States. These stories are of everyday problems and fears, and they are incredibly powerful in their ability to see into the intimate lives of others. They push readers to be empathic and loving and patient, which is important as well, but they do not push them to question the world around them. Lahiri is not urging us to critique postcolonial institutions and psyches, and as such, is not participating in the project of postcolonial writing.¹⁸⁵ Why then, is she labeled as postcolonial?

Lahiri is surely being unfairly categorized as means of validating her position as one of the few diasporic Indian American authors allowed into the literary mainstream, and as an artist. The “Postcolonial” label situates her as authentically Indian, but through struggle, which is an “American mindset,” as discussed in the previous chapter. It also allows her to be specific to a minority authenticity.

The power of the postcolonial label affects the marketing and sale of books because of this supposed authenticity of which it is indicative. From its inception, it has been part of a powerful movement to reclaim agency and break down political

¹⁸⁴ Young, Robert J.C. "World Literature and Postcolonialism." In *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, edited by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, 213-21. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2014. P.220

¹⁸⁵ “Introduction: Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Bengali, Asian American, Postcolonial, Universal?” In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, xi-xxvi. 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. P.xi

and social structures that are still relevant remnants of postcolonialism.¹⁸⁶ As such it holds almost a kind of cultural social justice clout, and is popularly seen as part of necessary rebellion. Its interest in ethics often spills over into the realm of “justice, human rights, ecology, religion and secularism, inequality in power relations, gender, class, caste, the respective roles of dominant and minority languages, [and] the continuing struggles of colonies and indigenous peoples.”¹⁸⁷ In an increasingly progressive American discourse, it makes sense that postcolonialism would come to carry with it a moral superiority among the scholarly elite and privileged readers.

The desire to label Lahiri as postcolonial by the American literary world is thus a strong one that ties an author more firmly, or “authentically” to their minority roots. This urge is likely born out of the fact that World Literature holds fewer distinctive markers that adhere to a particular idea of the authentic. Postcolonial Literature is inherently more specific, as it “will always be driven by its own context.”¹⁸⁸ The very structure of a postcolonial work is to place characters within larger recognizable histories, and give them unique experiences and emotions.

Again, the largely apolitical nature of Lahiri’s work does not indicate that World Literature itself is an apolitical endeavor. Rather, it holds fewer constraints on the themes and plot points of literary works, and the theorists and scholars who choose which works to include in their canons do the true political work. Writing that

¹⁸⁶ Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial And Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. P.3

¹⁸⁷ Young, Robert J.C. "World Literature and Postcolonialism." In *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, edited by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, 213-221. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2014. P.218

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.* P.221

is considered “world literature” can be steeped in history and politics, but it the category does not explicitly *require* that it must be.

While the educated readership of the US, whose flagship is often *The New Yorker*, has pinned her down as a Postcolonialist in an effort to highlight her ethnic authenticity, Lahiri has comfortably balanced various labels for quite some time now. Many scholars have commented on this as a sign of her ambivalence, hubris and cunning,¹⁸⁹ but I believe her to simply part of a growing class of minority writers not writing historically and politically minded works. Some may argue that if such writers are able to find a voice, then they must use their power to fight against societal ills, but this is only a reconfigured version burden of minority representation. Lahiri is an eloquent and highly intelligent writer, but she is not a postcolonial one.

This next chapter will continue exploring the insistence with which her readers insist on many different versions of Lahiri’s authenticity by looking directly at reviews written about her and analyzing the use of coded language. In looking at the topics that are brought up again and again by reviewers at different stages in her career, a clear pattern emerges. I am easily able to see the “horizons of significance,”¹⁹⁰ and the tension created by reviews that require her to be specific in a Postcolonial sense, but also universal in a World sense. Postcoloniality is one way to instantly allude to American “minority authenticity,” and the way in which reviewers discuss not only her work, but also her brand, is another.

¹⁸⁹ “Introduction: Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Bengali, Asian American, Postcolonial, Universal?” In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, xi-xxvi. 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. P.xvi

¹⁹⁰ Taylor, Charles 1931-. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. P.38

Chapter Four: The Shaping of Lahiri's Brand of Authenticity

As a result of “scholarship...moving in the direction of acknowledging the existence of plural, multidimensional authenticities,” formal literary critics no longer explicitly refer to “the authentic,” but rather implicitly refer to “conceptualizations of authenticity specified by adjectives or ‘particular types.’”¹⁹¹ Authenticity thus continues to guide the way in which we perceive the world and ourselves in relation to it,¹⁹² especially when it comes to taxonomizing ethnic difference. If authors or other public figures are non-white, non-western, and thus marked, then we require them to be authentically something else that is recognizable and known. This need to classify difference leads to the kind of literary categorization discussed in the previous chapter, where minority authors are forced into categories, such as Postcolonial, that may not fit. They are categorized as such only because it simplifies the Western perception of them by adhering to predetermined scripts of American authenticity.

Through reading the reviews written about Lahiri, we can easily identify the specific markers of authenticity that are attributed to her during her career, and the fact her brand of authenticity shifts from a focus on foreignness, to a focus on the self-creating American artist. While the focus shifts, the general desire to see her as a blank canvas into which reviewers can project their ideas does not. Any deviation from the Lahiri's authenticity being tethered to the universality that reviewers have

¹⁹¹ Theodossopoulos, Dimitrios. "Laying Claim to Authenticity: Five Anthropological Dilemmas." *Anthropological Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (2013): 337-60. doi:10.1353/anq.2013.0032. P.340

¹⁹² Weigert, Andrew J. "To Be Or Not To Be: Self and Authenticity, Identity, and Ambivalence." In *Self, Ego, and Identity*, 263-82. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1988. P.276

carved out for her is severely punished, as seen with the critical response to her 2013 novel, *The Lowland*. This fascinating nuance further strengthens my hypothesis that authenticity does place minority American writers in a paradoxical spot, as seen in the way the people authenticate Lahiri is through simultaneously labeling her postcolonial and also desiring her to be universal enough to allow fluidity.

Lahiri makes for such an interesting case study because of the length of her career and the way in which reviewers have indeed taken different approaches to her authenticity at different times. The reviewers are biting into what she is putting forth, but their fluctuating understanding of her authenticity also depends on the point at which she in with regards to her career, and the historical circumstances of the time.

As mentioned, times different versions of authenticity attributed to her appear to be contradictory, and while this falls in line with Chapter Two's definition of authenticity, it also alludes a unique pressure placed on minority celebrities. She is often sold as a wise and ethereal presence, the sort of ancient soul who has "never had Internet access."¹⁹³ This depiction of her is at once transcendent of ethnic boundaries, but is also reliant on the chronologically racist stereotype of Indian authenticity manifesting in an aging wisdom. When applicable however, her white-passing complexion, elite education, and not ethnically specific subject matter, afford her admittance into prestigious Western literary traditions. The contradictions are never ending. While this need to be authentic to more than just an ethnic tradition is not an issue to the individual understanding of authenticity and ambivalence,¹⁹⁴ it is

¹⁹³ Aguiar, Arun. "Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri." *PIF Magazine*, August 1999. Accessed November 13, 2017. <http://www.pifmagazine.com/1999/08/interview-with-jhumpa-lahiri/>.

¹⁹⁴ Weigert, Andrew J. "To Be Or Not To Be: Self and Authenticity, Identity, and Ambivalence." In *Self, Ego, and Identity*, 263-82. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1988. P.275

complicated by the need for a universal slate onto which “representational” minority authenticity can be denoted by a variety of differing and equally reductive symbols.

The next sensible step for this study is to move away from the more theoretical realm and look at how constraints of authenticity emerge in the treatment of Lahiri. Publishing, which is a Western dominated phenomenon, and the resulting system of reviews, do not allow any books to rise to prominence by accident. Books that create large revenue streams are allowed to do so because of certain attributes they hold that publishers and reviewers are able to successfully market and universalize. As such “convergence is the basic, if not the *only* mode of cultural history.”¹⁹⁵ It is then incredibly illuminative to take note of what specific elements publishers and reviewers are paying attention to with regards to Lahiri’s work. What kind of authenticity do they attribute to Lahiri? How do they implicitly allude to authenticity without cheapening their writing?

In order to fully explore this research question, my original plan was to look to scholarship surrounding the publishing and reviewing machinery in place and study their mechanics. With this information, I hoped to be able to understand more about the way non-white diasporic writers move through the industry and the different kinds of authenticity that are asked of them. I was more specifically looking to discover the way in which these institutions still implicitly use concerns about authenticity in order to make decisions surrounding the determination of reviewers, and which books to review at all.

¹⁹⁵ Moretti, Franco. “Evolution, World-Systems, *Weltliteratur*” *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, 399-420. Princeton, 2009. P.401-402

Unfortunately, I quickly discovered that little to no scholarship currently exists on the actual interworking of this side of the industry. While many, including academics and writers, discuss the odd and almost oligarchical structure,¹⁹⁶ it has not been formally studied and investigated, which is both fascinating and suggestive. In order for me to conduct such a study myself, I would need access to emails, notes, and private conversations among publishing executives. That in itself would be a tricky project to execute since it relies on people speak frankly to a third party. On top of that, the time constraints on my project render it entirely impossible.

In order to compensate for this loss, I have decided to use this chapter to look critically at the material to which I do have access: reviews and interviews published in journals and newspapers. I am acting on the belief that these publications are an excellent indicator of greater trends in literary authenticity because they have a hand in shaping public reception. I have catalogued fifty articles – more heavily skewed towards reviews, but also including interviews – that span the two decades of Lahiri's career. My analysis is double tiered and focuses on the topics that continuously emerge, as well as overall changes in the way Lahiri is discussed over time. These kinds of patterns are important here because they all work towards molding her image into something specific. But if that specific image is ever changing, than what exactly are they attempting to create?

The contextually dependent ideas of authenticity to which these critics adhere, speaks both to the greater fluidity of the term, and the paradoxical pressure placed on the minority artist by the mainstream.

¹⁹⁶ This statement is from in-class remarks made by professor Hirsh Sawhney.

I have grouped the grouped the reviews into three year period categories – from 1998 to 2001, from 2002 to 2005, from 2006 to 2009, from 2010 to 2013, and from 2014 to 2017 – in order to further understand the trajectory of her treatment by popular and literary outlets. I chose 1998 as the starting point because while her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was published in 1999, she had been publishing short stories in outlets like *The New Yorker*, for some time before that.¹⁹⁷ I then began pulling from these groupings specific themes and angles of framing that emerged time and time again. I will be analyzing five themes – marriage, food, diaspora, universality, and language – and within each theme I will look at changing importance over the course of her career. Her brand's malleability makes these five topics only a

The most explicitly important topic that appears time and time again in nearly all the reviews I read was that of marriage. There is a fascination with Lahiri's understandings of love and companionship, and even larger fascination with the concept of the infamous South Asian arranged marriage. This preoccupation dates back to the days of Christian missionaries,¹⁹⁸ and has not dulled in the curiosity it piques. Admittedly, Lahiri's early plotlines do include heavy commentary on marriage, so it would make sense for reviewers use this as a lens. They however, also appear to look past just her characters, and turn to Lahiri herself as the ultimate voice of reason and source of information on marriage, because of her Indian roots. This

¹⁹⁷ "Jhumpa Lahiri." Biography.com. April 2, 2014. Accessed November 5, 2017. <https://www.biography.com/people/jhumpa-lahiri-21465687>.

¹⁹⁸ Chaudhuri, Nupur, and Margaret Strobel. *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992. P.194-195

style of analyzing her brand is a clear nod to a specifically foreign and Indian authenticity that is an important part of her early career.

Another example of this kind of symbolic authenticity attributed to Lahiri's Indianness comes in the form of a focus on South Asian food. Food and authenticity have a long history of being tied to one another,¹⁹⁹ and this relationship is explicitly put on display here. Although food is a relatively small topic in Lahiri's work, reviewers appear to often grab at moments of her prose in which spices and flavors flow through, and focus on moments in her personal life, like when a "call about the Pulitzer interrupted her cooking."²⁰⁰ Food is the perfect example of manageable difference.

As Lahiri becomes an established author in the American landscape, and no longer needs to be explained by a concrete tie to India, reviewers appear to return to a more American idea of authenticity by means of self-creation. The world has also become more fluid by this point, and diasporic authors such as Lahiri no longer must necessarily be seen as foreign. They can be held to American stands. Reviewers do this work by focusing heavily on her diasporic status, transnational ties and the pain and suffering that accompanies her status as an exile.²⁰¹ The idea of movement remains constant throughout, but slowly shifts away from a tie to Indian land, to an

¹⁹⁹ Negra, Diane. 2002. Ethnic food fetishism, whiteness, and nostalgia in recent film and television. *The Velvet Light Trap - A Critical Journal of Film and Television*(Fall): 62-76, <http://www.wesleyan.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2049387?accountid=14963> (accessed April 9, 2018). P.62

²⁰⁰ Taylor, Charles. "'Interpreter of Maladies'." Salon. September 24, 2011. Accessed April 09, 2018. <https://www.salon.com/1999/07/27/lahiri/>.

²⁰¹ Kachka, Boris. "The Confidence Artist." March 31, 2018. Accessed March 10, 2018. <http://nymag.com/arts/books/profiles/45571/>.

overwhelming acceptance of fluid boundaries and the trying negotiation of identity that comes along with this new concept.

The next significant portion of Lahiri's reviews focuses on the overwhelmingly negative response to her novel *The Lowland*. With this 2013 novel, Lahiri attempts for the first time to step away from her universality and to be a political writer. She intertwines real histories and social nuances in order to tell a tragic and enlightening tale about the Naxalite Revolution in India, but nearly every reviewer felt that the resulting work lay flat. Lahiri's appeal, I argue, is that her books have been non-threatening enough that people have been able to focus on a desirable universality onto which they can project whatever form of authenticity they choose. Uncomfortable truths about political and institutional inequality and strife are a bit off base for Lahiri. Her departure from comfortable difference creates questions about her specific form of Indian American authenticity and negates her supposed universality. There is a tension, however, in the fact that she is labeled as postcolonial and then chided for writing about political revolution, and I believe this dissonance is an ill faced by the minority celebrity.

Her reviews appear to slowly move farther and farther away from specific Indian ties, which mimics the trajectory of her work as well. Her new focus on speaking and writing only in Italian, which feels gimmicky at times, is grounded by reviewers as yet a further manifestation of her commitment to truly transnational living and behavior. Language is thus another important theme as people choose to focus on the fact that she was born speaking Bengali, and had to learn English in

order to communicate in the U.S.,²⁰² and is now choosing to learn another language and live yet another life. Her work is met with lukewarm reviews, but her method of immersing herself in the struggle of recreating her identity in another context is highly commended.

Through these themes and topics, I will explore the reception and further cementation of Lahiri's brand by reviewers and interviewers. It appears clear to me that different authentic constraints are being placed upon Lahiri at different points in her career, and this chapter explores how and why. My guiding question remains: How do notions of American authenticity unconsciously guide the decisions made by critics, and how do they affect our perception of minority authors like Lahiri?

I. Marriage

The most overwhelmingly present focus in the early review and interviews of Lahiri is the topic marriage, in all its forms. This form of intimacy is clearly of interest to Lahiri, and throughout her works, she uses it as a means of examining human relationships under pressure. She uses the idea of marriage almost as a way of picking apart the roots of true human behavior, because this is where she finds them to be the most vulnerable and so she "continues to wonder about [marriage], and will continue to write about it."²⁰³

²⁰² Norman, Howard. "In Other Words' Review: Jhumpa Lahiri's Love Letter to Italian." *The Washington Post*, January 28, 2016. Accessed February 17, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/in-other-words-review-jhumpa-lahiris-love-letter-to-italian/2016/01/28/99a83058-c06a-11e5-bcda-62a36b394160_story.html?utm_term=.7018f8d436e0.

²⁰³ Chotiner, Isaac. "Jhumpa Lahiri." *The Atlantic*, April 2008. Accessed December 2, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/04/jhumpa-lahiri/306725/>.

Putting relationships under a microscope is work that all writers do in some form, and yet their work is often not boiled down to this single element in the same way. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, reviewers really do appear to be attributing the topic to Lahiri herself, rather than just her characters. This archaic marker of Indian authenticity dates far back as a mode of study because “how we choose a partner, or the way in which other people select a partner for us, forms one of the most fascinating questions for the cross-cultural researcher.”²⁰⁴ These first cross-cultural researchers took the form of western missionaries in India.²⁰⁵

Though many white westerners pride themselves on their system of “love marriages,” in fact, “the most common method of mate selection is by arrangement.”²⁰⁶ When Christian missionaries first visited Indian, however, they instantly latched on to the practice of arranged marriage as “the area of social life most in need of change.”²⁰⁷ As a result, much writing was done on Indian marriages, and it became cemented as one of the first major ideas associated with Indian life and thus Indian authenticity. It is clear why in this time, as reviewers scramble to make sense of Lahiri, they are firmly tying her to marriage.

From 1998-2000, nine out of eleven detailed reviews on Lahiri and her first collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, focused at least 50% or more of their article on marriage in conjunction with her stories and with Lahiri herself. I quantified this by counting the number of different topics explored in each article, as well as the actual word count devoted to said topics. While this collection of short stories does in fact

²⁰⁴ Goodwin, Robin. *Personal Relationship Across Culture*. London: Routledge, 1999. P.47

²⁰⁵ Ibid. P.47

²⁰⁶ Ibid. P.47

²⁰⁷ Chaudhuri, Nupur, and Margaret Strobel. *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992. P.194-195

touch upon relationships of love and friendship, the focus is disproportionate. They question Lahiri heavily about it, and talk about everything from “love across boundaries,”²⁰⁸ to more generally “marriages that have been arranged, rushed into, betrayed, invaded, and exhausted.”²⁰⁹ These are not joyous marriages, but rather, ones that are bleeding. The fascination does not merely go as deep as the characters on the page, and the reviewers fully turn to Lahiri herself as some kind of expert on the topic, often implicitly and also explicitly asking her: “How do you have such a keen grasp of marital problems?”²¹⁰ This questioning serves as a clear sign that they do in fact see in her as attached to a particular authority, and dare I say, authenticity.

At this time in her life, Lahiri is unmarried, and thus is merely “imagin[ing] things that [she is] not a part of,”²¹¹ but she notes that “as an Indian, the idea of marriage loomed large in [her] life.”²¹² Marriage is so tightly wound with Lahiri that it becomes a metaphor for her work, as writer and critic Caleb Crain of the New York Times put it: “No marriage is as arbitrary and accidental as one between a writer and a reader, set up by a brief infatuation in a bookstore or a the enthusiasm of a third party.”²¹³ The understanding here is that Lahiri not only writes about marriage, but in some ways, represents Indian marriage, even as an unmarried woman.

²⁰⁸ "Interpreter of Maladies, by Jhumpa Lahiri (Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin)." Pulitzer.org. Accessed February 09, 2018. <http://www.pulitzer.org/winners/jhumpa-lahiri>.

²⁰⁹ "Pulitzer for Jhumpa Lahiri." The Hindu. April 12, 2000. Accessed April 09, 2018. <http://www.thehindu.com/2000/04/12/stories/01120004.htm>.

²¹⁰ Newsweek Staff. "The Maladies of Belonging." Newsweek, September 19, 1999. Accessed November 13, 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/maladies-belonging-166262>.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Crain, Caleb. "Subcontinental Drift." The New York Times. July 11, 1999. Accessed April 09, 2018.

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/07/11/reviews/990711.11craint.html?mcubz=1>.

This next grouping of time, from 2001 to 2003, exemplifies a slight shift in the manner of speaking and understanding marriage, though not wildly so. This era is dominated by the publication of Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake*, which was then turned into a wildly popular film, directed by the infamous Mira Nair. Reviewers here appear to be focused on how "Lahiri's stories trace out the lives of various Bengali-Americans suffering through various stages of lovelorn distress."²¹⁴ Though the focus of many of these commentators remains steadily upon Lahiri's slightly dreary world, they appear now to be speaking more of romantic relationships at large, and not specifically marriage. Several reviewers speak of how the main character of this piece, Gogol, reinvents himself and situates himself in the American context through his series of romantic relationships.²¹⁵ Many of the reviews however, continue to look to Lahiri personally as the source for marital insight, and ask her at this point if she "[has] reevaluated any of [her] writing about men and/or marriage now that [she is] both a wife and mother?"²¹⁶ Lahiri responds by saying that while, "motherhood, in particular, makes [her] look at life in an entirely different way,"²¹⁷ her approach to writing about marriage these remains unchanged. Again, this framing alludes to Lahiri somehow having always had an "inherent" knowledge of marriage.

In the next three time chunks, which amount to the eleven from 2006 to 2017, we see a significant shift in the treatment of the topic. The reviews shift to speaking

²¹⁴ Metcalf, Stephen. "Out of the Overcoat." *The New York Times*. September 28, 2003. Accessed February 17, 2018. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/28/books/out-of-the-overcoat.html>.

²¹⁵ Kakutani, Michiko. "From Calcutta to Suburbia: A Family's Perplexing Journey." *The New York Times*. September 02, 2003. Accessed January 25, 2018. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/02/books/books-of-the-times-from-calcutta-to-suburbia-a-family-s-perplexing-journey.html>.

²¹⁶ "Interview With Jhumpa Lahiri." *Writers Write*. Accessed April 09, 2018. <https://www.writerswrite.com/books/interview-with-jhumpa-lahiri-110120031>.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

more specifically about the marriages between characters and stop tying the symbol to Lahiri personally. Eventually the reviews begin to stop mentioning marriage at all. Given their earlier obsession with the topic, this is a drastic and alarming shift that becomes especially apparent when reading through two decades worth of reviews in a concentrated period of time. Marriage has certainly not disappeared from Lahiri's novels, and yet the institutions that shape public perception have nearly dropped the topic all together. Why is this?

I argue that marriage was first used in conjunction with the diasporic Lahiri in order to ground her as an "authentic Indian writer." Reviews had to make sense of her and place her somewhere within their known universe, so they used marriage as a means of grounding her difference. Her authenticity was relegated to a particular symbol or trait, much in the form of essentialism, unlike the new American ideas surrounding authenticity that highlighted navigation of multi-faceted identity. They here rely on an older version of authenticity, which reveals the inconsistency in the way Americans view their own authenticity in comparison to that of foreign peoples.

II. Food

As mentioned earlier, a lot of reviews from the early days of Lahiri's career focus on personal details about her life that bleed into her work. Another such detail that reviewers seem to grasp is that of Indian food and cooking, though interestingly, the topic is hardly touched upon in her written work. It makes sense, however, that they would choose to use Indian food as a means of expressing her Indian identity because "expertise with food is strongly linked to a sense of self-possession grounded

in ethnic and/or national affiliation.”²¹⁸ An accessible example of this phenomenon is the plethora “film stars who establish their representative relationship to a national culture through a cookbook.”²¹⁹

Here, it is used to directly tie Lahiri to India, regardless of the fact that she was raised elsewhere. Lahiri speaks at great lengths about how she has “inherited [her] parents’ preoccupations”²²⁰ as a result of postmemory, which “describes relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.”²²¹ This generational sense of loss and longing, however, is hard to comprehend as fact for those who do not experience it, and so it appears that many attempt to track this passage between diasporic generations through food. An example of this can be seen in the way in which one reviewer discusses the character of Mrs. Sen “feeling diminished without a daily regimen of fresh halibut”²²² as a means of translating the pain of her loss.

The reviews explicitly speak to this, saying: “Food in these stories is a talisman, a reassuring bit of the homeland to cling to. Spices and flavors waft through like themes in a piece of music.”²²³ Now this is obviously exoticizing writing that

²¹⁸ Negra, Diane. 2002. Ethnic food fetishism, whiteness, and nostalgia in recent film and television. *The Velvet Light Trap - A Critical Journal of Film and Television*(Fall): 62-76, <http://www.wesleyan.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2049387?accountid=14963> (accessed April 9, 2018). P.62

²¹⁹ Ibid. P.70

²²⁰ Newsweek Staff. "The Maladies of Belonging." *Newsweek*, September 19, 1999. Accessed November 13, 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/maladies-belonging-166262>.

²²¹ Hirsch, Marianne. "The Generation of Postmemory." *On Writing with Photography*, 2013, 202-30. Accessed February 20, 2018. doi:10.5749/minnesota/9780816674695.003.0009.

²²² Aguiar, Arun. "Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri." *PIF Magazine*, August 1999. Accessed November 13, 2017. <http://www.pifmagazine.com/1999/08/interview-with-jhumpa-lahiri/>.

²²³ Taylor, Charles. "'Interpreter of Maladies'." *Salon*. September 24, 2011. Accessed April 09, 2018. <https://www.salon.com/1999/07/27/lahiri/>.

stares in wonderment at the blend of spices and colors that run through South Asian cooking, but it is used by many of her reviews. It establishes another symbolically authentic tie to India, a generational progression, and lastly, again, a simple way of familiarizing difference. As her career progresses, this particular invocation quickly fades away.

III. Diaspora

An important topic of consideration in the case of Lahiri, of course, is the theme of diaspora. The way in which reviewers deal with the said topic changes throughout her career and as such, is important to assess in the context of authenticity. Towards the beginning of her popularity, they largely emphasize her physical connection to India, and by the end, they focus instead on the struggle associated with multiplicities of diasporic identity. The style of speaking indicates a shift towards understanding Lahiri's minority identity through an American framework of authenticity.

A typical review, as one published in the popular Seattle-based literary magazine, PIF Magazine, in 1999, seems to follow a basic format. They introduce Lahiri not first as a new author or cultural commenter, but rather as “Jhumpa Lahiri, 32, [and] was born to Bengali Indian parents in London, moved to Rhode Island before she could say her first *haw haw*, often vacationed in Calcutta during her youth,

and now lives on the border of Greenwich Village.”²²⁴ Her authenticity is very concretely and specifically tied to place, rather than to any self-determined quality.

This decision on the part of reviewers is inaccurate, especially since Lahiri early on spends a lot of time discussing the “constant sense of exile”²²⁵ from every place she resides, and focuses on characters that “date, vacation, emigrate, and work across cultural and national borders.”²²⁶ She appears to be very set on lifting characters from their cultural and localized contexts and creating “a paean to their bifurcated lives.”²²⁷ Reviewers in the time period from 1998 to about 2006 are not interested in doing the same for her.

They are, as I mentioned earlier, attempting to make sense of Lahiri as she enters this new literary space. Almost as a justification for her subject matter and their slotting of her as an “immigrant author,”²²⁸ they repeatedly mention her visits to Calcutta, though never actually specifying the duration or frequency of said trips. Later however, especially from 2009 onwards, a tie to land becomes less important and they instead focus on multiplicity of identity and the reinvention that comes along with that. Reviews begin to describe Lahiri more along the lines of this review in the New York Times:

²²⁴ Aguiar, Arun. "Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri." *PIF Magazine*, August 1999. Accessed November 13, 2017. <http://www.pifmagazine.com/1999/08/interview-with-jhumpa-lahiri/>.

²²⁵ "Interview With Jhumpa Lahiri." *Writers Write*. Accessed April 09, 2018. <https://www.writerswrite.com/books/interview-with-jhumpa-lahiri-110120031>.

²²⁶ Craim, Caleb. "Subcontinental Drift." *The New York Times*. July 11, 1999. Accessed April 09, 2018. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/07/11/reviews/990711.11craint.html?mcubz=1>.

²²⁷ Kumari, Trishya. "Book Review: 'The Interpreter of Maladies' by Jhumpa Lahiri." *Between The Lines*. July 24, 2014. Accessed March 09, 2018. <http://betweenthelines.in/2012/07/book-review-the-interpreter-maladies-jhumpa-lahiri/>.

²²⁸ Cannon, Steve. "'Namesake' by Jhumpa Lahiri." *A GATHERING OF THE TRIBES*. January 2, 2003. Accessed March 20, 2018. <http://www.tribes.org/web/2003/01/02/namesake-by-jhumpa-lahiri>.

Lahiri, who is of Bengali descent but was born in London, raised in Rhode Island and today makes her home in Brooklyn, shows that the place to which you feel the strongest attachment isn't necessarily the country you're tied to by blood or birth: it's the place that allows you to become yourself. This place, she quietly indicates, may not lie on any map.²²⁹

Reviewers' understanding of Lahiri's authenticity has shifted towards the American conception of the term, and is now no longer attaching it to place.

It is certainly important to recognize that times have changed by this point as well. As the 2000s progress, being diasporic, transnational, or global is hardly a new phenomenon anymore and certainly not one that is little discussed. Lahiri's "hook...the Bengali-American Experience,"²³⁰ is no longer fresh, and as such, the specific facts of movement are no longer discussed. The emotion behind such uprooting, however, is still powerful and made especially striking by Lahiri's deft hand. It is then a focus on "cultural dissonance experienced by the children of immigrants"²³¹ and resulting identity negotiations they must work through that becomes the highlight of many reviews. The changing tone with which Lahiri's authenticity is discussed reveals the difficulty of diasporic authors: they must be authentically different, but authentic as defined by American standards.

²²⁹ Schillinger, Liesl. "American Children." *New York Times*, April 6, 2008. Accessed March 10, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/06/books/review/Schillinger3-t.html>.

²³⁰ Kachka, Boris. "The Confidence Artist." March 31, 2018. Accessed March 10, 2018. <http://nymag.com/arts/books/profiles/45571/>.

²³¹ Chotiner, Isaac. "Jhumpa Lahiri." *The Atlantic*, April 2008. Accessed December 2, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/04/jhumpa-lahiri/306725/>.

IV. Universality and the Failure of *The Lowland*

Another element of Lahiri's brand is her supposed universality, which reviewers praise to no end, a bit in the beginning of her career and with growing intensity towards the middle. My own understanding of this is that they are commending her ability to appeal universally to western audiences through her portrayal of non-threatening difference, and to represent a multitude of authenticities. This writing style allows her to be authentic to some higher Eurocentric ideal of "authorial authenticity" that places her in a greater literary tradition, while diluting her "Indianness." It is important to note that Lahiri has also received criticism for being too universal, which is the constant paradox. People want her to be universal enough that she is not solely an "ethnic writer" and yet they also need her to be concretely different. In this section, I will look at the time in which she did attempt to be politically, racially, and historically specific and reviewers reacted negatively.

First, it is an interesting exercise to take a look at the wide variety of different authors to whom she is compared. These are authors from vastly different literary genres, time periods, and walks of life, and this great disparity shows the extent to which reviews truly wish to make Lahiri accessible and understandable. The names mentioned just in these fifty reviews include: Samuel Richardson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Raymond Carver, O. Henry, Guy Maupassant, Roald Dahl, Amy Tan, Leo Tolstoy, William Faulkner, Rabindranath Tagore, Anton Chekhov, James Joyce, Virginia Wolfe, Nikolai Gogol, Sir Walter Scott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Trevor, J.D. Salinger, Thomas Hardy, Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, Emily Dickinson, Charles Dickens, Flannery O'Connor, Andre Dubus, John Cheever, and Dante

Alighieri.²³² It goes without saying that this list is by no means comprehensive, and is in its own right, utterly ridiculous.

Reviewers also achieve this by focusing heavily on the aspects of Lahiri's work that can indeed appeal quite easily to the larger public. Instead of tackling diaspora, they label her as "speaking[ing] with universal eloquence to everyone who has ever felt like a foreigner."²³³ Instead of focusing on the burden of maintaining and protecting culture, they say her characters are "ordinary people who just happen to be Indians caught in the throes of immigration pangs."²³⁴ Instead of relationships frayed by distance and the pressures to perform in a new country, they discuss "couples and families joining, coming apart, dealing with death, and estrangement."²³⁵ The point here is clear. This is after all, a business, and publishers and agents wish to intrigue people by highlighting Lahiri's malleable appeal. This is not to say that publishing and reviewing is the same monopolized enterprise, but only that there is much overlaps with regards to who controls what, and how that control is exerted. Success in the literary world is largely dependent on who your agent knows.²³⁶

Lahiri, as mentioned in the previous chapter, largely does feed into this narrative of universality. Her characters are faced with troubles that are "deeply private, personal, ultimately without reference to the ostensible political

²³² This list is from a compilation of reviews spanning the two decades from 1998-2017 and found in various U.S. newspapers and magazines.

²³³ "Interpreter of Maladies, by Jhumpa Lahiri (Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin)." Pulitzer.org. Accessed February 09, 2018. <http://www.pulitzer.org/winners/jhumpa-lahiri>.

²³⁴ Kumari, Trishya. "Book Review: 'The Interpreter of Maladies' by Jhumpa Lahiri." Between The Lines. July 24, 2014. Accessed March 09, 2018. <http://betweenthelines.in/2012/07/book-review-the-interpreter-maladies-jhumpa-lahiri/>.

²³⁵ Kachka, Boris. "The Confidence Artist." March 31, 2018. Accessed March 10, 2018. <http://nymag.com/arts/books/profiles/45571/>.

²³⁶ This statement is from in-class comments made by professor Hirsh Sawhney,

background.”²³⁷ Her characters face universal ailments such as health problems, or marriage troubles, or lack of professional growth. They largely do not, however, face problems of inequality and racism that would likely occur for brown people especially in the wake of 9/11. As one reviewer so aptly, albeit harshly, put it, “it is a novel about the wonderbread wanting to be a loaf of Balthazar’s best...the novel is more about class divisions than cross cultural confusion.”²³⁸

Even though Lahiri has faced repeated criticism for not engaging with difficult political truths,²³⁹ when she did attempt to tackle an explicitly political situation – the Naxalite rebellion in India – she was judged more harshly than ever by critics. Lahiri rarely received negative reviews until 2013, after she published *The Lowland*. The New York Times Book Review noted that “if some of [her] strengths are present in the new novel, they seem adrift in its larger swaths of time and space, diluted by waves of politics and history that Lahiri herself has chosen to bring in.”²⁴⁰ Other reviews say that she is simply unable to make the jump from short stories to full-length novels,²⁴¹ but the fact of the matter is that she was easily able to do so with *The Namesake*. The Washington Post notes that “writing this fine is easy to praise,” and so that itself is not the issue, but rather, “there’s something naggingly synthetic

²³⁷ Deb, Siddhartha. "Sins of the Brother." *New York Times*, September 27, 2013. Accessed January 14, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/books/review/jhumpa-lahiris-lowland.html>.

²³⁸ Cannon, Steve. "'Namesake' by Jhumpa Lahiri." A GATHERING OF THE TRIBES. January 2, 2003. Accessed March 20, 2018. <http://www.tribes.org/web/2003/01/02/namesake-by-jhumpa-lahiri>.

²³⁹ “What Lies Beneath: Lahiri’s Brand of Desirable Difference in *Unaccustomed Earth*.” In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, 51-71. 1st ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. P.52

²⁴⁰ Deb, Siddhartha. "Sins of the Brother." *New York Times*, September 27, 2013. Accessed January 14, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/books/review/jhumpa-lahiris-lowland.html>.

²⁴¹ Khakpour, Porochista. "Jhumpa Lahiri Comes Up Short In 'The Lowland'." *Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 2013. Accessed February 20, 2018.

<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/sep/26/entertainment/la-ca-jc-jhumpa-lahiri-20130929>.

about this [historical] tableau of woe.”²⁴² So while critics have for years noted her lack of engagement with specific political histories and realities, perhaps alluding to a desire for her to be more typically postcolonial, they also are quick to reject her attempt to do so. This pressure placed on minority writers is nonsensical because it appears to want Lahiri to be an authentic American minority artist, while still maintaining the universality that allows her to take the shape of many different forms of authenticity that readers desire.

Essentially what most reviewers, and particularly this one review in from *The New York Times* written by Siddhartha Deb appears to be saying, is that Lahiri’s foray into historical writing simply isn’t believable. He notes that:

There are passing references to the civil rights movement and the antiwar demonstrations, to organic farming and an Obama sticker, to India’s vaunted new economic policies (now suddenly in trouble) and to the re-emergence of the Naxalites, now underground in the forests of central India, but these things seem to have as little to do with the characters as the characters have to do with them. It makes all four generations of the family appear strangely bereft, not so much upwardly mobile immigrants making it into the promised land as much as characters flailing at the boundaries of life, wanting to be let across the borders into the mysterious disquiet that afflicts so much of the rest of humanity.²⁴³

With this quote, he states that Lahiri’s characters barely appear to be human. This critique is a damning one, and while its truth is a matter of debate, the kind of strong

²⁴² Charles, Ron. "Review: The Lowland, by Jhumpa Lahiri." *The Washington Post*, September 25, 2013. Accessed March 12, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/review-the-lowland-by-jhumpa-lahiri/2013/09/24/7b9dcba-2005-11e3-8459-657e0c72fec8_story.html?utm_term=.abc75b7290b7.

²⁴³ Deb, Siddhartha. "Sins of the Brother." *New York Times*, September 27, 2013. Accessed January 14, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/books/review/jhumpa-lahiris-lowland.html>.

language used in reviews regarding *The Lowland* is not. It is a complete departure from the kind of airy reverence with which she is spoken about before.

Again, this example exemplifies the delicate tension created by reviewers for non-white writers. They must be authentically different, but not so different that they cannot also be universal. It is also notable that Lahiri attempts to make this departure from the universal much later in her career, after reviewers have already applied many different versions of authenticity to her. They moved her authenticity away from specific Indianness – in the form of a focus on symbols like marriage and food – and to a more American idea of diasporic self-creation. Reviewers and readers need to *continue* to be able to see her as a canvas in order to make sense of the many shapes she has taken, and the many that she will take in the future. Perhaps it was too late for Lahiri to turn to difficult and foreign political truths. While other diasporic authors might be able to do such a thing, her brand of universal authenticity is specific to her previous work and her entire cultivated persona. She has already been slated as the comfortable American version of Indian difference. This distinction allows her great fame, but also acts as a disciplining force.²⁴⁴

V. Language and Movement

Language and translation have been an important theme throughout reviews of Lahiri, though perhaps in a more theoretical sense. English serves the “supra-

²⁴⁴ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin Books, 1977. P.170

language function”²⁴⁵ in the South Asian diaspora, and thus Lahiri writes in English and her characters always speak in English. As a result, reviewers from the early part of her career often discuss cultural translation and the fact that “Lahiri, who was raised and educated in the US and whose parents are Bengali, is adept at showing us these cultural and generational conflicts.”²⁴⁶ She was seen as an interpreter for people who may be speaking the same language, but with entirely different contexts.

When she makes the startling jump to move away from English in the more recent portion of her career, however, she somewhat falls out of the mainstream postcolonial spotlight, and linguistic choice becomes an obvious focus. Without English, how can they place her as an authentically South Asian American Diasporic person? This is not to say that she is no longer a household name and the first face one thinks of when considering diasporic South Asians, but only that her more recent work has been a complete departure.²⁴⁷ Lahiri had been studying Italian for quite some time, but in 2015 she decided to “abandon the English language that made her famous and move with her family to Rome.”²⁴⁸

She then committed herself to speaking and writing purely in Italian, because, as Lahiri so simply put it, “she was in love.”²⁴⁹ As an author, Lahiri uses this “lexical

²⁴⁵ Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna. "Introduction." In *A History of English Literature in English*, 1-26. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. P.18

²⁴⁶ Tuck, Lily. "Exiles on Main Street." *Washington Post*, April 6, 2008. Accessed February 20, 2018. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/03/AR2008040303131.html>.

²⁴⁷ Norman, Howard. "'In Other Words' Review: Jhumpa Lahiri's Love Letter to Italian." *The Washington Post*, January 28, 2016. Accessed February 17, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/in-other-words-review-jhumpa-lahiris-love-letter-to-italian/2016/01/28/99a83058-c06a-11e5-bcda-62a36b394160_story.html?utm_term=.7018f8d436e0.

²⁴⁸ Luzzi, Joseph. "'In Other Words,' by Jhumpa Lahiri." *New York Times*, March 14, 2016. Accessed February 23, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/books/review/in-other-words-by-jhumpa-lahiri.html>.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

displacement”²⁵⁰ in order to reconnect with writing and language and the power of “displacement and the discoveries it can lead to.”²⁵¹ This is fascinating given that the entirety of Lahiri’s other work has focused on the pain of being an “exile.”²⁵² Perhaps here she is reclaiming her agency here by *choosing* to completely upstage her life, but this overwhelming privilege to be able to reinvent so easily is also likely why her new writing can feel difficult to connect with and understand. The majority of people could not simply replant themselves at a whim in another country’s cultural and linguistic soil.

While critics have for this reason dismissed her book, *In Other Words*, they have also overwhelmingly applauded her bravery and the risk she took in order to discover her authentic self. The criticism directed towards the book mostly says it is “repetitive, self-dramatic and self-hobbled...packed with watercolor observations,”²⁵³ and also that it “feels starved of actual experiences of Italy.”²⁵⁴ That latter criticism sounds oddly similar to the grievances of reviewers who commented on her dissociation with historical backdrops earlier in her career.

More so, however, they commend her choice to write the book in Italian and not translate it herself, so “the English we read is not hers, but belongs to her

²⁵⁰ Garner, Dwight. "Review: Jhumpa Lahiri's 'In Other Words,' a Writer's Headlong Immersion Into Italian." *New York Times*, February 9, 2016. Accessed February 13, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/10/books/review-jhumpa-lahiris-in-other-words-a-writers-headlong-immersion-into-italian.html>.

²⁵¹ Luzzi, Joseph. "'In Other Words,' by Jhumpa Lahiri." *New York Times*, March 14, 2016. Accessed February 23, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/books/review/in-other-words-by-jhumpa-lahiri.html>.

²⁵² Garner, Dwight. "Review: Jhumpa Lahiri's 'In Other Words,' a Writer's Headlong Immersion Into Italian." *New York Times*, February 9, 2016. Accessed February 13, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/10/books/review-jhumpa-lahiris-in-other-words-a-writers-headlong-immersion-into-italian.html>.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ Hadley, Tessa. "In Other Words by Jhumpa Lahiri Review – a Pulitzer Prize Winner Gives up Writing and Speaking in English." *The Guardian*, January 30, 2016. Accessed February 20, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/30/in-other-words-jhumpa-lahiri-review-learning-italian>.

translator, Ann Goldstein.”²⁵⁵ By refusing to translate her work, and instead challenging herself to exist only in Italian, she is once again renegotiating the amalgamation of her identity in order to earn some kind of fresh authenticity. The book quite literally is “written as an adult, but also, from the linguistic point of view of a child,”²⁵⁶ which plays neatly into this idea of returning to the authentic origin. Interestingly though, here the origin in mind is not some idea of ethnic essentialism, but rather, a wholly transnational and wholly global creation.

I argue that the reason this book has gotten far less publicity and reached a smaller height of success²⁵⁷ is precisely because it *is* so unabashedly transnational, and can not be read through any sort of postcolonial lens. The shift in language appears to transcend any ties, symbolic or otherwise, to nation or place. They do attempt to frame the shift in terms of “the new language free[ing] her from what she describes as the clash between the Bengali of her Indian parents and the English she learned after her family immigrated to the United States.”²⁵⁸ This framework paints a picture of her life as a continuous struggle without agency, even though she quite clearly explained to interviewers that she is now a “self-imposed exile” and that it is exciting to “start again from the beginning, as if [she] had never written anything in

²⁵⁵ Luzzi, Joseph. “‘In Other Words,’ by Jhumpa Lahiri.” *New York Times*, March 14, 2016. Accessed February 23, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/books/review/in-other-words-by-jhumpa-lahiri.html>.

²⁵⁶ Garner, Dwight. “Review: Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘In Other Words,’ a Writer’s Headlong Immersion Into Italian.” *New York Times*, February 9, 2016. Accessed February 13, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/10/books/review-jhumpa-lahiris-in-other-words-a-writers-headlong-immersion-into-italian.html>.

²⁵⁷ Success here is measured by comparing the number of reviews written about *in altre parole* to the number of reviews written about any of her other collections.

²⁵⁸ Luzzi, Joseph. “‘In Other Words,’ by Jhumpa Lahiri.” *New York Times*, March 14, 2016. Accessed February 23, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/books/review/in-other-words-by-jhumpa-lahiri.html>.

[her] life.”²⁵⁹ Lahiri has completely removed herself from the path of a typical “minority writer” in a way that only her class privilege could allow, and yet unlike her attempt at writing history, she is praised for doing so by reviewers because she is playing by the rules of American authenticity. She is perhaps even epitomizing the behavior of a “true artist,” who is dedicated to her craft and to the cultivation of self beyond all else.

She is thus allowed to continue wearing her authentic crown, it is just a bit less relevant and a bit more confusing to consider for what it stands.

VI. Conclusion

In summary, it is quite clear from combing through 50 reviews written about Lahiri that she has been both constrained and uplifted many different kinds of authenticity. During her rise to prominence, she was first tethered to a foreign and Indian authenticity through essentialist symbols. In the middle portion of her career reviewers began to focus on her diasporic status, and how she wrangled with the pain of exile in order to create her strong and authentic sense of self.

Ironically, though reviewers clearly were trying to make sense of her as an immigrant author, as she grew more popular a clear trend emerged in which they began comparing her to any number of famous canonized and mostly western writers. There exists a burdensome tension here at this point in her career because they are

²⁵⁹ Norman, Howard. “‘In Other Words’ Review: Jhumpa Lahiri’s Love Letter to Italian.” *The Washington Post*, January 28, 2016. Accessed February 17, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/in-other-words-review-jhumpa-lahiris-love-letter-to-italian/2016/01/28/99a83058-c06a-11e5-bcda-62a36b394160_story.html?utm_term=.7018f8d436e0.

attempting to familiarize her both as uniquely different and as universal in the same breath. This moment only further highlights the lack of unity in ideas of authenticity, and the unique and claustrophobic place in which it puts minority authors. When Lahiri does attempt to branch out of her brand of desirable difference and discuss the brutal histories of the Naxalite Rebellion, she is harshly criticized. Though unspoken, the literary world can chastise her in this way. Her attempt to engage with politics is too much of a departure from the more universal and lightly diasporic direction that is required of her.

In her most recent works, as she returns to the process of reshaping and revamping her connection with language and writing, Lahiri falls neatly back into the American ideal of the universally authentic artist proudly struggling to untangle the complex web of identity and origin. Simultaneously, she falls out and away from the postcolonial conversation. It here, in an entirely foreign language and foreign context, that reviewers again begin to highlight her skill and her fortitude as a “true” writer.

There is no simple way to sum up the relationship between Lahiri’s brand and authenticity, because the object to which Lahiri is authentic is continuously changing. If anything, this research proves that authenticity is as porous as cultural commentators, such as reviewers and interviewers, will allow it to be, and absolutely always dependent on context. For minority writers, however, it is clear that the effects of not understanding the rules of the unscripted authenticity game are strong, and sometimes damning.

While we may champion multiplicity of identity for individuals, we still necessitate that large-scale public figures like Lahiri be easily recognizable symbols

of authenticity on which we can base our own. As an artist, and as one of the few mainstream Indian literary celebrities, Lahiri is expected to be every version of both “universal” and minority American authenticity. What exactly those are, however, remains constantly in flux, and thus, is entirely unknown.

Conclusion

Today, Lahiri is married to Greek-Guatemalan-American journalist Alberto Vourvoulis-Bush,²⁶⁰ is a part-time resident in Rome, and an honorary member of the Creative Writing faculty at Princeton University.²⁶¹ The abridged Lahiri biography that is listed on the Princeton Faculty website includes no personal information, and focuses heavily on her more recent work in Italian, translation and transnationalism.²⁶² Her seat at the table of this prestigious university is a further indication of her canonization in the American literary world, and a validation of her brand of universal authenticity. It is interesting to note however, that Lahiri appears to have completely moved away from the tone of her earlier, more specific, “Indian immigrant focused” work after her publication of *The Lowland*. Perhaps the aforementioned “heavy burden”²⁶³ of needing to be authentic as an American minority artist, and also universal enough for American readers was simply too much. Lahiri continues to produce writing, but in an entirely different context.

If but one truth can be made clear from the completion of this thesis, it is that any discussion surrounding authenticity is an inherently complicated one, especially in the case of non-white Americans. I have grounded this exploration in the specific

²⁶⁰ Pierce, Sheila. "Why Pulitzer Prize-winner Jhumpa Lahiri Quit the US for Italy." *Financial Times*. May 22, 2015. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/3b188aec-f8bf-11e4-be00-00144feab7de>.

²⁶¹ "Faculty & Visiting Writers." Princeton University. Accessed April 16, 2018. <http://arts.princeton.edu/academics/creative-writing/creative-writing-people/>.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ Pellas, Francesca. "What Am I Trying to Leave Behind?" An Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri." *Literary Hub*. August 31, 2017. Accessed February 15, 2018. <https://lithub.com/what-am-i-trying-to-leave-behind-an-interview-with-jhumpa-lahiri/>.

case of Jhumpa Lahiri because her diasporic identity and public persona expose a misalignment in the way the American literary sphere connects the artist to both specific identifiable authenticity and also universal struggle. While authenticity is no longer explicitly considered the ultimate standard to which all artists are held, the idea of being true to something higher or deeper still guides the way in which we think and speak about literature and art. The coded language used by reviewers to demarcate shifts in authenticity from a more essentializing and reductive view, to a more self-negotiated and individualized view, all fall under the umbrella of postcolonial authenticity. The pieces of Lahiri's authentic puzzle do not fit neatly together, as seen by the demands for her continued universality, and this misalignment only proves that it does not matter so much to the public to what she is authentic, but only that she is authentic to *something accessible*.

In Chapter One we introduced ourselves to Lahiri by walking through her life as an Indian-American woman, and as a prolific author. In addressing her biography, we are able to understand with what literary scholars and interpreters are working, and how this may translate to her overwhelming success. Her life is replete with a number of complex identities that she personally must navigate, but it is clear that the rest of the world is attempting to draw her within a clean outline.

Chapter Two then took a step back from Lahiri herself in order to understand what authenticity truly is, what it has been historically, and what it continues to be today. I break authenticity down into its three main uses – personal, cultural, and aesthetic – in order to create a foundation amidst a debate that covers an overwhelming and nonsensical amount of ground. Through my research into the history of the term,

it becomes clear that while still broad, authenticity does hold a particular meaning in the American context. It specifically refers to a return to the origin and a rebuilding of self through arduous struggle and perseverance.²⁶⁴ This idea of hard work and sacrifice powers American ideology and creates the framework through which all those who are seen as truly “American” are judged. Beyond that, however, it also places importance on recognition of authenticity through self-expression, and thus sets up the artist as the ultimate authentic hero.²⁶⁵

Next, in chapter three, I look at my first of two examples of how authenticity implicitly guides our reception of authors today. I relied on the idea that because non-white authors are inherently seen as different, they cannot simply just be included in national literature, and must in fact be organized into one of two categories of difference: likely either Postcolonial Literature or World Literature. Lahiri is clearly mistakenly identified as a postcolonial author, simply because it is seen in the American context as a category that is more authentic to minority identity. The genre speaks of minority struggle and oppression, and a final attempted reclaiming of agency and identity,²⁶⁶ all of which plays into to the American understanding of authenticity. I also argue that because it aligns Lahiri to the colonized people of a once less developed nation, it encourages a kind of chronological racism that allows for Westerners to see minorities as closer to an authentic past.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980. P.99, P.133

²⁶⁵ Taylor, Charles 1931-. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. P. 32-33

²⁶⁶ Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial And Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. P.3

²⁶⁷ Theodossopoulos, Dimitrios. "Laying Claim to Authenticity: Five Anthropological Dilemmas." *Anthropological Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (2013): 337-60. doi:10.1353/anq.2013.0032. p.342

The fourth and final chapter takes the ideas set up by the overall categorization discussed in the third, and breaks it down into specific time chunks in order to analyze reviews written about Lahiri's brand throughout the course of her career. In the beginning of her career, there is a clear push to align her with symbolic and essentializing discourse surrounding a foreign or "othered" authenticity to Indianness. By the middle and towards the more recent part of her career, we can clearly see how reviewers switch over to using the language of American authenticity in order to describe her decisions and her work. The one piece that does not fit this trend is the absolutely negative reviews that meet the publishing of her one and only political work, *The Lowland*. I understood this as such: by this point in her career, Lahiri had already moved through several stages of Indian authenticity, and into the realm of American diasporic authenticity. The latter realm highlights her universality and yet this attempt to focus to solely foreign politics alienates her readership, and prevents them from being able to craft their own authenticity through her. That angers her readership even more than her recent switch to writing in Italian, because here she is still adhering to American notions of authenticity by returning to origins and rebuilding her entire sense of self. Validating cultural markers, like a professorship at Princeton, thus reward Lahiri.

This research, while very important and interesting, raises more questions than I am able to answer at this time. It pinpoints what exactly cultural authenticity, as loose as the term may be, means to Americans, and challenges it by studying how the ideology has affected the reception of someone whose national ties are not quite so clear. This study would, however, need to be much larger if I truly wanted to study

how American authenticity has changed over time, and also how it effects foreign understandings of authenticity. Since America stands as arguably the last remaining superpower, does our understanding of authenticity create the hegemonic standard for the rest of the world through widely circulated art and media?

It also demands a further investigation into the treatment of white minority authors, as well as those who are considered white non-minorities as well. How does authenticity affect their careers and the way in which people label and discuss them? Is the requirement for struggle also applied to them? This research would be made stronger by a clear look into how authenticity affects many different groups of writers. The tricky part is, ironically, choosing which of the endless number of identities one would choose to focus on in grouping said writers for further analysis.

Beyond that, I have also addressed in Chapter 4 that I was unable to actually interview and speak with publishing industry executives and literary critics. Extending the research in this way would productively allow us to hear directly from the source, instead of analyzing their resulting decisions surrounding classification and printed reviews.

Regardless of its shortcomings, what this thesis does show us is that the prioritization of authenticity is alive and well with regards to American art. Again, to what people are authentic holds not as much value as the fact that they are authentic to something at all. This is especially clear in the case of the artist, who comes to symbolize the epitome of authenticity purely as a result of their chosen craft.

No matter how much academia may be moving away from the idea of an “authentic/inauthentic” divide,²⁶⁸ it is vital that we continue to study and be aware of the way these concepts guide our lives and our perceptions those in the public sphere. There is an innate obsession with the idea of something at the “core,”²⁶⁹ and arguably one that grows even stronger in the face of an increasingly diasporic world. Identity is only becoming more and more complicated and layered, and so the “horizons of significance”²⁷⁰ on which we rely are only becoming stronger. As a response to the increasing number of “authenticities” that are created and claimed, people are retreating farther into their own. This further tethering to individual realities places a heavier challenge upon the universality of the authentic artist that supposedly encapsulates them all.

It is not likely that the majority of the world’s population will, at any time soon, accept itself as merely an amalgamation of circumstance. As such, we must continue to look to those who control culture, recognize their coded language, and analyze their undying devotion to the concept of a deeper and truer self. Authenticity and its henchmen will continue to rule for years to come.

²⁶⁸ Theodossopoulos, Dimitrios. "Laying Claim to Authenticity: Five Anthropological Dilemmas." *Anthropological Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (2013): 337-60. doi:10.1353/anq.2013.0032. p.343-347

²⁶⁹ Theodossopoulos, Dimitrios. "Laying Claim to Authenticity: Five Anthropological Dilemmas." *Anthropological Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (2013): 337-60. doi:10.1353/anq.2013.0032. p.342

²⁷⁰ Taylor, Charles 1931-. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. P. 38

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Post*, September 25, 2013. Accessed March 12, 2018.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/review-the-lowland-by-jhumpa-lahiri/2013/09/24/7b9dcbca-2005-11e3-8459-657e0c72fec8_story.html?utm_term=.abc75b7290b7.

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