

**The price of achieving the American Dream for the Indian immigrant in Jhumpa Lahiri's
short story 'This Blessed House'.**

Lahiri masterly weaves the theme of cultural integration of the Indian immigrant into her short story *This Blessed House* through Sanjeev's reaction to the discovery of various symbols of Christianity in a new house and contrasts it with Twinkle's reaction to the same objects. Lahiri shows the reader how different levels of integration between the immigrant and the first generation immigrant create a conflict that is brought out by the Christian objects. Finally, Twinkle becomes the catalyst for Sanjeev's loss of cultural identity to make place for his cultural integration into America.

The main characters in the story, Twinkle and Sanjeev, are newly-weds living in modern day Connecticut. Their marriage is the product of traditional Indian match-making between their families. Lahiri presents the Indian, male, professional elite through Sanjeev's character. He went abroad to study, graduated from an Ivy League American university and is successfully making his way up the corporate ladder. He even married the right woman for a man of his ambition, '...a pretty one, from a suitably high caste, who would soon have a master's degree.'¹

Twinkle, on the other hand, is a modern Indian woman; a tango-dancing writer who is fond of bookstores, smokes cigarettes, reads in bed and drinks whiskey. She has broken away from the stereotypical image of an Indian house-wife who is supposed to have a strong sense of duty towards her husband and home.² By putting these two contrasting stereotypes together, Lahiri creates a subtly maintained tension between these two main characters which can be read as the tension between the immigrant and the host country or the tension between Oriental culture and Western culture.

¹ Jhumpa Lahiri, 'This Blessed House', in *Interpreter of Maladies* (London: Flamingo, 2000), p. 148.

² *Ibid.*, p. 140.

While settling in their new house in Connecticut, Twinkle discovers an entire collection of ‘Christian paraphernalia’ (Lahiri, p.137) hidden in various places around the house. As one object is revealed after another, the reader sees the absurdity of the objects mount from a ‘white porcelain effigy of Christ’ (Lahiri, p.136) to ‘a dishtowel that had [...] the Ten Commandments printed on it.’ (Lahiri, p.144) The choice of objects reveals Lahiri’s sense of humour in her writing. Twinkle’s gradual discovery of these Christian symbols appeals to her sense of curiosity and wonder whereas they irritate Sanjeev. While Twinkle feels that their ‘house is blessed’ (Lahiri, p.144) Sanjeev verbally resists Twinkle’s attempts to display the symbols of Christian identity in the new home they are building together by asserting his own sense of cultural identity, rooted in Hinduism. (Lahiri, p.137)

The objects bring to the forefront the difference in integration into the host country between Sanjeev and Twinkle. While Sanjeev is an Indian immigrant to the country, Twinkle was born in the United States of America to Indian parents who immigrated from Calcutta. (Lahiri, p.142) It is this difference in integration that enables Twinkle to have a non-threatened, respectful attitude towards the ‘biblical menagerie’ (Lahiri, p.139) that continues to reveal itself in their home. The ‘Christian paraphernalia’ (Lahiri, p.137) are important symbols of integration into the Western host country. While Twinkle finds the discoveries of integration exciting and easy to accept, Sanjeev feels his cultural identity is being threatened by them. Twinkle becomes the catalyst for integration in Sanjeev’s life. While she welcomes the strange new symbols into their lives, openly accepting that they have a history and a place in their life, Sanjeev constantly seeks to reject them.

In her essay *The Travelling Subject and its (De)conceptualization* Melita Richter says that she ‘considers citizenship as a process and not simply as an outcome.’³ Lahiri shows the reader that

³ Melita Richter, ‘The Travelling Subject and its (De)conceptualization’, <<http://travellingconcepts.net/richter1.html>> [4 December 2009]

Sanjeev's move to America, graduation from MIT and success in corporate America should not be assumed as an indication that he has successfully integrated into his host country or accepted American culture, although he is achieving the American Dream. As a recent immigrant to America, Sanjeev is still going through the process of integrating into American culture. In contrast, Twinkle is a first generation, American-born citizen of Indian origin who has spent her childhood going through the process of integration into American culture. In her essay *Wanted: Transdisciplinary Methodologies in order to Analyse Histories Inscribed into Bodies and Minds* Sabine Grenz writes:

It appears as if in this case one cannot only talk about 'history tattooed on our bodies' but rather of different layers of petrified discourses, one rock stratum above the other, broken, melted again, having gone through enormous metamorphosis 'deep in the earth' (people's minds) and coming back to the surface mixed with each other, pieces of one sort embraced in another.⁴

Twinkle has undergone the 'enormous metamorphosis' needed to link her parents' immigrant past with her first generation experience as an American citizen in the present. This is why she is able to be a Hindu with henna-streaked hair (Lahiri, p.139) who also wears traditional Indian clothes (Lahiri, p.152) and still accept the symbols of Christianity into her home, whereas Sanjeev, who is still earlier in the process of integration, resists it as much as possible.

A significant point of conflict in the story arises when Twinkle discovers 'a plaster Virgin Mary as tall as their waists, with a blue painted hood draped over her head in the manner of an Indian bride.' (Lahiri, p.146) In an attempt to convince Sanjeev to keep the statue, Twinkle tells him that 'Every other person in this neighborhood has a statue of Mary on the lawn. We'll fit right in.' (Lahiri, p.146) She knows that Sanjeev wants to fit in. But, he is starting to realize that the price of

⁴ Sabine Grenz, 'Wanted: Transdisciplinary Methodologies in order to Analyse Histories Inscribed into Bodies and Minds', <<http://travellingconcepts.net/grenz1.html>> [4 December 2009]

the American Dream means giving up some of his cultural identity. He resists doing this and it leads to a fight between them, ultimately ending in Twinkle's tears. Sanjeev compromises on his cultural identity for the first time at this point by giving in to Twinkle and keeping the statue, but in a less conspicuous place in their home. (Lahiri, p.149)

At the end of the story, he finally surrenders through a physical representation of acceptance and surrender by hugging the large, silver bust of Christ in the final paragraph of the story. The mention of being careful with the feather hat on top of the bust suggests that Sanjeev's acceptance of integration into America is a careful balancing act that he has to learn to master. (Lahiri, p.157)

Lahiri keeps the story open-ended, leaving the reader to assume their own interpretation of the ending.

Throughout the text, Lahiri has a lyrical flow to her words, giving the reader the impression of a carefully constructed story using the bare minimum of words needed to convey the sense of diasporic alienation from the motherland:

Still, the presence of his college books in the room reminded him of a time in his life he recalled with fondness, when he would walk each evening across the Mass. Avenue bridge to order Mughlai chicken with spinach from his favourite Indian restaurant on the other side of the Charles, and return to his dorm to write out clean copies of his problem sets.

(Lahiri, p. 138)

She chooses her words cautiously and uses humour well to draw clear images of what she wants the reader to see: controlled writing without making it obvious to the reader. The characters of the story interact well enough with each other for the reader to feel that he or she is watching the protagonist's lives play out without emotionally connecting to them. This is evident in the following line which uses emotion sparingly, 'Though she did not say it herself, he assumed then that she loved him too,

but now he was no longer sure.’ (Lahiri, p.147) Using this controlled sense of emotion in her characters, Lahiri creates a sense of distance between the readers and the characters. This reflects the sense of alienation that the characters in the story feel, being dislocated from the country of their origin, India.

It is noteworthy that Lahiri chose to write the story from Sanjeev’s point of view, that is, from the point of view of the immigrant rather than the first generation Indian immigrant who is already well integrated into the host country. Lahiri, being a first generation Indian immigrant herself⁵, could probably relate more to Twinkle’s character. In writing from an unfamiliar point of view, Lahiri demonstrates her skill as an Indian diaspora writer who stretches beyond capturing the sense of dislocation, alienation and loss experienced by the Indian immigrant to bringing the reader closer to an understanding of human nature, brought out by the interplay between the newly-weds in her story.

WORD count: 1530 including footnotes.

Bibliography:

‘A Conversation with Jhumpa Lahiri’ in *Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Company: A*

Reader’s Guide,

<http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guides/interpreter_maladies.shtml#conversation> [4 December 2009]

Grenz, Sabine, ‘Wanted: Transdisciplinary Methodologies in order to Analyse Histories

⁵ ‘Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Company: A Reader’s Guide’, <http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guides/interpreter_maladies.shtml#conversation> [4 December 2009]

Inscribed into Bodies and Minds', <<http://travellingconcepts.net/grenz1.html>> [4 December 2009]

Lahiri, Jhumpa, 'This Blessed House', in *Interpreter of Maladies* (London: Flamingo, 2000), pp. 136-157

Richter, Melita, 'The Travelling Subject and its (De)conceptualization', <<http://travellingconcepts.net/richter1.html>> [4 December 2009]