SOUTH ASIAN REVIEW

2015 Special Topic Issue

Borders, Boundaries, and Margins

Editor

P.S. Chauhan

Guest-edited by

Jana Fedtke

American University of Sharjah (UAE)

and

Pranav Jani

Ohio State University

The Publication of the
South Asian Literary Association

Volume 36, Number 3, 2015

SOUTH ASIAN REVIEW

Founded 1977

Founding Editor: H. B. Kulkarni

Editor Emeritus: K. D. Verma

Published by the South Asian Literary Association

EDITOR

P.S. Chauhan, *Arcadia University*

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Kavita Daiya, *George Washington University*

Robin Field, *King's College*

John C. Hawley, *Santa Clara University*

Amritjit Singh, *Ohio University*

REVIEWS EDITOR

Kavita Daiya, *George Washington University*

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS

Angelica Bonnabeau, Nathan Greene, Zachary See, Stacey Wisniewski

EDITORIAL BOARD

P.S. Chauhan, *Arcadia University*; Kavita Daiya, *George Washington University*; Robin Field, *King's College*; John C. Hawley, *Santa Clara University*; Rajender Kaur, *William Paterson University*; Cynthia Leenerts, *East Stroudsburg University*; Harveen Mann, *Loyola University*; Judith Plotz, *George Washington University*; Amritjit Singh, *Ohio University*; K. D. Verma, *Professor Emeritus University of Pittsburgh-Johnstown*

ADVISORY BOARD

Fawzia Afzal-Khan, *Montclair State University*; Lopamudra Basu, *University of Wisconsin-Stout*; Kavita Daiya, *George Washington University*; Robin Field, *King's College*; Bed Giri, *Dartmouth College*; Feroza Jussawalla, *University of New Mexico*; Geoffrey Kain, *Embry-Riddle University*; Suvir Kaul, *University of Pennsylvania*; Inder Nath Kher, *University of Calgary*; Priya Kumar, *University of Iowa*; Malashri Lal, *Delhi University*; Makarand Paranjape, *Jawaharlal Nehru University*; Moumin Quazi, *Tarleton State University*; Rosane Rocher, *University of Pennsylvania*; Alpna Sharma, *Wright State University*; Amardeep Singh, *Lehigh University*; Zacharias Thundy, *Notre Dame University*

Breaking the Boundary: Reading Lahiri's *The Lowland* as a Neo-cosmopolitan Fiction

Binod Paudyal

University of Utah

[**Abstract:** This essay offers a critical reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* as a "neo-cosmopolitan fiction," one which is invested in imagining a transnational and global community, in order to initiate a new analytical framework for South Asian diasporic literature. I argue that this critical framework not only challenges the notion of literary canons and classifications which consolidate national identity, but also offers a critical recognition of the South Asian diaspora in the United States by re-envisioning an American identity that is responsive to an age of migration, mobility, and transnational connections.]

In an interview published in *The New York Times*, Jhumpa Lahiri questions the category of "immigrant fiction." She states that "many writers originate from different parts of the world than the ones they end up living in, either by choice or by necessity or by circumstances, and therefore, write about those experiences." Lahiri rightly points out that since the United States is a nation of immigrants, "all American fiction could be classified as immigrant fiction." "If certain books are to be termed immigrant fiction," she asks, "what do we call the rest? Native fiction? Puritan fiction?" (*NYT*, Sept 5. n.p.). Lahiri therefore dismisses such a distinction, and emphasizes that themes of border crossing, wandering, and encounters with the new have always been the focus of most American writers' narratives.

What makes one categorize Lahiri's and other South-Asian American writers' works as "immigrant fiction" is the fact that these writers are always considered ethnic minorities and immigrants in the United States because of their non-European national origins and their

non-white skin color. The categorization of South Asian-American literary texts broadly as “immigrant fiction” not only denies the specificities and particularities of South Asians in the United States, but it also distorts their identity into perpetual foreigners—by creating various binaries such as home/abroad, immigrant/native, us/them, and host/guest. In this essay, I read Lahiri’s *The Lowland* (2013) as a “neo-cosmopolitan fiction,” invested in the imagination of a transnational and global community. I use the term “neo-cosmopolitan fiction” to refer to the body of literary writing that transgresses the traditional categorization and canonization of literary works by blurring the distinction between home and abroad, and by imagining a global community, characterized by transcultural exchanges and transnational affiliations.

Although many critics—such as Bruce Robbins, Timothy Brennan, Kwame Appiah, Pheng Cheah, and others—have been theorizing and revising cosmopolitanism to address the complexities of the contemporary global world for the last two decades, it is only recently that they have started to view the novel as a site for representing and imagining contemporary manifestations of the “global” world. For instance, *Ariel*’s special issue (2011; 42.1), dedicated to “the cosmopolitan novel,” explores the central questions related to cosmopolitanism, situating “literary texts as central to the expansion of cosmopolitan discourse” (8). The essays in this issue, we are told, “consider the ways in which contemporary fiction—and, perhaps especially, postcolonial fiction—usher new cosmopolitan possibilities and diverse ways-of-being into a radically globalized world” (6). Similarly, Berthold Schoene’s *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (2009) describes the novel as a medium for imagining a global community, rather than an imagined *national* community (as Benedict Anderson had argued). Schoene argues that a novel cannot become cosmopolitan simply by achieving “global circulation and popularity,” or by the authors’ choice of “the world as their central topic” (16). Instead, a novel’s cosmopolitanism lies, he claims, in the author’s “particular stance towards the world, which must come to be shared by author and reader” (16). For Schoene, the representation of a “worldwide living and global community,” driven by “ethical commitments and political conscientiousness,” should be the central focus of the cosmopolitan novel (17, 18).

I share with Schoene the notion that the cosmopolitan novel has the ethical capacity to imagine a global community through the process of “creative world-formation” (32). In this vein, I read Lahiri’s *The Lowland* as a neo-cosmopolitan fiction, not simply because Lahiri is a cosmopolitan and her novel has received global recognition, but because her novel reflects the often invisible connections between

personal and transnational experience. After all, as Rebecca Walkowitz, like Schoene, has argued persuasively, “[B]eing cosmopolitan, for texts and for people, means engaging in an intellectual program rather than inhabiting a cultural position” (16). Although Schoene’s idea of the cosmopolitan novel as a new genre is focused on the emergence of a new kind of British novel, the theme of the cosmopolitan novel is applicable to American ethnic literature as well. However, I depart from Schoene by theorizing South Asian-American fiction as “neo-cosmopolitan fiction” for two reasons: firstly, to distinguish new cosmopolitanism from traditional cosmopolitanism in relation to South Asian-American subjects; and secondly, to challenge the notion that literary canons and classifications consolidate national identity, specifically by exploring transgressive characteristics of Lahiri’s *The Lowland* within the context of Asian-American studies in particular and American studies in general.

Typically cosmopolitan discourses eschew ethnic categories in that cosmopolitan discourses favor the universal over the particular. As Susan Koshy persuasively claims, because of ethnic studies’ demand for the recognition of minority cultures within the United States and cosmopolitanism’s desire to recast identity in transnational frames, cosmopolitanism has been tangential to ethnic studies scholarship (592). Koshy therefore coins the term “‘minority cosmopolitanism’ to refer to translocal affiliations that are grounded in the experience of minority subjects and are marked by a critical awareness of the constraints of primary attachments such as family, religion, race, and nation and by an ethnic or imaginative receptivity, orientation, or aspiration to an interconnected or shared world” (594). Koshy’s theorization of minority cosmopolitanism is particularly important not only to break down the opposition between ethnic studies and cosmopolitanism, but also to challenge the Eurocentric versions of cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism, historically, has been largely associated with the elite and the upper class—those who have resources necessary to travel, learn different languages, and absorb other cultures (Vertovec and Cohen 5). This traditional model of cosmopolitanism cannot address the contemporary manifestations of a complex global world in which travel and migration, and availability of different cultural, linguistic, and aesthetic cosmopolitanisms, are not limited only to the elite and frequent travelers. Neither can such an elitist version of cosmopolitanism recognize the diversity and particularities of the contemporary South Asian diaspora in the United States and elsewhere. Perhaps for these reasons, scholars have recently started to redefine cosmopolitanism in various forms by modifying the term cosmopolitanism with various adjectives: “‘discrepant

cosmopolitanisms' (Clifford 1992, 1998), 'exclusionary cosmopolitanism' and 'inclusionary cosmopolitanism' (A. Anderson 1998), 'rooted cosmopolitanism' (Cohen 1992), 'oppositional cosmopolitanism' (Schein 1998a, b), 'eccentric or ex-orbitant cosmopolitanism' (Radhakrishnan 1995)," and the list goes on (Vertovec and Cohen 21).

Although the above list of terminology may be useful to describe contemporary global conditions, I employ the term "neo-cosmopolitanism" in an attempt to capture this new development of cosmopolitanism collectively and initiate a new critical framework of analysis for South Asian diasporic literary works. The term is particularly useful in generating new perspectives on contemporary global conditions—rather than repeating the same manifestations of old, elite mobility and cross-cultural exchanges. In this regard, this critical framework also carries what Koshy calls "non-Western modes of cosmopolitanism that offer alternative visions of cross-cultural exchange and transnational affiliation" (594). The critical traction of this framework, for example, can be found in Sneja Gunew's recent essay, "'A Multilingual Life': The Cosmopolitan and Globalectic Dimensions of Shirley Geok-lin Lim's Writings," in which she deploys the terms "neo-cosmopolitanism" and "globalectic" to bring a new perspective on Lim's work. Gunew argues that Lim should be considered a "neo-cosmopolitan" and "globalectic" writer because she is "committed to weaving the local into the global—giving it a global legibility" (13).

My use of the term "neo-cosmopolitanism" is informed by Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma's prior formulation of the term in their anthology, *New Cosmopolitanisms: South Asians in the US* (2006). Rajan and Sharma distinguish "new cosmopolitanism" from traditional diaspora in order to locate it in a contemporary formation that results from the confluence of globalized forms of trade, migration, media, money, and culture. While traditional cosmopolitanism was largely associated with the transnational connections of an elite and privileged class, the new cosmopolitanism, they argue, "allows different classes to partake in it at different levels," because new cosmopolitanism "is a network of relations between home and abroad, native and diasporic" (5). Rajan and Sharma's notion of new cosmopolitanism is particularly important for understanding the position of contemporary South Asians in the United States who inhabit a wide spectrum of class positions—comprised of a large population of visible professionals such as physicians, managers, engineers—and a population of invisible low-end service workers such as taxi drivers, restaurant workers, and day-care workers.

I discuss what I see as specifically two major defining characteristics of neo-cosmopolitan fiction in *The Lowland*. I explore what we might call the “narrative of connectivity,” which involves interconnections between local and global, and which forms a “glocal” community; and new cosmopolitan characters, who are diasporic, mobile and hold various social, political, and class positions. As my analysis will show, reading Lahiri’s *The Lowland* (and other contemporary South Asian-American fiction with cosmopolitan sensibilities in general) from this critical framework offers a new way to reconfigure the representation of South Asian literary texts *within* Asian American literary studies, a complexity largely resulting from the diasporic and cosmopolitan nature of South Asian-Americans. South Asian-American writers remain peripheral within the canon of Asian-American literary studies because they do not necessarily reflect Asian-American studies’ dominant theme of “claiming America.” As Koshy argues, since a demand for the recognition of minority cultures in the United States was the major founding political claim for ethnic studies in general and Asian American studies in particular, “in ethnic canons writers with a cosmopolitan focus are treated with salutary neglect—counted in bibliographies and anthologies but infrequently accounted for in research” (592-593). Crucially, I argue that reading *The Lowland* as a neo-cosmopolitan fiction not only reorients Asian-American literary studies toward a more diasporic and cosmopolitan direction, reflecting the complex global relations and rupturing literary classification based on national identity, but also re-envisioning an American identity that is responsive to an age of migration, mobility, and transnational connections.

Imagining a Global Community

Although *The Lowland* begins in Tollygunge, a neighborhood of South Calcutta (now Kolkata), the story takes shape in the United States, inter-permeating the global and the local. It explores a microcosm of the global world of the 1960s, characterized by social, political, and cultural movements and uprisings, and their effects on its characters in later decades up to the first decade of the twenty-first century. Lahiri uses real historical anecdotes, incidents, political figures, as well as fictional characters, from different places around the world, all of which coalesce to create a transnational world in which South Asian subjects are active participants in global connections. The novel imagines a “glocal” history, ushering the local history into a global context.

The Lowland approaches large-scale global events by focusing on local episodes and personal experiences in India. It explores the interconnectedness of the contemporary modern world, in which a local

place is affected by global phenomena. The characters in India are influenced by international phenomena just as much as the immigrant characters' identity and practices in the United States are shaped by the local history and phenomena in India. The world of the 1960s was a unique period not only in India but also in other parts of the world, and Lahiri powerfully captures that world and its impacts on individuals in the novel. The discussion of the Naxalite movement of the 1960s in India particularly functions as a central force in developing the story. Put differently, Lahiri positions the Naxalite movement in a global context, charting its connections to the 60s' movements in the United States and other places around the world.

The Naxalite movement, backed by student activists, was not an autonomous, isolated movement sparked by a local incident in Naxalbari, Darjeeling alone. It was, as *The Lowland* demonstrates, influenced by several other simultaneous phenomena occurring in different parts of the world, such as Cold War politics and the Civil Rights movement in the U.S, the student protests in Paris, Maoism in China, and the Cuban revolution. Lahiri does not discuss the interconnectedness of these movements explicitly; nor does she describe them in detail, except for the student movement of the 60s in Calcutta and passing references to segregation against African Americans and to the U.S involvement in the Vietnam War. Instead, she uses fragments of historical anecdotes from several places without providing any context or detail for the reader. Nevertheless, these fragmented historical references, which I call a "narrative of connectivity" in which fragments of historical anecdotes and references are interjected into the main narrative, make the novel, I would suggest, interesting and important by demanding a meticulous and active participation on the part of the reader.

The novel's "narrative of connectivity" reflects the interconnectedness of a contemporary world characterized by exchanges of ideas, information, and sentiments made possible by global capitalism and technological advancements. Udayan, for instance, gets information about the movements of the 60s around the world by listening to a short-wave radio, and by reading books and newspapers that are circulated around campuses in Calcutta. Early in the novel, Udayan and his brother Subhash assemble parts gathered from Indian Army surplus to build a short-wave radio. They familiarize themselves with frequency bands and listen to "news bulletins from Radio Moscow, Voice of America, Radio Peking, the BBC" (17). They hear fragments of information, weather conditions, and folk songs from all over the world, sometimes "in languages they could only guess: Finnish, Turkish, Korean, Portuguese" (17). Udayan is highly influenced by the events taking place outside of India. His inspiration

for joining the radical left results from his listening to radio news, and from his reading of several newspapers and books about historical figures and movements around the world.

The books— such as Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and Lenin’s *What is to Be Done*— that Udayan reads, and the historical figures such as Mao Tse-tung and Che Guevara that he idolizes function as conduits for Udayan in creating his own attitude concerning political ideologies that seem best for societies in India. In a conversation about the golf course in Tollygunge, Udayan tells Subhash that Ernesto Guevara, the Argentinian-born Cuban revolutionary commonly known as “Che,” who had worked as a caddy on a golf course in Argentina, opposed the idea of having a golf course because “golf was the pastime of the comprador bourgeoisie” (25). He mentions that “after the Cuban revolution getting rid of the golf courses was one of the first things Castro had done” (25). Udayan borrows Che’s ideas and applies them to the local context, concluding that the golf course in newly Independent India similarly symbolizes the remnants of British colonialism and exploitation in feudal Indian society. Interestingly, Udayan is inspired by international ideologies, but he also criticizes the exploitation of Indian people by the feudal system inherited from the British colonial regime, as symbolized by the Tolly Club. Towards the beginning of the novel, Lahiri notes that the Tolly Club originally belonged to Richard Johnson and was later restored by William Cruickshank in the 1890s as a country club “to escape the city’s commotion, and to be among their own” (13-14). The fact that “people still filled slums all over the city, children were born and raised on the streets,” while a hundred acres were “walled off for the enjoyment of a few”— bothers Udayan more than anything else (25). Although India is no longer a British colony and Jawaharlal Nehru has become the first prime minister of the newly independent India, “it was the new Queen of England Elizabeth II, whose portrait presided in the main drawing room” (7). Udayan therefore identifies the Tolly Club as “proof that India was still a semi-colonial country, representing as if the British had never left” (25).

Udayan can be characterized as what Appiah calls a “cosmopolitan patriot,” a version of neo-cosmopolitanism, in that he practices different international ideologies while remaining committed to the political culture of India. In his seminal essay “Cosmopolitan Patriots,” Appiah states that “the cosmopolitan patriot can enter the possibility of a world in which everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people” (91). Certainly, Udayan never leaves India and rejects the idea of emigrating to another country for better

opportunities—thus he cannot experience the physical presence of other people as Appiah suggests—but he still lives in a world of cosmopolitan patriotism, as a rooted cosmopolitan. He borrows radical ideologies from different international movements and international historical figures, and accepts the call to nurture and reform the cultural, economic, and political condition of his country. For example, Udayan and other radical students protest for a change in the education system in India, arguing that “an outdated pedagogy” still exists in India that teaches “the young to ignore the needs of common people” (26). But this aspiration for change was connected to student movements in California and Paris: “Echoing Paris, echoing Berkeley, exams were boycotted throughout Calcutta, diplomas torn up. Students called out during convocation addresses, disrupting speakers. They said campus administrators were corrupt. They barricaded vice-chancellors in their offices, refusing them food and water until their demands were met” (26). Toward the end of the novel, Lahiri specifically provides some references about the parallels between the Naxalite movement and the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) movement in the United States within a discussion between Gauri and Dipankar Biswas, a professor of Political Science who specializes in South Asian studies. Dipankar is writing a book on the history of the student movement at colleges in Calcutta when the Naxalite movement was at its height, comparing it to the SDS in the United States.

The Lowland reflects how students and youth movements of the 60s, both in India and the United States, shared similar core interests in hoping to build a just and better society. Both movements stressed the working poor and class difference in aiming to overthrow capitalism and feudalism in the United States and India respectively. The student activists in both India and the United States mostly came from either the middle class or the elite class. In the United States, a large number of activists were white students from affluent families who could afford to go to top universities like Harvard, Berkeley, and Columbia. While the primary concern of these students was the Vietnam War, they also expressed solidarity for African Americans who were segregated by Jim Crow laws and victimized by American capitalism. These students visited several cities and small towns in Southern states and tried to make African Americans aware of their voting and other constitutional rights. Largely influenced by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, student activists advocated for the rights of minority and underrepresented groups.

Similarly, the student activists in Calcutta, as *The Lowland* demonstrates, come from middle and upper class families. They go to small villages to share and experience the lives of poor tribal peasants. These activists learn tribal dialects, sleep under the open sky, and share

the experiences of poor tribal people. Udayan, for instance, disappears from Tollygunge, traveling to a remote village with “nothing but a cloth bag over his shoulder. Just enough money in his pocket for the train fare back” (31). After a month or so, he returns in “a lungi around his waist, the beard and mustache overtaking his face not concealing the weight he’d lost” (32). Even after returning to his city, Udayan’s mind often travels back to the remote villages. Following the party’s revolutionary ideology, he gives up his life of luxury, and tries to live the life of a peasant. The purposes of Udayan’s trips outside the city are to promote Mao Tse-tung’s ideas among the peasants, and to try to understand the lives of the poor. He strongly believes that “an agrarian economy based on feudalism is the problem [in India],” and therefore advocates a more “egalitarian structure” and “better land reforms” (41). As a student activist, he believes that students are an essential part of the movement, a conviction which makes him accuse Subhash of being selfish “for not supporting a movement that will only improve the lives of millions of people” (42). Udayan not only fights for the brotherhood of peasants and the poor class in India, but he also supports the anti-war movements and expresses his sympathies for the underprivileged ethnic minorities in the United States. He is also critical of U.S imperialism. In this regard, although Udayan’s subjectivity is anchored in his own society, his consciousness is shaped by global phenomena, committed to fighting against social, economic, and political injustices.

New Cosmopolitan Characters

The Lowland imagines a post-1965 world in which global capitalism and mobility play a significant role in shaping the characters’ identities. It does not emphasize traditional Asian American topics, which Kandice Chuh lists as “oppression, marginalization, and resistance” (12). Instead, the characters in the novel engage in the usual worldly phenomena of everyday lives in unremarkably remarkable ways, yoking two disparate worlds together. These characters occupy various fluid spaces in their everyday lives, attempting to navigate the world beyond their birthplaces. They embody “new cosmopolitan subjects” and identities, participating in global connections. I borrow the term “new cosmopolitan subjects” from Rajan and Sharma to refer to non-traditional mobile, diasporic South Asian subjects whose identities are not precisely based on nation, class, or ethnicity. These new subjects are non-traditional because, unlike traditional Asian American subjects, new cosmopolitan subjects occupy “a range of fluid subject positions, which can be trans-class, trans-local with competing value systems” (Rajan and Sharma 2).

I would characterize Lahiri’s characters in *The Lowland*—especially Subhash, Gauri, and Bela—as new cosmopolitan subjects

because they not only occupy various fluid subject positions, but they also embody what Sharma and Rajan call the “diaspora in motion” (2). These characters blur the home-abroad dichotomy by challenging the traditional wisdom about the immigrant experience. Their engagement in everyday life is grounded in networks and relationality constituted by shifting forms of global capitalism and globalized forms of travel, communication, and technologies. Subhash, for instance, comes to the United States to pursue a doctoral degree in Oceanography, but his immigrant experience is different from what readers are accustomed to reading in most Asian American fictions. Subhash does not feel displaced or homeless upon his arrival in the United States. Instead, he is very impressed by the “enormous new country” (34). He feels that he has left the old country for his adventure in a new country, and he is “the sole link” between these two dissimilar nations (34).

Subhash’s excitement about his new life in Rhode Island comes in part from the fact that he finds many physical aspects of Rhode Island corresponding roughly to those of Calcutta: “mountains to the north, an ocean to the east, the majority of land to the south and west” (34). These similarities give Subhash the feel of Calcutta even though he is about eight thousand miles away from his hometown. The geographical properties, however, are not the sole contributors to Subhash’s happiness about being in the United States. The feeling of home, after all, is not only a physical state, but it is also a mental one.¹ Put differently, Subhash’s pleasure in being in the United States also results from the fact that he was interested in pursuing his PhD in the U.S, and he was tired of all the unrest occurring in Calcutta in 1968. His migration can be seen in relation to the larger context of shifting global capitalism, which had brought unrest in Calcutta in the form of a worldwide student activism on the one hand, and had opened opportunities for him in the U.S on the other hand. As Lahiri points out in the novel, the recently changed immigration laws of 1965 had made it easier for Indian students and professionals to come to the United States.² The United States particularly welcomed highly skilled professionals, technocrats, and scientists from South Asia and other Asian countries through a selective immigration policy— as the U.S was alarmed in its Cold War competition with the USSR, especially after the USSR launched *Sputnik* I and II into orbit. Subhash’s welcome (he claims at one point that he was a guest of Nixon) was thus partly motivated by the United States’ self-interest in bringing the most talented scientists and technocrats from around the world as part of the effort to defeat the USSR in a technological power-race. Nevertheless, Subhash is delighted to have come to the United States because his consciousness was shaped by global capitalism, and his immigration to

the United States is what Aihwa Ong calls a matter of “convenience” and “confidence” (1).³

Given the time period in which Subhash migrates to the United States, a reader might expect him to undergo discrimination and conflict in trying to assimilate into mainstream American culture. But such a recurrent and typical immigrant experience is not something Subhash actually encounters upon arriving in the United States. His friendship with his American roommate Richard Grifalconi, a PhD student in Sociology, for instance, is very typical and familiar. Although they come from two different worlds, their friendship is built upon their shared sentiments and shared commitments toward building a better world. The relation of host and guest between Richard and Subhash gets blurred through their reciprocal friendship. Subhash invites Richard to share his Indian-style curry, and Richard in turn takes Subhash to the grocery store and later teaches him how to drive.

When Subhash feels loneliness, especially during the time of Durga Puja, he starts dating and spending nights with Holly, a thirty-six year old white American single mother who is separated from her husband. They share a romance until Holly chooses to end their relationship because she decides to reunite with her ex-husband. Although Holly and her husband had been living separately for a few years, she decides to patch it up with him for the sake, she says, of her son Joshua. This short transnational and transracial affair offers Holly an opportunity to learn about different cultural and familial traditions in India. Similarly, Subhash also develops an understanding of American marriage and culture. He learns that in America husband and wife could divorce and live separately, yet they could still behave reasonably. Seeing the casualness and independence of life in the U.S, Subhash goes as far as thinking about marrying Holly. But he instantly realizes that it would be “unthinkable to his parents, unacceptable” because of “her situation, her child, her age, the fact that she was technically another man’s wife” (77). Nevertheless, he transgresses his cultural borders and his parents’ expectations by dating Holly in a land far away from his home in Calcutta.

Ironically, Subhash breaks social mores and boundaries first by marrying Gauri, his late brother Udayan’s pregnant wife, out of compassion, and then years later, in his seventies, by ending up in another marriage with Elise Silva, a white American woman who was his daughter Bela’s teacher. Subhash’s marriage to Elise, a move very unusual in South Asian characters, connects these two people born and raised in two different countries, redefining the idea of national identity and belonging. In other words, their marriage signals a new category of identity based on their choices of cultural and civic affiliations, one which moves beyond race, religion, class, and nation. After dating for a

couple of years in his late sixties, Subhash marries Elise in a casual ceremony, witnessed by a group of friends and families. Their union provides them not only each other's company but also several children and grandchildren to whom Subhash is related now.

While Lahiri does not clarify whether Subhash ever becomes an American citizen, his position suggests his sense of belonging to multiple places. In spite of having lived in the United States for four decades, he still maintains close ties with India by making frequent visits to India, made possible by technological advancements, and by sending monetary remittances to his parents. His marriage to Gauri, although it fails, gives him a daughter whom he cares for until old age. Subhash encourages his daughter Bela to choose her own career, and accepts her decision to become a single mother when she comes home one day, pregnant without knowing who the baby's father is.

Lahiri's depiction of Bela's character challenges common (mis)understandings of South Asian-American children as typical exhibits of the model minority myth.⁴ Asian American children are assumed to be typically smart in math and science, and attend top-notch schools. Nevertheless, Bela chooses a small liberal arts college in the Midwest, and later does not show any interest in pursuing graduate studies. After college, she does not work in a company, but in the field, "putting in irrigation lines, weeding and harvesting, cleaning out animal pens, packing crates to sell vegetables, weighing them for customers on the side of the road" (221). Bela wanders across the country like a nomad, doing odd jobs, helping people learn to use their backyards for organic vegetation. She sometimes lives in a tent, "without insurance, without heed for her future. Without a fixed address" (222). She gets pregnant, and chooses to become a single mom and raise her child (263).

Bela's character contests the homogenization of second-generation South Asian-American children by exposing the class spectrum and the exercise of individual choice and freedom by these children. Second-generation South Asian-American children are assumed, both in the academy and the public, to be confused *desis* who are forced to work hard and succeed by their parents, not allowed to exercise their own choices and decisions. Certainly, Bela goes through a rough time and struggles to understand her identity, but these difficulties are not based on race, ethnicity, or her experience of living between two cultures. Rather, her difficulties result from her parents' unsuccessful relationship, as well as their decision not to tell her about her real identity. Bela is traumatized by Gauri's abandonment at the age of twelve, which leaves a severe psychological impact in her life. Nevertheless, Bela tries to understand life pragmatically and to apply her political ideology in her work. Like her biological father Udayan,

“she blamed the unequal distribution of wealth” as the primary reason that many farmers go hungry (224). She helps low-income families by teaching them “to grow vegetables in their backyards, so that they wouldn’t have to depend entirely on food banks” (224). Bela does not search for high-end jobs that are visible, but prefers low-end jobs, helping people and trying to make the world a better place. She befriends all sorts of people from the working and poor classes, yet she remains invisible to the extent that when Gauri searches for her on the Internet, she does not find any trace of her, even on social media. Nevertheless, Bela is happy with the choice she makes in her life.

Although Gauri blatantly abandons her daughter and husband, and apparently cannot become a good mother and a good wife in traditional terms, she too is an interesting example of a new cosmopolitan subject. Her new cosmopolitan character is shaped by her being in the United States, as well as by her upbringing and quest for independence that was initiated by the loss of her parents at an early age and her development in Calcutta away from them. Gauri’s homegrown cosmopolitan character challenges the traditional Asian American focus on “claiming America.” She comes to the United States for better opportunities, but “claiming America” does not become a primary focus. Although Gauri encounters some people who “ask her where she came from,” due to her appearance and accent, she takes such encounters in stride (233). She forms her cultural identity by adopting western tastes along with her Indian appearance and accent. In spite of having lived for forty years in the United States, Gauri still holds an Indian passport. She chooses not to become a U.S citizen because becoming a U.S citizen would be to betray Udayan, who always advocated staying in India and fighting for the poor instead of moving to the U.S for better opportunities. Gauri knows that “for the sake of retirement, for the sake of simplifying the end of her life, she would need to become an American” (234). Nevertheless, she opts to remain an Indian citizen, a position numerous academics and other South Asian immigrants hold to this day.

Gauri embodies various social positions by going through a number of different roles: from wife to widow of Udayan, from sister-in-law to wife of Subhash, from mother to childless woman, and from Gauri to “a number of versions of herself” (240). But all these roles are her own chosen ones, including her deliberate decision to abandon Bela. Gauri is not a typical Indian immigrant character who joins her husband in the United States and remains a dutiful housewife, suffering from homesickness, preparing Indian food, and sticking to Indian cultural practices in an attempt to alleviate the loneliness and displacement of being in a new country. Instead, she is an immigrant who goes through a number of transformations and conversions—by

chopping off her hair and discarding all her Indian dresses, for instance— so as to explore and understand her new world. Although she is living in the United States, she is still haunted by her traumatic experiences in India. She regrets being a part of the student activist plan that killed a policeman, who had been someone's father and someone's husband. Gauri worries that she was also partly responsible for Udayan's death because she accidentally gave the police officer a clue about Udayan's hideout in the hyacinths of the lowland. Udayan's ghost still haunts her even after having lived in the United States for many years. She remains Indian in many ways, yet she cannot become a good Indian mother who would never abandon her daughter, nor a typical Indian wife who serves her husband and remains dependent on him.⁵

Gauri represents a new cosmopolitan subject of the twenty-first century, the new millennium characterized by global capitalism and global forms of travel, technology, and communication. She adopts mainstream American culture, while also maintaining her ties to India. She dwells in multiple locations and occupies fluid subject positions, which complicate the traditional categories of home and belonging because her identity is based on her personal choices and affiliations, rather than on her national citizenship or antecedent properties. The transformed global forms of technology and communication enable Gauri to connect and reunite with anyone. Although she travels to India for the first time in thirty years, she can easily get access to all needed information—"more information than anyone has need for"—from her computer at home in California. She can get answers to "any possible questions the human brain might generate" (275). Gauri stays home in California, but she is a moving diaspora, positioning herself between multiple places, particularly through the virtual world.

Reading *The Lowland* as a neo-cosmopolitan fiction not only provides us a new way of redefining an Asian American literary studies that is more responsive to the heterogeneity and connectivity within the United States and beyond, but it also helps us understand the transnational and cosmopolitan nature of contemporary South Asian-American literary works that cannot be confined to a single classification within literary studies. *The Lowland*, for instance, fits into several areas of literary studies: postcolonial fiction, South Asian fiction (or Indian fiction), American fiction, and several more categories like world literature and transnational literature. The term "neo-cosmopolitan fiction" has potential for critical longevity not only for the analysis of South Asian-American literary works but also for contemporary Anglophone literature in general. For example, Prajwal Parajuly's *Land Where I Flee* (2014) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), to name only two, represent other examples

of neo-cosmopolitan fiction that transgress literary classifications and categorizations based on national identity. Parajuly's novel spans national, cultural, and social boundaries, and connects Nepal, India, Bhutan, England, and the United States—and thus adds a new dimension to the fields of South Asian literary studies, postcolonial studies, and transnational studies, as well as to South Asian-American studies. In a similar vein, Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* intricately interweaves multiple, fragmented stories of many characters in the shifting cultural worlds between Kalimpong, a small town in India, and New York, a metropolitan center in the United States.

After all, in this new millennium, it is difficult for literary writers to focus their narrative only within a nation-state because the experiences of characters in today's world span national, cultural, and political borders. For instance, the local episodes taking place in India in *The Lowland* are intricately connected to and influenced by global phenomena, and the characters' identities are shaped by their experiences both in India and the United States. Lahiri's depiction of neo-cosmopolitan characters transcends older forms of privilege based on class, nation, and race, both at local and global levels. Towards the end of the novel, Lahiri specifically signals this new world in the form of a virtual world, by investing a large part of her discussion on changes that the technological advancements have made in people's lives. She rightly describes that today's people are "citizens of the Internet [who] dwell free from hierarchy. There is room for everyone, given that there are no spatial constraints" (340). In actuality, in today's world, there might still be some constraints, especially for poor people, to travel physically from one place to another—but there are no constraints for them to cross boundaries in the virtual world as long as they are literate and have access to the Internet. As Gauri admits, "she is a member of the virtual world, an aspect of her visibility on the new sea that has come to dominate the earth's surface" (276). This new form of cosmopolitanism, as imagined by *The Lowland*, is what defines our citizenship today more than the nation-state or race.

Notes

1. See George's *The Politics of Home* (p. 11).
2. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 abolished the national-origins quotas and provided for the admission of 170,000 immigrants from the Eastern hemisphere, formerly the "barred zone."
3. Ong argues that in the era of global capitalism, passports have become less and less attestations of citizenship and loyalty to a nation-state, than of claims to participate in labor market. Therefore, having multiple passports or citizenships/legal resident statuses ensures, Ong argues, convenience and confidence in condition of political insecurity and turbulence of global trade. See *Flexible Citizenship* (p. 1-5).

4. The model minority, in simple terms, refers to the images of Asian Americans as a most successful group that has excelled educationally and economically through their hard work and self-reliance. Asian Americans are assumed to be docile and submissive, obedient and uncomplaining, and living the American dream without reliance on government welfare and assistance.

5. Moushumi's mother in Lahiri's *The Namesake* and the narrator, an unnamed, terminally ill woman, in Amit Majmudar's *The Abundance*, for example, represent such stereotypical Indian women characters.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983. Print.
- Appiah, Anthony. "Cosmopolitan Patriots." *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*. Eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998. 91-116. Print.
- Brennan, Timothy. *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. Print.
- Cheah, Pheng. "The Cosmopolitical—Today." *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*. Ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998. 20-44. Print.
- Chuh, Kandice. *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.
- Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. New York: Grove Press, 2006. Print.
- George, Rosemary Marangoly. *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Cambridge UP, 1996. Print.
- Gunew, Sneja. "'A Multilingual Life': The Cosmopolitan and Globalectic Dimensions of Shirley Geok-lin Lim's Writing." *Asiatic* 8.1 (2014): 12-24. Web. 15 August 2015.
- Johansen, Emily, and Soo Yeon Kim. "The Cosmopolitan Novel: Introduction." *Ariel* 42.1 (January 2011): 5-9. Print.
- Koshy, Susan. "Minority Cosmopolitanism." *PMLA* 126.3 (May 2011): 592-609. Print.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Lowland*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2013. Print.
- . "Jhumpa Lahiri: By the Book." Interview. *The New York Times* 5 Sept. 2013: n. pag. Web. 10 July 2014.
- Ong, Aihwa. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999. Print.
- Parajuly, Prajwal. *Land Where I Flee*. London: Quercus, 2014. Print.
- Rajan, Gita, and Shailja Sharma. "New Cosmopolitanisms: South Asians in the United States at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century." *New Cosmopolitanisms: South Asians in the US*. Ed. Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006. 1-36. Print.
- Robbins, Bruce. "Comparative Cosmopolitanisms." *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*. Ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998. 246-264. Print.
- Schoene, Berthold. *Cosmopolitan Novel*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009. E-Book.

- Vertovec, Steven, and Robin Cohen. "Introduction: Conceiving Cosmopolitanism." *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice*. Ed. Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 2002. 1-24. Print.
- Walkowitz, Rebecca L. *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation*. New York: Columbia UP, 2006. Print.