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UTSC English Conference 2017

3 March 2017

“Post-postcolonial” Translatability in Cultural Translation: Negotiating Transactions of Culture in Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Hell-Heaven”

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about.

—Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism

Cultural translation is as ubiquitous as it is under-examined and under-valued. In “Intimate Alienation: Immigrant Fiction and Translation,” Jhumpa Lahiri, a bilingual and transcultural writer, regards cultural translation as a way to claim one’s existence: “Unlike my parents, I translate not so much to survive in the world around me as to create and illuminate a nonexistent one. Fiction is the foreign land of my choosing, the place where I strive to convey and preserve the meaningful. And whether I write as an American or an Indian, about things
American or Indian or otherwise, one thing remains constant: I translate, therefore I am” (120). Here, Lahiri promotes the importance of translation as a fertile starting point for fiction. Translation, understood as a negotiation and mediation between the unbalanced relations among language and cultures, is a necessary and daily communicative need. Cultural translation or transculturation is embedded within the practice of translation, and it involves the concerns associated with negotiations and transactions between two or more cultures. In Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar, Fernando Ortiz, proposes the concept of transculturation to try to account for the complexities that arise with negotiations and transactions of culture. Ortiz’s idea of transculturation not only emphasizes the outcome of the merging and converging between cultures, but the process by which it may somehow modify one or both cultures in contact and result in new reconstructions or creations that arise from that cultural encounter. Moreover, transculturation is a hybrid process that is continuously regenerating and reshaping itself. In this way, I associate the translation of culture or transculturation with Homi Bhabha’s concept of “in-betweenness.” In The Location of Culture, Bhabha posits the significance of hybrid cultural spaces, and that culture is a site in permanent transition. The following statement from Bhabha’s reflections on cultural translation underscores the value of the space bridged between two cultures: “[I]t is the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture…And by exploring this third space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (Bhabha 38-39). The “third space” that Bhabha refers to represents a bridge struggling to connect both cultures together. In this essay, I examine the translatable of this “in-between” or third space between cultures in two of Lahiri’s short stories.
In recent decades, literary production has opened itself to the cross-cultural encounters that define diasporic and “post-postcolonial” literatures. Lahiri’s “post-postcolonial” short stories embody the complexities submerged within cross-cultural encounters as well as the complexities associated with cultural translation. Lahiri’s “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Hell-Heaven” are the first two short stories from her 2008 collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*. The two stories describe the diasporic experiences of first and second-generation Bengali Americans as they face challenges which are associated with belonging to two different cultures, that is, Bengali culture and American or Western culture. The stories also “reveal the dislocating effects of economic migration,” and the fragmentation which is embedded within the immigrant experience. (Koshy 374). “Unaccustomed Earth” discusses the family relationships between three generations: the father, his daughter, Ruma, and her son, Akash, through its profound illustration of life in the South Asian American diaspora. Ruma feels a great deal of pain stemming from her mother’s recent death, as she struggles with the demands of motherhood and her recent move to Seattle with her American husband, Adam. Her father has become accustomed to a life of travelling and has initiated a relationship with a Bengali woman—Mrs. Bagchi—which he cannot bring himself to admit to Ruma. “Hell-Heaven” contends with similar concerns associated with South Asian American diasporic experiences. The story is told through the point of view of a second-generation Bengali girl, Usha, whose mother, Aparna, tries to adjust to living in Boston with her family. Usha’s rendition of events occurs in the past as she, now grown, looks back on the events which have shaped her life in America. Throughout both stories, the tension between Bengali culture and Western culture is highlighted, as the

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1 In *The Chronicle Online*, Mohsin Hamid discusses his belief that there is a new generation of “post-postcolonial” writers, which includes writers such as himself and diasporic writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri. Further, Paul Jay argues, that the “post-postcolonial” is “less interested in foregrounding the persistent effects of British colonization” (51). Rather, the “post-postcolonial” is concerned with problematizations of life in the diaspora.
generational divide becomes evident between the parental figures and their children across this geographical and diasporic gap.

Unremitting renegotiations of cultural identity lie at the core of these two stories. In this essay, I argue that the space which exists between the home culture and the translated culture cannot be completely bridged. Thus, I suggest that this “in-betweenness” is untranslatable, but that this untranslatability is characterized by continuous negotiations between both cultures. In my consideration of the untranslatability between cultures in the two short stories, I will examine the narrative structure and how it underscores the unbridgeable gaps between Bengali culture and Western culture. In addition, I will examine how the challenges of this “in-between” space is exacerbated by the difficulty of the generational divide between the parental figures and their children, as well as by the difficulty of inter-racial relationships in both stories. Further, photography is a significant aspect of both stories, as it emphasizes the continuous renegotiations of cultural identity through the desire for permanence of memory. Photography also becomes emblematic of the untranslatable in both stories. While the “diasporic subjects in Lahiri’s [stories]” are “dispersed and interrupted” individuals who are ultimately fragmented, they do appear to gain an awareness of cultural change on some level (Koshy 372). What is more, Salman Rushdie describes how “translation” is a fitting term for producing identities in the American Indian diaspora: “The word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across’. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men [and women]. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained” (Rushdie 17). Thus, although the characters in “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Hell-Heaven” experience a departure of aspects of their Bengali
culture, they ultimately gain an awareness of cultural change and the regeneration of a familiar intimacy.

The narrative structure is a noteworthy aspect of both stories, as it bears a connection to the internal confusion and discomfort of the characters as they navigate themselves through continuous renegotiations of culture and intimacy. The narrative structure also illuminates the interruption of the present with the memories of the past and the characters’ desire for the permanence of memory. The narrative style of “Unaccustomed Earth” is quite complex, which stems from it being focalized through two different characters—Ruma and her father—who take turns as focalizing agents in the story. The narrative style also infuses the present narrative with Ruma and her father’s memories of the past. Lahiri’s narrative technique of shifting focalizers and leaps back in time allows her to skilfully convey two life stories within the frame of a single short story. By the time the story ends, we, as readers, feel as if we have been privy to the entire family history of Ruma and her father. The interruption of the present with the memories of the past disrupts the trajectory of the narrative, creating at times a jagged and disorienting narrative. The confusion and disorder that is created by this narrative style emphasizes the discomfort that is felt in the characters’ lives as they continually find themselves negotiating between their two cultures. During his stay at Ruma’s house, Ruma’s father tells her that it would have been nice to have a porch like Ruma’s in their old house. Ruma feels an intense flash of emotions as her father utters those words: “When her father mentioned their old house, tears sprang to her eyes. In a way it was helpful to be in a place her mother had never seen. It was one of the last conversations she had had with her mother, telling her about Adam’s new job, which back then was only a remote possibility” (45). Here, Ruma and her father feel an intense nostalgia for the past and for Ruma’s mother, whether they are willing to admit this or not. Ruma’s father reminds
himself of the family home he shared with his late wife before she died, the home he has now sold. Ruma in turn reminds herself of the family home and thus her late mother, who urged her not to move to Seattle. The interruption of the present narrative with the memories of the past emphasizes the ongoing albeit fragmentary renegotiations of culture that Ruma and her father must contend with while living in the diaspora. This particular instance in the narrative reveals Ruma’s and her father’s nostalgic emotions, as well as their disoriented states as they try to come to terms with the loss of the mother and the wife which still haunts them. Ultimately, the two focalizing agents embody the continuous cultural negotiations which lie at the core of the diasporic experience. “Hell-Heaven” is narrated differently from “Unaccustomed Earth,” but the two stories unite together in terms of the fragmented narrative style and the interruption of the present narrative with the memories of the past.

In “Hell-Heaven,” Usha internally focalizes the events of the story, and she acts as the sole narrator of the story. Usha’s rendition of events occurs in the past as she, now grown, looks back on the events concerning her mother and Pranab. Usha’s rendering of events is built on memory, which ultimately hinders Aparna’s personal perspective of events, and thus, Aparna’s narrative is fragmented, and severely filtered as well as translated. In contrast to the narrative structure of “Unaccustomed Earth,” “Hell-Heaven” is narrated by one internal focalizing agent and is positioned entirely in the past. However, despite the disparity in focalizing agents and temporal space, both stories place an emphasis on resonances from the past. “Hell-Heaven” is built entirely on memory, as Usha’s memories of the past transcend the present narrative. Usha remembers an early memory of Pranab listening to her mother’s stories from the past: “Pranab Kaku listened to these stories with interest, absorbing the vanishing details of her past. He did not turn a deaf ear to her nostalgia, like my father, or listen uncomprehending, like me” (66). A
now much older Usha looks back on this memory from her childhood where she remembers the appreciation Pranab showed “absorbing” her mother’s nostalgic stories. Aparna—although living in the diaspora—feels nostalgia for the past and her home culture. Usha’s rendering of events is fragmented, however, in part because she is narrating from the perspective of her mother. Aparna herself is fragmented living in the diaspora; she struggles to assimilate and reconcile with a sense of familiar intimacy. Ultimately, Lahiri’s narrative technique in both stories is successful, as it highlights the disoriented states of the characters as they undergo enduring renegotiations of cultural identity in the American Bengali diaspora. I will continue to highlight the importance of Lahiri’s narrative technique in both stories with respect to cultural renegotiation and resonances from the past as I probe further into my investigation.

In “Unaccustomed Earth,” continuous renegotiations of cultural identity and intimacy in the diasporic experience are illuminated through the generational divide between parents and their children, specifically through the relationship between Ruma and her father. Ruma feels a tension from her continual renegotiations of Bengali culture as a mother to Akash. Ruma feels a tension between herself and Akash, a kind of “resistance, [a] profound barrier she assume[s] w[ill] set in with adolescence” (10). She feels this resistance forming with their Bengali language: “By now Akash had forgotten the little Bengali Ruma had taught him when he was little. After he started speaking in full sentences English had taken over, and she lacked the discipline to stick to Bengali…Her own Bengali was slipping from her. Her mother had been strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English. But her father didn’t mind” (12). This instance in Ruma’s focalization illuminates a profound generational tension which spreads across three generations: Ruma’s father, Ruma, and her son. Ruma feels she is mediating between her home culture and the Bengali language and Western culture and her son’s future—
and already present—desire to assimilate. She herself “lack[s] the discipline to stick to Bengali,” which illustrates her own assimilation in the American diaspora. Her father’s lack of interest in speaking the Bengali language points towards the fact that both Ruma and her father have re-established a new sense of familiar intimacy living in the diaspora, one that does not seem to involve the influence of the Bengali language. Moreover, the inability to translate language to fruition is embedded within this untranslatable “in-between” space of cultures. Further, another example of generational tension lies in the relationship between Ruma and her father and the question of his moving in with her. During her father’s visit, Ruma and her father feel a weight on their shoulders about the possibility of him moving in with her family. Ruma becomes cognizant that “her father d[oes] not need taking care of, and yet this very fact cause[s] her to feel guilty; in India, there would have been no question of his not moving in with her” (6). Ruma feels a tension between the tradition of Bengali culture and Western culture. She feels she must at least offer her father the possibility of moving in with her, because it would be deemed inappropriate within the tradition of her Bengali culture not to do so. However, her father is thriving living alone, and it is Ruma’s renegotiations between the tradition of her Bengali culture and her desire to conform to Western culture which causes her to feel “guilty.”

Similarly, “Hell-Heaven” also contends with the difficulties of a generational divide. Usha and Aparna feel a tension in their relationship resulting from the tension between their Bengali culture and Western culture, as well as through the continuous renegotiations of cultural identity and intimacy they must make in their diasporic experiences. Deborah widens the tension between Usha and Aparna as they struggle to develop their own views of familiar intimacy. While Usha adores Deborah and her Caucasian American culture, Aparna condemns her, as Deborah does not fit with traditional images of Bengali women. Usha looks forward to
Deborah’s visits: “The more my mother began to resent Deborah’s visits, the more I began to anticipate them. I fell in love with Deborah, the way young girls often fall in love with women who are not their mothers” (69). Although Deborah amplifies the rift between Usha and Aparna, her very presence in their home allows Usha and Aparna to negotiate what familiar intimacy means to them, and to negotiate the cultural tension within their home. Usha romanticizes Deborah because she is “not [her] mother” and because she is not a traditional Bengali woman (69). Usha is able to renegotiate her cultural identity through the presence of Deborah, which is best illustrated through how she chooses to communicate with Deborah. Usha expresses, “Deborah and I spoke freely in English, a language in which, by that age, I expressed myself more easily than Bengali, which I was required to speak at home” (69). Like “Unaccustomed Earth,” “Hell-Heaven” demonstrates the struggle to translate a language to fruition in the diaspora, through Usha who does not have the discipline to maintain the Bengali language she has learned from her parents. Through her continual negotiations of culture, Usha demonstrates a tension between her desire to conform to Western tradition and speak English and her home culture and speak Bengali. With Deborah, Usha feels a sense of freedom and release. There is the sense from Usha’s narration here that Deborah gives Usha a sense of peace and relaxation from the constraints which her traditional mother imposes on her. Thus, Usha demonstrates that she does not want to bridge the space between her Bengali culture and American culture. During a tense moment in her relationship with her mother, Usha feels a rush of resentment towards her mother following Pranab’s wedding: “As we drove home from the wedding I told my mother, for the first time but not the last time in my life, that I hated her” (74). The use of the word “hate”—a powerful, negative word—in this sentence amplifies the tension between Usha and her mother because of their different experiences of cultural renegotiation. Usha desires to assimilate with
Western culture, which does not please Aparna. As Usha continues to renegotiate between Bengali culture and Western culture, she begins to rebel: “It was Matty who drove me home, and sitting in my parents’ driveway I kissed him, at once thrilled and terrified that my mother might walk onto the lawn in her nightgown and discover us” (81). Usha’s feels simultaneous thrill and terror as she defies her mother’s traditional notions of how a Bengali woman should behave. Her continuous cultural renegotiations of what constitutes familiar intimacy points to the process of cultural renegotiation itself and that it can render sublime emotions of awe and wonderment, but also terror.

Moreover, “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Hell-Heaven” illustrate the difficulty of parent-child relationships in the diaspora. Both Ruma and Usha feel a sense of confinement within the Bengali tradition, and it is through their renegotiations of culture and intimacy that they become cognizant of cultural changes within themselves and their desire to assimilate. However, Ruma’s father contrasts to Aparna, as he also embodies an awareness of cultural change and the desire to conform to Western culture. Aparna, on the other hand, is resistant to cultural change and desires to maintain a familiar intimacy of traditional Bengali culture within her home. Although Aparna is resistant to cultural change, she ultimately does render herself to renegotiations of culture through her bond with Pranab. Whether or not the characters desire to assimilate, the space between Bengali culture and American culture remains partially unbridged.

In “Unaccustomed Earth” as well as “Hell-Heaven,” Lahiri offers a critique on interracial relationships in the diaspora. In “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma and Adam’s relationship faces a struggle in part because of the continuous negotiations of culture and intimacy Ruma must make living in the diaspora, and his inability to understand the profound strain of these continuous renegotiations. Ruma faces an internal conflict throughout the story about whether or
not she should offer her father the possibility of living with her: “She couldn’t imagine tending to her father as her mother had, serving the meals her mother used to prepare. Still, not offering him a place in her home made her feel worse. It was a dilemma Adam didn’t understand” (7). Ruma mediates between the tradition of her Bengali culture and her sense of American culture as she tries to come to terms with the possibility that her father may live with her. She faces this internal conflict throughout the story, a conflict which Adam simply “[does not] understand” because he does not occupy the same position as Ruma, that is to say, a mediator between two cultures. During phone calls with her mother, her mother would ask Ruma what she would be making for dinner, and her mother would be in disbelief when Ruma would tell her the small and simple dishes she would be making. Ruma cuts corners when she cooks for Adam, but “[h]er mother had never cut corners” when she cooked for her husband, and “it [i]s in such moments that Ruma recognize[s] how different her experience of being a wife [is]” (22). During this moment in Ruma’s focalization, memories of the past—specifically of Ruma’s mother—interrupt the present narrative. These resonances from the past emphasize Ruma’s longing for her mother and thus, her Bengali culture. As someone who is now a mediator between Bengali culture and American culture, Ruma feels a great deal of internal turmoil and turns to her memories of her mother for solace and comfort. Ruma realizes through her conversations with her mother that she is not a traditional Bengali wife, and that her experience of being a wife to Adam involves enduring and unremitting renegotiations of their two cultures. However, from Ruma’s focalization here, there is also the sense of relief at not being required to meet some exacting standard. Towards the end of the story, Ruma realizes that she does not feel tortured by her father’s presence, but rather, has come to appreciate having him in her home. Ruma “plan[s] to tell Adam this, but…she change[s] her mind” (46), and she becomes cognizant that “[i]t [i]s
wrong of her [to admit it],…[but] an awareness…set[s] in, that she and Adam [are] separate people leading separate lives” (26). The construction of the visual imagery of Ruma and Adam illustrates them going in completely separate directions with their lives. Ruma becomes aware that she and Adam are “leading separate lives” and that her continual renegotiations of culture do not fit in her marriage. The “in-between” space which exists between Ruma and Adam ultimately cannot be completely bridged, as this space is fairly distinguished because of cultural differences. This echoes Rushdie’s idea of “translation” or translatability and how it is a fitting term for producing identities in the American Indian diaspora. While Ruma’s marriage tragically “gets lost in translation” in the diaspora, she becomes cognizant of her failed marriage and she also becomes aware of cultural change and that her experiences of being a wife cannot be compared to her mother’s experiences (Rushdie 17).

“Hell-Heaven” also illustrates the difficulty of inter-racial relationships in the diaspora through the relationship between Pranab and Deborah. Ultimately, there is the sense from both Ruma and Deborah that something cannot be bridged or accessed in the middle ground between Bengali culture and Western culture. Usha revisits her mother’s feelings about Deborah in her narration: “She would also talk about Deborah to other Bengali women: “‘He used to be so different. I don’t understand how a person can change so suddenly. It’s just hell-heaven, the difference,’ she would say, always using the English words for her self-concocted, backward metaphor” (69). The fact that Aparna constructs this phrase in English is quite curious in terms of the interplay between the translation of language and cultural translation. Aparna “always” uses English to express this metaphor of “hell-heaven,” which suggests that she herself is negotiating between her Bengali language and the English language living as a diasporic subject. The construction of the metaphor of “hell-heaven” also illuminates the tension between Pranab
and Deborah, which is exacerbated by his traditional Bengali culture. For Aparna, Pranab represents “heaven” and Deborah represents “hell.” Moreover, Aparna, being the traditional Bengali woman that she is, does not approve of Pranab’s marriage to Deborah, an American woman. In Pranab’s case, neither his family nor the Bengali American society in general approves of his marriage to Deborah, who like Adam, is an outsider. After Pranab and Deborah divorce, Deborah ironically confides in Aparna about her broken marriage. She openly reveals to Aparna that during the time she was married to Pranab, she could not access his culture and the demands he felt:

On the phone, Deborah admitted something that surprised my mother: that all these years she had felt hopelessly shut out of a part of Pranab Kaku’s life. “I was so horribly jealous of you back then, for knowing him, understanding him in a way I never could…I still felt threatened. I could never get over that.” (82)

Deborah’s profound honesty to Aparna illustrates that there is the sense that something cannot be bridged or accessed between these two cultures. Her honesty here also reveals the transparency between her “Americanness” and Aparna’s “Bengaliness.” Deborah feels that she is locked out of Pranab’s cultural identity as a Bengali. Thus, she herself experiences renegotiations of culture and intimacy in her marriage to Pranab as she tries albeit unsuccessfully to bridge those cultural gaps.

Moreover, both “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Hell-Heaven” illustrate the difficulties which arise in inter-racial marriages in the diaspora. Through these difficulties, Lahiri offers a critique on the notion of inter-racial marriages and marriages as a whole. That is to say, no marriage is ever easy let alone when it involves the blending of two different cultures and traditions. In Susan Koshy’s essay, “Neoliberal Family Matters,” she posits that “[m]ost stories
in *Unaccustomed Earth* turn around characters whose identities have been loosened from their moorings in kinship, place, or nationality and whose affiliations confound the citizen–alien binary” (371). Moreover, both Ruma and Pranab are considered to be outsiders to the families of their spouses given their very different cultures, and thus, they are viewed as “citizen-aliens.” However, what Koshy suggests is that the “affiliations” of the inter-racial marriages of Ruma and Pranab confound the “citizen-alien” binary. While Koshy proposes that the result of these “affiliations” is a sense of liberalism, I argue that the result of these “affiliations” or inter-racial marriages is an even more complicated process of cultural renegotiation in the diaspora. The struggle with inter-racial marriages in both stories underscores that there is a degree of discomfort negotiating between cultures whilst living in the American diaspora. There is the sense from both Ruma and Deborah that something cannot be bridged or accessed between both cultures. Ruma and Deborah both occupy the position of the mediator as they try to negotiate a balance of culture in their respective marriages. However, Ruma is Bengali and struggles to communicate her concerns about her Bengali tradition to Adam, as she simply feels he cannot understand the pain of her enduring renegotiations. By contrast, Deborah is not Bengali and she is also the outsider in her marriage to Pranab. However, she faces a similar plight as Ruma in that she struggles to balance her position as a mediator between both cultures, and that she must continually negotiate between how she is viewed in the Bengali tradition and how she views herself in her own marriage. While I have thus far focused on narrative mediation with respect to cultural negotiation, I will now discuss photography in both stories, and how photography functions as a different form of narrative mediation through the emphasis on visual narration.

Photography plays an important role in “Unaccustomed Earth,” as it brings a woman—Mrs. Bagchi—who is meant to be invisible into the light. The motif of photography in this story
emphasizes the continual renegotiations of culture and intimacy in the diasporic experiences of Ruma and her father. What lies at the core of the tension between Ruma and her father is that they have both departed from aspects of their Bengali culture and have embraced aspects of Western culture. In terms of her father’s departure from Bengali culture, he embraces his freedom in retirement and finds a romantic companion in Mrs. Bagchi. Mrs. Bagchi is no longer invisible when she appears in the video for Ruma to see:

He stared, horrified, at the television screen, where for a few seconds, Mrs. Bagchi choppily appeared, sitting at a small table at a café, stirring sugar with a tiny spoon into a tiny cup. Mrs. Bagchi vanished, did not appear again. He was grateful the room was dark, that his daughter could not see his face…It was an opportunity to tell Ruma. It was more difficult than he’d thought, being in his daughter’s home, being around her all day. He felt pathetic deceiving her. (39-40)

The moment that his camera video reveals Mrs. Bagchi in the frame is an incredibly tense moment in the narrative, as Ruma becomes cognizant of that fact that her father has moved on with another woman. However, neither Ruma nor her father verbally addresses the presence of Mrs. Bagchi in the video. Mrs. Bagchi is meant to be invisible, as Ruma’s father wants to conceal his relationship with her from Ruma, but she transitions into the light in this video. This photographic moment in the story underscores the enduring renegotiations of culture and intimacy for both Ruma and her father. The familiarity of intimacy within the private space of the home is shattered through this video, as Ruma must grapple with this new knowledge and her father must accept that his daughter now knows the truth. His relationship with Mrs. Bagchi also emphasizes continual negotiations of culture, as Ruma’s father mediates between his Bengali
culture and American culture, as does Ruma. His relationship with Mrs. Bagchi represents an amalgamation of his Bengali culture with his American sense of individualism.

Similarly to the video of Mrs. Bagchi in “Unaccustomed Earth,” photography is a motif in “Hell-Heaven” which also brings Aparna into the light. Photography in this story emphasizes the difficulty of cultural negotiation. During Usha’s account of her past memories with her family and Pranab, she narrates the events surrounding a dinner her parents hosted for Pranab before his wedding to Deborah to “mark the end of his bachelorhood” (72). Usha remembers the only photograph of her mother and Pranab:

There is a photograph of the dinner, taken by my father, the only picture, to my knowledge, in which my mother and Pranab Kaku appear together. The picture is slightly blurry; I remember Pranab Kaku explaining to my father how to work the camera, and so he is captured…instructing my father how to read the light meter or some such thing. My mother stands beside him, one hand placed on top of his head in a gesture of blessing, the first and last time she was to touch him in her life. (72-73)

Usha’s narratorial rendering of this dinner emphasizes the negotiations of culture that Aparna faces. Pranab is her way to hold onto her Bengali culture, as he is a relatively newly immigrated diasporic subject, unlike Aparna and her family who have been living in Boston for several years. However, it is clear from this visual image and from the narrative that Aparna also has romantic feelings for Pranab, who is much closer to her age than her husband. The last line of the aforementioned passage effectively illustrates the futility of Aparna’s attraction to Pranab. Ultimately, as the “slightly blurry” photograph reveals, there is no romantic future for Aparna and Pranab. The photograph Usha describes is “blurry,” but it nonetheless brings Aparna into light from her previous invisibility. Despite that Pranab and Aparna form a bond, Pranab does
not appear to feel the same way about Aparna, and Aparna is thus romantically invisible to him. Moreover, this “blurry” photograph is able to refute Aparna’s lack of visibility throughout the story and bring her to light.

The two instances of photography in “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Hell-Heaven” are a different form of mediation than narrative prose, as these images of photography create visual narratives of cultural renegotiation. Photography in these stories underscores the desire for permanence of memory. Photography also functions as a form of visual documentation to piece together women who are invisible or unnoticed in both stories. “Unaccustomed Earth” presents a kinesthetic image of photography through the motion-depicted video of Mrs. Bagchi. It is through the movement in the video that the profound movement of shock and surprise can be felt within both Ruma and her father. “Hell-Heaven,” by contrast, does not rely on a kinesthetic image of photography, but rather, a visual image of photography which illustrates Aparna’s fragmented and “blurry” process of cultural renegotiations. Ultimately, these photographic images in both stories illuminate the struggle that exists within the mediation between two cultures, and it is only fitting that the way to express this is through a kind of narration which mediates between the visual and the descriptive.

In conclusion, Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Hell-Heaven” explore life in the South Asian American diaspora through the discussion of familial conflict and the difficulty of accepting cultural change. What lies at the core of both these stories is unremitting renegotiations of the home culture and American culture. What also lies at the core of these stories is unremitting negotiations of familiar intimacy within a private space and accepting that a familiar intimacy has been altered or modified. Ultimately, the “in-between” space between Bengali culture and American culture is untranslatable, and the gaps between these cultures
cannot be bridged. Although the narrations of “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Hell-Heaven” differ in terms of focalizing agents and temporal space, I believe their visions of life in the diaspora are ultimately the same. Both stories illustrate the difficulties of living in the diaspora and the challenges which arise from mediating a position between two different cultures.

The ending of “Unaccustomed Earth” lacks a certain degree of emotional catharsis, as Ruma and her father do not have the opportunity to forgive each other—and themselves—for their departure from the Bengali tradition, but there is nonetheless the cognizance that a departure from the Bengali tradition has taken place. The ending of “Hell-heaven” is more striking than that of “Unaccustomed Earth,” largely because of Aparna’s suicidal gesture. While this is a tragic moment in the story, it remains a gesture and not an attempt. Elisabeth Heidi Bollinger argues that the endings of these stories do not provide narrative closure, as “[the reader] do[es] not know what comes ‘after’ the disaster for the characters, and therefore narrative closure eludes us” (487). While the endings of both stories do not provide fulfillment and narrative closure, there is something to be said about the emotionally raw ending of “Hell-Heaven.” The ending of “Hell-Heaven” encapsulates the profound difficulties of the untranslatable in diasporic life, and the difficult consequences which follow. Nonetheless, both of Lahiri’s stories illuminate that while diversity and individualism are tenants of American freedom, many of the characters cannot access a genuine sense of individualism because of the uneasiness they feel leaving the culture of their homeland behind.
Works Cited


