

Sexual Politics of the Gaze and Objectification of the (Immigrant) Woman in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract: *Gayatri Spivak's repeated accusations against the hyphenated Americans of colluding in their own exploitation is noteworthy in the context of diasporic writers' portrayal of immigrant women within the prevailing discourse of anti-Communism in the United States. The woman in South Asian American writings is often portrayed as still stuck in the traditional prescribed gender roles imposed by patriarchal society. This essay explores Jhumpa Lahiri's literary engagement with the contemporary racialization and gendering of a collective subject described as the Indian diaspora in her Pulitzer Prize winning short story collection, Interpreter of Maladies (1999). Specifically, it focuses on the two stories of "Sexy" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" to analyse the manner dynamics of the gaze operate between the male and female characters. The numerous acts of looking that take place in these stories fall naturally into two major categories: the psychoanalytic look of voyeurism and the historicist gaze of surveillance. Through a rapprochement between the two seemingly different fields of the socius and the psychic, the study concludes that the material and ideological specificities of the stories that formulate a particular group of women as powerless, passive, alien and monstrous are rooted in the contradictory cultural and moral imperatives of the contemporary American society.*

Keywords: *Gaze, female subject, objectification, monstrosity, Jhumpa Lahiri*

Introduction

Gayatri Spivak's repeated accusations against the hyphenated Americans of being "possible agents of exploitation, not its victims" (357) is important in the context of diasporic writers' portrayal of immigrant women within the prevailing discourse of anti-Communism in the United States. The South Asian American woman is often portrayed as still stuck in the traditional prescribed gender roles imposed by patriarchal society. For Spivak, as for other anticapitalist transnational feminists, the reproduction of certain forms of existing hierarchies of power is absolutely crucial.

The immigrant woman and her subjectification (government of others) and subjectivation (government of one's self) have been the focus of many literary works and studies. Among the contemporary short story writers, Bharati Mukherjee's both collections *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) approach the theme of giving women a new sense of themselves. These are followed by Chitra Divakaruni's two short story collections *Arranged Marriage* (1995) and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), which are similarly preoccupied with Indian immigrant women's wilful construction of subjectivity. Situated at the border between the traditional, repressive world of patriarchy and the new one of supposed possibilities and freedom, her female protagonists deliberately break away from predefined forms of living. But if one asks who the most widely acclaimed contemporary Indian American writer is in the present century thus far, one is likely to hear the name of Jhumpa Lahiri, mainly for her Pulitzer Prize winning short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). The prize has distinguished Lahiri from her predecessors and fellow-writers, as she became the first Indian-origin winner of the prize for fiction so far. The debut is comprised of nine stories that address common motifs such as race, ethnicity, displacement, and identity affecting the immigrants in the new world. This essay aims to explore Lahiri's literary engagement with the contemporary racialization and gendering of a collective subject described as the Indian diaspora.

Studies on Lahiri's representations of Indian diasporic woman have been plentiful over the last sixteen years. Some of her feminist critique has drawn attention to the "uneven gendered relation" as well as to the unbalanced "generational labour of diasporic social production" (Koshy 352). Some have critiqued the way gender intersects with race and ethnicity. We see examples of this in Dhingra's "Feminizing Men?: Moving Beyond Asian American Literary Gender Wars in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction," where

she examines Lahiri's sympathetic depictions of South Asian American masculinity and argues that such representations of male characters demonstrate the manner her "work transcends and challenges the [traditional] Asian American 'gender troubles' paradigm that earlier 'Woman Warrior'-like Bengali American writers" modelled (136). In a similar study, Dutt-Ballerstadt compares Lahiri's male with female characters and observes that many are "gendered nomad" that must "work through complex negotiations of belonging and unbelonging. Identity and non-identity, learning new words and entering new worlds" (quoted in Dhingra and Cheung xx). Both critics applaud Lahiri for eschewing conventional forms of gender and racial politics.

Such adulatory comments formulate the backbone of much of the scholarship that erroneously assume Lahiri as a (postcolonial) feminist. In scholarly analyses of her fiction, there is a tendency to view her female characters as deconstructing pre-established stereotypes and functioning "on an egalitarian level not only with their male Indian counterparts, but also with their American colleagues" (Aubeeluck 45). To begin with, Kuortti finds *Twinkle* of "This Blessed House" an inspiring instance of not only a "feminist resistance to the controlled, rationalized, patriarchal structures," but also a reproach of the "colonial project" (205). In a similar vein, Stoican commends Lahiri for her unorthodox female characters that subvert "both Hindu hegemonic ideals of womanhood and Western assumptions of female otherness" (27). Lastly, Kasun takes it for granted that Lahiri is a feminist who exemplifies and offers a redefinition of womanism throughout her fiction. Kasun praises Lahiri for her manifestations of womanist conceptions and defines her as a new Bengali-/Indian-American womanist. She moreover suggests that akin to African womanists, Lahiri is also struggling for an independent theory and hegemony that would resist ethnic and gendered prejudice. What is remarkable about Kasun's approach is studying Lahiri's fiction through pluralistic theories that attempt not to be limited by American and European definitions. It is also very convincing that to assess the oppression of colonialism and neo-colonialism, and to liberate oneself from those oppressions, one has to develop one's own theories and free oneself from dominant forces, particularly from Western and feminist hegemony. Indeed, this is in keeping with what contemporary transnationalist

feminists like Mohanty advocate.¹ But Kasun's adulatory comments that credited Lahiri's fiction with chronicling the struggle of women to liberate themselves and establish parity in society suffer from a limited perspective as they are based on only a few of Lahiri's short stories which happen to be situated in America.

It is noteworthy that not all critical studies on Lahiri have presumed her narratives to harbor a feminist sympathy. For Zare, Lahiri departs from conventional "representations of men as stereotypical villains," and in so doing leads the reader to admire men (100). Likewise, Cussen points to Lahiri's frequent and conspicuous employments of pathologically unhappy, scapegoating female characters to argue that "far from writing in favour of the ethos of millennial female license, female sympathy and female advocacy that frequently underlies the icons' scholarly employments and that is too-frequently assumed to be Lahiri's own predisposition, she writes against that ethos" (7). One critic observes that in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri "tackles the immigrant experience from the safe distance of an acceptable stereotype formulated around the 1960s when South Asians struggled and melted into America" (Rajan 127). In the recent criticism that surrounds Lahiri's counter-feminist representations of women, one finds Asl et al's Sartrean reading of "A Temporary Matter" also germane to the subject matter of the present study. They have noted, for example, that "notwithstanding infrequent emasculated images of the male subject, it is ultimately the masculine that, in the battle of looks between male and female, nihilates the Other to the state of 'being-in-itself' and enjoys supremacy over the feminine" ("Nihilation" 123). Even though it is an insightful analysis of gender roles in Lahiri's fiction—as the psychic domain fashions the principal framework for her writings whereby she explores the emotional development of diasporic subjects—this essay has largely focused on a particular Sartrean theoretical standpoint and has thus neglected the socio-political context of the narrative. Hence the implications of the socio-political sphere have yet to be fully explored.

1 In a 2003 revisiting of her ground-breaking essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Mohanty accuses Western feminism of an attempt to homogenize the experiences of postcolonial women, and proposes the more refined strategy of "anticapitalist transnational feminist practice" for studying postcolonial women. She explains that profound changes such as "political shifts to the right, accompanied by global capitalist hegemony, privatization and increased religious, ethnic and racial hatreds, pose very concrete challenges for feminists" (508-9).

This essay seeks to fill the gap by delineating the material and ideological specificities that formulate a particular group of women as powerless, passive, alien and monstrous in Lahiri's fiction. We use theories of the gaze to investigate Lahiri's literary engagement with the privileged masculine gaze and her "possible" complicity in reinforcing the pre-existing hierarchies of gender already at work within the predominant discourse of the mainstream. To this end, we specifically focus on two of her short stories "Sexy" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" to examine the existing relations of power. Both stories are pertinent to the present study for their similar portrayal of women's sexual desire as a growing threat to the structure of male-centred societies. "Sexy" is about a twenty-two-year-old American girl Miranda's affair with a married Indian American man called Dev, who describes her as sexy. As the narrative progresses, however, Miranda understands a larger truth about the meaning of the word and its widespread interpretation, which leads to her break off with Dev. Relatedly, "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" is about the titular Indian female protagonist Bibi and her baffling ailment, the only cure for which is presumed to be heterosexual relations. Hence, her married male cousin Haldar places an advertisement in the local newspapers to find her a husband. After some months, the neighbours find Bibi pregnant and healed—though no response has ever come to the advertisement, and even though she has no idea who her baby's father is. Despite their differences in setting—"Sexy" is situated in the States and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" in India—both narratives are produced in post-1960s America. In situating the stories within their socio-political context in the process of examining the formation of power relations, this essay expands upon recent studies in (postcolonial) feminist scholarship that have turned to the act of looking as a way of analysing latent hierarchies of race and gender. Unless one appreciates the significance of looking as a form of objectification of the subject, and unless one properly understands the setting the stories are situated and produced in, one cannot appreciate the pleasure of being either the subject or the object of the gaze, nor can one recognize the nature of the power relations performing within the socially established interpretation of sexual difference that are perpetuated within the stories.

The Objectifying Gaze

To begin with, the theory of the gaze "does not denote a well-defined theo-

retical or critical movement or school” (Hawthorn, “Theories” 509). As an inclusive term, however, the gaze refers to studies of looking behaviour that aim to unravel the manner relations of power operate between two or more groups or, alternatively, in dyads. As a concept with a mixed pedigree, the gaze tackles both with social relations and historical issues as well as with more specific matters of individual psyche. Accordingly, the term has been employed in conjunction with Foucauldian practices of observation and surveillance as well as with psychoanalytic mechanisms of voyeurism and exhibitionism. Though the former is engaged with *socius* and the latter with the *psyche*, both disciplines are “interested in possession and power than in interaction,” and both treat the subject(s) surveyed as an object for use (Hawthorn, “Seeing” 123).

For the past few decades, feminist theorists and critics, with a particular emphasis on the notion of heterosexuality, have argued that metaphor of vision is closely linked with the formation of gender and sexual difference (Butler; De Lauretis; Irigaray, *This Sex and “Another”*; Keller and Grontkowski; Mulvey), and that the existing privilege of vision works to maintain the privilege of masculinity in contemporary writing practices. Most of this scholarship is rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis that arguably revolves around the dichotomy between scopophilia,² i.e. the pleasure in looking,³ and exhibitionism,⁴ or the desire to display. For these critics, because the

2 The term “scoptophilia,” replaced by “scopophilia,” is taken from the Greek *skopein* meaning “to look” and *philein* meaning “to love,” and denotes a love of watching in which one gains pleasure in accordance with the Freudian notion of *schaulust*, “pleasure in looking.” In Freudian analysis, the term is associated “with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 344).

3 Christian Metz comments on pleasure of looking that: “the mechanism of satisfaction relies on my awareness that the object I am watching is unaware of being watched. ‘Seeing’ is no longer a matter of sending something back, but of catching something unawares. That something which is designed to be caught unawares has been gradually put in place and organized in its function, and through a kind of institutional specialization... it has become story” (quoted in Clark 16).

4 Looking at an object for pleasure is one aspect of the process of looking. In order for a subject to look, an object must be seen, must capture the subject’s attention and form the opposite pole of looking. From the traditional psychoanalytic view, “exhibitionism” denotes a sexual perversion in which gratification is connected to the displaying of one’s genitals (Holtzman and Kulish 271). As a manifestation of childhood sexuality, exhibitionism is a common phenomenon and a part of sexual play. Exhibitionists “exhibit their own genitals in order to obtain a reciprocal view of the genitals of the other person” (Freud, “Three Essays” 1483). In psychoanalysis, therefore, exhibitionism is one of the elements of instinctual life, making its appearance in conjunction with its opposite, namely pleasure in looking (Schilton 535). The present study, however, employs Newman’s definition that exhibitionism is to be understood not as perversion, “but as a normal part of human condition;” in this regard, exhibitionism is inherent in all subjectivity: “I know that I am loved by the way I see myself being looked at by the other” (Subjects 2). It is understood as the “passive

gaze is “something imposed on women by men” (Newman *Subjects* 8), one of the principal sources of woman’s objectification and oppression lies in the way she has “been consigned to visuality” (Chow 114). Concerning such patriarchal structure of the gaze, Mulvey rightly points to the “active/passive heterosexual division of labor” in Western metaphysics and asserts that,

[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle. (346)

Looking thus functions as a means of oppression of women when it takes place between men and women, because the imposed male gaze, Mulvey maintains, essentially aims at objectifying women.⁵

In like manner, Irigaray points to the phallogocentric nature of the field of vision in Western culture and affirms that the privileging of visibility unavoidably situates the woman forever as an object, and never a subject. The produced object-status of women is inescapably tied up “with the structure of the look and the localization of the eye of authority,” which suggests that the woman internalizes the objectification and makes “her self-image a function of being for another” (Copjec 288). Such an assumption of gaze as an apparatus of objectification and as an agent of power is more developed by both Nietzsche and Foucault for whom the primary satisfaction is not in survival, but in exerting power and acquiring mastery over the other. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche insists that life itself is fundamentally a means of “appropriating, injuring, overpowering the alien and the weaker, oppressing, being harsh, imposing your own form, incorporating, and at least, the very least, exploiting” (quoted in Horstmann and Norman 153).

manifestation of the visual field, a ‘scopic’ or ‘scopophilic’ drive expressed in its active form as the impulse to obtain pleasure through looking or seeing” (6), in general.

- 5 Sex positive and lipstick feminists like Paglia, on the contrary, refuse to regard women as sex-object victims of male oppressors. They believe that through their body’s ability to attract men as a form of power, women act as agents instead of objectified victims. This concept of the gaze is in direct opposition to the male gaze that Mulvey proposes in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In her analysis of women in mainstream media, she argues that the male gaze is imposed upon women, which result in their objectification.

In this view, rather than being something for pleasure, the goal of the observer's gaze is clear: it seeks control and supremacy over the other or over the object. In this regard, Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish* that the gaze operates as an ideal apparatus to acquire this domination, not least through internalization of it by the object itself. The idea of being see-able creates in people an awareness of always being visible, and hence a need for their self-vigilance. Thus the crucial factor in the workings of power relations, for Foucault, is in the operation of the gaze, in the very fact of general visibility by an omnipresent observer.

Whereas the two fields of the gaze have often seemed to be indifferent to each other, it is with the rapprochement between the *socius* and the *psyche* that the ongoing analysis is concerned. By converging the two, we seek to examine the dynamics of the gaze operating in Lahiri's stories. Such an analysis is pertinent to the understanding of the numerous acts of looking—the psychoanalytic look of voyeurism and the historicist gaze of surveillance—that take place between Lahiri's male and female characters. The rapprochement is helpful as the (diasporic) woman's display in the US is tangled by the country's contemporary contradictory cultural and moral imperatives. On the one hand, under a neoliberal rationality, the diasporic female subject is promised individuality, freedom and egalitarianism. On the other, within the patriarchal discourse of the spectacle, looking remains a privilege of a male subject and a means of appropriating her as an object. Hence, the setting of both stories has profound consequences for the construction of such a patriarchal image of woman. Both narratives are situated and produced in the aftermath of the 1965 Immigration Act⁶ as well as within the prevailing discourse of post-Cold War political and sexual paranoia, which needs to be touched upon in some detail here.

Communism and the Monstrous Woman

The massive influx of non-European immigrants to America during the 1960s, a period of time most of Lahiri's elite characters enter the country, ushered in a new epoch of political and sexual paranoia. Its occurrence coincided with the emergence of two seemingly opposing social phenomena, neoliberalism and the Oriental Other. Whereas the former promoted the

6 In 1965 a new immigration act was introduced to abolish the long-practiced 1924 restrictive policies that excluded immigrants from Asian lineage, in particular the South Asians (Asl et al. "Mechanisms" 155).

country as a land of freedom and individuality, the latter turned out to be a recuperation of much older and different demonological traditions and legacies brought back to serve new purposes (Asl and Abdullah, "Practices" 125). In the aftermath of Cold War and drawing its energy from the prevailing menace of global Communism to the liberal American way of life, "a distinctive American political tradition, fearful of primitivism, *disorder*, and conspiracy, developed in response to peoples of color" (Rogin 1). The Oriental who refused and/or failed to integrate into the mainstream was directly associated with corresponding monstrous threats to the established socio-political discourse of national security (Asl et al. "Mechanisms" 141).

Within the produced discursive regime of communist menace, dichotomies of "enemy vs. ally" and "normal vs. deviant" captured popular and state discourse which led to the construction of a new mode of national identity. This discursive regime, in effect, enabled "the production of the sovereign subject through a variety of technologies—one of them being the ways in which the managing of risk and danger is connected to classifications of race and gender" (Grewal, "Transnational" 539). In doing so, the apparatus of internal security was allowed to install disciplinary mechanisms for the policing of private behaviours to detect the invisible menace in things which were often considered abnormal. Thus, the disciplinary technologies were expanded to scrutinize other visible formations—e.g. cultural heterogeneity, sexual freedom and the destabilization of the family—that could be considered as socially non-normative.

One such public inspection was being conducted during the third quarter of the twentieth century, a period of time in which the deployment of the male into the war zones had already paved the way for the emergence of the matriarchal authority within the family. New subjectivities were formed, the structures of domination were reversed, and the family authority was inevitably repolarized. The new structure, albeit a growing realization of the "post-liberal" ideology of the early 1970s, was repudiated for its androgenizing the country "through an expansion of the range of sexual options available to women" (Hurley 49). Hence, the most pernicious effect of modern American culture was the manner this repolarization redrew the traditional boundaries of identity, effaced existing differences between men and women, and allowed the modern mother to "reverse the circuit of power in the family, effectively castrating the husband/father, and taking his phallus for herself—and then using it against him" (Hurley 50). But the alternative feminine subjectivity was not only challenging the patriarchal

power orders, but also violating the boundaries of heterosexual normativities by producing “self-sufficient,” independent girls that “polymorphized” American sexuality. The growing power of women, both at home and in society, brought up self-sufficient girls that in their resistance to the patriarchy became sexually deviant.

The sexual empowerment of women during the post-Cold War period coincided with the emergence of a contrasting “domestic ideology” that buttressed women’s return to “domestic subordination in response not only to their husband’s return from the war but also to their own newfound independence” (Rogin 241). Thus, the attitude of American society towards this “domestic ideology”⁷ was ambivalent. At the same time that matriarchal family was glorified, the working mothers were also condemned for their leaving their children alone at home for work. What followed, nonetheless, was the chastisement of female sexual transgression, as it was assumed to be aiming at repolarizing the family authority. Besides, within the contemporary risk and danger discourse of the Cold War, the sexual empowerment of women was to a certain degree associated with the threatening Marxist doctrines of international Communism.

The communist menace reinforced a nationalist discourse that, perforce, effectuated the construction of race and gender as regulatory formations. The practices of government pervaded all of society, sparking off expressions of “cultural anxiety” in the guise of a paranoiac attempt to remove potential danger to national security by simply conducting both the woman and the racially other’s behaviour not only in the social domains but also in the private spheres. The attempt systematically muted, controlled and regulated woman’s sexual difference and the migrants’ cultural variety. The whole process thus brought about limitations on individual agency at both macro and micro levels of the society.

Lahiri re-narrates this domestic ideology in family-affirmative short stories that repudiate the independent and undomesticated woman, insofar as the individualistic woman is directly associated with a figure of monster, death and a disgusting image of hole and slime (Cussen 8; Asl et al. “Nihilation”). What is crucial to note in these associations is that the moment the monster appears, as Dolar similarly observes in his study of Lacan and the uncanny, it

7 The term was first used by the political scientist Michael Rogin to describe America’s post-war cultural imaginary (Hurley 47).

is always immediately seized by an overwhelming amount of meaning... It has immediate social and ideological connotations. The monster can stand for everything our culture has to repress—the proletariat, sexuality, other cultures, alternative ways of living, heterogeneity, the Other. (19)

We draw upon Dolar's observations to argue that the connection Lahiri makes between the monster and the sexually powerful and socially assertive woman in "Sexy" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" has significant implications with respect to the socio-historical milieu of the narratives, particularly, in the light of the cultural anxiety of the Cold War, during which the monster became a surrogate for Communism.

"Sexy" Woman as Signifier of Male Desire

"Sexy" begins with a situational irony wherein Laxmi, an Indian female character, relates a moral percept that it is "a wife's worst nightmare" if her husband falls "in love with another woman" to the female protagonist, Miranda, who turns out to be a mistress herself (Lahiri 92). And it concludes with the heroine's remorseful decision to tell her Indian lover "that it wasn't fair to her, or to his wife, that they both deserved better, that there was no point in it dragging on" (121). The theme of adultery thus formulates the backbone of the whole narrative. But unlike many ethnic women writers who associate female adultery with "notions of independent agency" whereby the racially other women destabilize and subvert pre-existing gendered hierarchies,⁸ Lahiri presents Miranda's adulterous affairs as threatening to dismantle Indian family relationships and to destabilize social stability. Specifically, whereas Miranda's illegitimate affairs with a South Asian man, named Dev, provides her as a Western woman with an opportunity for psychological development, within the framework of domestic ideology and in a society in which marriage and family structure is emphasized, it simultaneously poses a radical threat to the private sphere of South Asian family and victimizes the apparently powerless diasporic

8 In "Revisiting Adultery: The Bodies of Diasporic Female Adulterers in South Asian Immigrant Narratives," Kuo examines the way female adulterers in South Asian immigrant narratives function "less as a moral transgression than as means of psychological development, exerting a vital influence over reformation of the female characters' diasporic identities, and developing their autonomy" (171).

woman. Within this structure, in consequence, and compared to the liberated, secular Western women, South Asian women are depicted as emblems of ignorance, domesticity, tradition virtues, subservience and victimization, and are thereby defined in terms of their object status.

The objectification of diasporic women is built upon two fundamental assumptions: woman as a dependent figure and woman situated within the domestic ideology. Both Laxmi's cousin and Dev's wife are presented as a homogenous category, victims of their husband's infidelity. Though the former is suffering from the truth and the latter is utterly unaware of it, both are positioned within traditional arranged marriage structure, as ahistorical, apolitical, and as women and mothers not only absent from social structure but non-existent even within the narrative framework of the story. Laxmi's cousin, for instance, is bound in familial duties and "is willing to forgive" her husband for the sake of their son and the greater welfare of the family (101)—a decision that frustrates Laxmi. In this manner, the diasporic woman is stereotypically depicted as guardian of the home whose role as a wife and mother to protect the collectivity of the family is reinforced. However, in the battle among Western woman and Eastern one, it is the latter that is defined as other, as peripheral, and it is the latter's life that ultimately and unwantedly ends in "divorce" (110). In a similar way, Dev's wife's departure for India not only paves the ground for Dev's extramarital affair with Miranda to begin because "without the wife there, it didn't seem so wrong" (97), but it also accentuates the perspectival ruptures within the narrative system of the story. The narrative disjunction that is created in "Sexy" is specifically that of ethnic woman's, not precisely in the sense that the story is about Laxmi's cousin or Dev's wife (an idea that their disappearance from narrative structures withholds), but in that, "Sexy" is included in a collection of short stories that relate the diasporic experience, that its very structure is ethnic. That the experience that is structurally diasporic is lost in "Sexy" points to the racial specificities of the so-called experience presented in the story. In terms of female adultery, it is easy to deduce that even though it endues Western woman with emotional progression, it exiles the immigrant one to the farthest periphery of social structure and narrative sphere.

Within this context and with respect to the existing looking behaviours in the narrative, "Sexy" is thus drawn frequently toward female protagonist whose feminine desire and propensity to be seen leads to trouble and is highly repudiated. At the crux of this vigorous castigation of feminine frail-

ty, however, there exists conventional visual underpinnings that comply with the pre-established gendered structure of the gaze. More specifically, in the world of “Sexy,” the heroin is rendered a traditional exhibitionist role and is thus constructed as a sexual object, as erotic spectacle, as the object of a determining male gaze. As a young Western woman, and in keeping with the normative codes of prevailing ideology, Miranda becomes “sexy” when she plays to and signifies male desire, and in so doing, adheres to the pre-existing active/passive heterosexual division of labour in Western metaphysics.

Miranda’s exhibitionism is established in both her being a passive image of visual perfection and in her interest in cosmetics and titillating clothing. Throughout the narrative, she becomes subject of both Dev and Laxmi’s cousin’s son, Rohin’s blatant voyeurism both of whom admire her sexy body and long legs. It is her legs, being “longer than her torso,” that Dev “observed the first time she walked across a room naked;” and admired her that she was the first woman he had seen “with legs this long” [italics mine] (98); and later, complained “she was depriving him of the *sight* of” them [italics mine] (103). In like manner, Rohin’s “eyes opened wide at the sight of” Miranda’s body when she put on a “silver cocktail dress,” with “stockings” and “high heels;” a sight that made him presently declare “you’re sexy” (117-8). Miranda’s exhibitionism thus conceives of her a perfect passive object to both Dev and Rohin’s active voyeurism. More importantly, it is Miranda that knows her role as spectacle and buys herself “things she thought a mistress should have.” She bought “a pair of black high heels ... a satin slip with scalloped edges and a knee-length silk robe ... sheer stockings with a seam” and a silver cocktail dress that though is intended to make Dev “want to rip it right off” her and thereby keep his erotic interest, the dress excites Rohin in a quite similar way (102). But it is in the re-performance of such masochism to Rohin that Miranda is broken down and her guilt is uncovered. Rohin’s blatant voyeurism and his ensuing racy remarks wins through and Miranda is admonished. As soon as Rohin indecorously declared she is sexy, “her heart skipped a beat” and she started imagining the “quarrels Rohin had overheard in his house” between his parents over his father’s English mistress; and as she “imagined the scene she began to cry a little herself ... [and then] cried harder, unable to stop” (119-20).

“Sexy” is thus paradoxical in its moral: the female character’s deviation from the socially ascribed role of spectacle, and her progression into the role of spectator is immediately bound with a stereotypical image of female

monstrosity. The affinity is most illustratively depicted in one of Miranda's amorous scenes with Dev in which she recalls a frightening painting that was in the house of an Indian family, the Dixits, "in the neighborhood where she'd grown up" (105). As we are told,

[i]t was a painting of a naked woman with a red face shaped like a knight's shield. She had enormous white eyes that tilted toward her temples, and mere dots for pupils. Two circles, with the same dots at their centers, indicated her breasts. In one hand she brandished a dagger. With one foot she crushed a struggling man on the ground. Around her body was a necklace composed of bleeding heads, strung together like a popcorn chain. She stuck her tongue out at Miranda. (106)

Much like the commanding posture of the described "goddess Kali" standing on a man's body, Miranda remembers the painting while casting a stealthy, yet assertive look on the impassive body of her partner Dev: when she turns to face him, "his ribs were visible through his skin as he breathed, and yet he was beginning to develop a paunch" (104). The supine passivity of Dev is suggestive of his feminine position with respect to Miranda's objectifying gaze, but it also indicates another difference between his way of seeing and that of Miranda's. Whereas the earlier looks in the story made Miranda an object for Dev's voyeuristic subject, Miranda's gaze here is less erotic. In assuming the role of spectator, she seeks a masculine position by which she asserts her existence as a subject. On the other hand, the story also inscribes the dynamics involved in the gaze through her sudden realization of her being a woman and thus the usual object of an appropriating male gaze. In other words, in a rare instance when the narrative allows the female subject's gaze, to use Williams's words, "she not only sees a monster, she sees a monster that offers a distorted reflection of her own image" ("When" 88). Hence, the impudently assertive look of Miranda's in this scene makes of her a monstrous woman even for herself, as her recalling the horrifying image of the monster-like goddess suggests "their similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing" (Williams 85).

Miranda's "masculine" position and her account of the "frightening" creature, and more importantly her subsequent feeling of "shame" is better understood in relation to Freud's "Medusa's Head," an essay in which he writes, "the terror of Medusa is a terror of castration linked to the sight of something ... the female genitals" (3943), which also confirms the existence of "castrated" human beings. What goes wrong with Miranda's look is that her recollection of the painting calls attention to the implicit gendering of

the gaze in Lahiri's story wherein the woman has to be absent as the subject of the look except when she sees herself seeing herself, i.e. seeing herself relegated to the status of object. And finally, Miranda learns not to look because when she does so "the spectacle provokes, castration is in the air, the Medusa's air is not far off; thus, she must not look, is absorbed herself on the side of the seen" (Newman, "The Situation" 1031). As a result, the haunting of a once "too frightening" image of the monstrous goddess fears Miranda no more, but the thought of her seeing herself seeing herself provokes a feeling of shame in her that "now," as we are told later, "when she and Dev made love, Miranda closed her eyes and saw deserts and elephants, and marble pavilions floating on lakes beneath a full moon" (Lahiri 106).

Male Phallus as an Antidote to Monstrous Female Desire

Akin to "Sexy," in "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar," Lahiri would seem to directly define the feminine in relation to the masculine by constructing a compulsory heterosexuality within the narrative. Whereas masculinity is equated with plenitude, femininity is associated with deficiency. From the very first line of the story, the unmarried woman stands out as a pressing social problem through repeated insistence on the monstrous maladies of the female body of the titular character, Bibi Haldar. The opening lines render the reader with various groups of people perplexed with respect to a female situation. Bibi suffers from an ailment that baffles "family, friends, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets, and fools" (172). She repeatedly "falls unconscious," converses with herself "in a fluent but totally incomprehensible language," and at any moment, is very likely to enter "a shameless delirium" (173).

The essential condition of Bibi's identity in the male-dominated system portrayed within the narrative is the transgression of incest proscription, i.e. the essential predilection for the patriarch, ensued by an increasing infatuation with and/or marrying of a "protective," "promising," and healthy man. From her early life throughout her adolescence, "FOR THE GREATER NUMBER of her twenty-nine years," her female identity is contingent upon the existence of man, her social being in service of man: carrying out his wishes as a daughter, a wife, and eventually as a mother to her son (172). What concerns the "wise men" about Bibi's ailment, and what they consider "the mystery of [her] illness," originates from her failure to carry out her sex-norm stereotype (181). Accordingly, even the only cure viz.

“marriage” that could save her from “the evil eye,” from the “shameless delirium,” and from continual “paroxysms” seems to be only another “fruitless antidote” as she has never been taught to play the role of a woman. Hence, her cousin’s disappointed expression that,

who would marry her? The girl knows nothing about anything, speaks backward, is practically thirty, can’t light a coal stove, can’t boil rice, can’t tell the difference between fennel and a cumin seed. Imagine her attempting to feed a man! (178)

In effect, Bibi’s malady is a reflection of her social and cultural impotence, a request for help as she wanted a man “to be spoken for, protected, ... [to take her] to the cinema, the zoo-garden ... [to buy her] lime soda and cashews” (174-5). The constituted help-requiring and contingent behaviour of the female character emanates from Lahiri’s dichotomized thinking that presents things in relation to their opposites and thereby privileges one over the other, for example, man over woman, sane over insane, healthy over patient, married over single, same over other and looking over being-looked-at. Bibi is thus depicted as man’s other, as mad and hysteric, as what the man is not. It is obvious that for Bibi to obtain mental well-being she must comply with the pre-established social norms for her sex, albeit the unpleasant ones. To achieve this socially established status, the neighbours “began to coach her in wifely ways,” how to caress men with her expression, how to chitchat with nearby men and how to smile to possible suitors (180). Thus, the ethic of female protagonist’s mental well-being in the narrative is established as masculine because it seeks to abide by and tend to patriarchal normativities, rather than empowering the female subject.

Moreover, the nature of sexual difference in “The Treatment of Bibi Hal-dar” is depicted in close connection with the male phallus, in particular when, after “Allopaths, homeopaths, ayurvedics, [and] all branches of the medical arts had been consulted” (172), it is diagnosed that only “relations will calm her blood” (176). Apparently, female sexuality is portrayed as an absence of the male genital organ, as lack—or what Haldar calls “a liability and a loss” (179)—and subsequently, as an insatiable desire for the opposite, privileged and valued sex. It is just through this symmetrical pattern that the present and visible woman of the narrative is defined by the absent and invisible man as its other. To be seen, to be defined by this invisible subject, necessarily entails the woman to modify herself based on the principles that please him. Hence, once the diagnosis was made, Bibi,

began at once to prepare for conjugal life ... polished her toenails and softened her elbows, ... applied glycerine to smooth her lips, resisted sweets to reduce her measurements[,] ... [ordered] a new *salwar-kameez* in an umbrella cut, the fashion that season[,] ... dressed ... in a sari of lavender eyelet chiffon and mirrored slippers ... and insisted on being taken to the photographer's studio so that her portrait, like those of other brides-in-waiting, could be circulated in the homes of eligible men. (177-9)

Since the woman's mental health and her socially acceptable existence within the narrative is subject to the presence of the invisible man, it can be easily concluded that the woman is preordained to be the subordinate in the existing gender relations, to be always the invisible. In other words, the woman is defined by the man as *its* invisible, as a disallowed sight. To be seen, to be considered as a *normal* spectacle, and to "increase whatever matrimonial prospects she had" (175), it is necessary for Bibi to undergo "a change of scenery" and to abide by the established regularities of the male-dominated system, otherwise, "no man of sane mind would touch her" (180), as Haldar phallogocentrically asserts so.

Haldar's reasoning thus emanates from his patriarchal logic that aims at appropriating the woman's madness by already objectifying her, by driving her into a spectacle: as "GIRL, UNSTABLE, HEIGHT 152 CENTIMETRES, SEEKS HUSBAND" is the one-line advertisement he places in the town newspaper to find a man for Bibi (180). To "advertise" her in order to "solicit a groom;" to "marry her off" in order to "cure" her. Such is his masculine line of reasoning to objectify Bibi's insanity and thereby monitor and control her. Unsurprisingly, once the nature of her illness is recognized as her insatiable desire to have heterosexual "relations," she falls under the regulating gaze of her patriarchal cousin, Haldar. She is also exiled to an asylum-like storage room—"a space in which one could sit but not comfortably stand"—lest her disease may be "contagious, like the pox" and infect his pregnant wife and unborn child (173-82). If patriarchal logic thus formulates a systematic pattern to objectify, "confine" and master, and thus, figuratively rape the female character, eventually, Bibi is literally sexually assaulted and on that account is "cured."

Within the narrative, Lahiri relates Bibi's hysteric and insane behaviour to her femininity. The narrator, as the author's surrogate, for a number of times, defines Bibi's mental derangement as the lack of her feminine qualities, her inability to "feed a man," to caress him and to please him. Insanity, in this manner, is what makes Bibi not a woman, i.e. a social being that is

constituted by the logic of patriarch, by his narcissism. Thus the paradox is that in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar,” Lahiri equates woman with insanity, while simultaneously equating insanity with the lack of womanhood. Therefore, Bibi’s madness is due to her lack of feminine qualities to the extent that these qualities are prescribed by patriarchal strictures—not the ones that disrupt the orderliness imposed by patriarchal society. In other words, the woman’s departure from the existing patriarchal norms suggestively equates her with monster, a “biological freak with impossible and threatening appetites that suggest a frightening potency precisely where the normal male would perceive a lack” (Williams 87). The nexus between monster and woman sets out a paradigmatic hierarchical relation between masculine and feminine. The former is privileged with activity and subjectivity, and the latter is identified with passivity and objectivity. Within the produced binary system, man’s centrality is self-perpetuated, and the other is defined and nihilated, accordingly.

Conclusion

Lahiri’s “Sexy” and “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” are both crammed with numerous acts of looking—in their both literal and metaphoric implications. From the attempt to outline the politics of looking, it can be deduced that the prevalent gaze in these stories has minimal chance of operating merely at a metaphoric and psycho-sexual level. Rather, looking is power, and the privilege to appropriate the gaze in these narratives ought to be of some political significance. The prevailing structural domination in the produced looking relations inhabit the realms of desire insofar as the discourse of institutional power relations monitor, appropriate and codify the dynamics of the gaze, or to put simply, wholly produce the desire. Hence, in keeping with the homogenizing, heterosexual discourse of the mainstream, however sophisticated or problematical its use in Lahiri’s fiction, the right to look in both stories is nearly invariably the privilege of the masculine. In consequence, the Indian immigrant woman’s inactive spectation and her visual identification with what the heterosexist conventions present place her as a passive spectator that is doubly objectified and monsterized.

The woman’s spectatorship is indeed complicated by seemingly anti-theoretical socio-political imperatives existing within the neoliberal post-Cold War American culture—a time span the narratives are situated in. On the one hand, characters like Miranda and Bibi Haldar are ideal subjects within

the contemporary domestic ideology to reinforce a nationalist discourse by virtue of chastising female sexual aggression and returning to domestic subordination. On the other, their scopophilic desires alongside with their exhibitionism act to promote individualism within an increasingly differentiated neoliberal society. This cultural paradox further complicates the psychoanalytic paradox of phallogentrism wherein the woman serves as signifier for the male other. After all, it is Bibi's libidinous cravings and Mirandas's adultery together with their feeling of lack that endow the phallus with a symbolic presence. Within this context, the woman who takes the role of spectator symbolizes the castration threat—which is socio-politically associated with the menace of global Communism—that threatens not only to deprive man of his self-command but to disturb and immobilize the conventions of the patriarchal heterosexual society.

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