

Michael Quinteros

Prof. Silber

WRCT 113F-01

26 March 2021

The Power of Immigrants to Make Decisions

In *The Third and Final Continent*, Jhumpa Lahiri explores the process of assimilation of an immigrant (the narrator) from Calcutta, India into the American way of life. She writes about his journey from India to England to Cambridge in Massachusetts, and on the way illustrates the narrator's intricate social relationships and his ability to forge his own voyage. Through this, Lahiri not only demonstrates the process of assimilation but the complex steps embedded in it, from the ability to make decisions to forming impactful relationships that drastically affect the process of merging into American culture. As the problem of immigration worsens, it is important to understand what the immigrant experience is, if we are to help mitigate the drastic effects of moving to a foreign country. Lahiri explores one of these concepts which is the extent to which immigrants can make their own decisions instead of letting their circumstances dictate their immigrant experience. In other words, Lahiri concentrates on the decision-making process of immigrants. Thus, Lahiri's *The Third and Final Continent* aids our understanding of the immigrant assimilation experience through the use of imagery, repetition, and symbolism, to highlight the inability of immigrants to make their own decisions due to the constraints imposed by their legal status, financial problems, and other circumstances.

Before delving into the specific examples surrounding decision-making, Lahiri paints a picture of immigration assimilation throughout her story. This is the story of an Indian immigrant (the narrator) from Calcutta who immigrated to London to study economics with nothing but 10

dollars to his name (Lahiri 173). He spends time in London working in the university's library and living in inadequate conditions alongside other "penniless Bengali bachelors" (Lahiri 173). By pointing to the financial situation of other Bengali immigrants, we get a glimpse of the bad conditions the narrator lives under and his struggles with settling. This process is affected by his decision to move to Cambridge, Massachusetts after obtaining a job in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Library (Lahiri 174). Furthermore, the narrator found himself living in appalling conditions in the YMCA before moving to the house of Mrs. Croft, a mysterious older woman who tends to represent America and the promise of a better life. Hesitant at first, the narrator grows closer to Mrs. Croft, talking with her frequently and holding her views in a high manner. The narrator also undergoes an arranged marriage where he is forced to marry a woman he treats as a stranger. However, after presenting her to Mrs. Croft, and gaining her approval, they grow closer together. In the end, they have a son and decide to settle in the United States (Lahiri 198). This illustrates the process of assimilation into American society but also highlights the decisions that got the narrator there, which were not always his to make.

Through the use of imagery, Lahiri introduces how immigrants have limited opportunities to make decisions that affect their assimilation into a new country. This imagery is first introduced when the narrator leaves India for London. Lahiri uses this literary device to describe the living conditions of our narrator in London; the narrator states, "we lived three or four a room, shared a single, icy toilet, and took turns cooking pots of egg curry" (Lahiri 174). Through a small amount of imagery, this quote highlights the limitations imposed on immigrants due to the circumstances they find themselves in. In other words, it wasn't the narrator's choice to go to that small room. He would have decided to move to a mansion but it was because of his circumstances, which are common to the majority of immigrants who arrived in a new country

without financial backing, that dictated the living conditions he endured. Lahiri then connects this to other moments of imagery in order to further advance her point of view.

This was made more evident when he moved to Massachusetts for his new job where he had to stay at the YMCA. Although the room itself is not that unpleasant, the language the narrator uses to describe the noise from the outside buses, car horns, and sirens explain the limitation of his capacity to make his own decisions that will affect his life. When discussing the noise, he calls it “suffocating” and reminds him of the sound by the drone engine on the *SS Roma* on which he immigrated; the narrator exclaims, “But there was no ship’s deck to escape to, no glittering ocean to thrill my soul” (Lahiri 175). By declaring this powerful imagery in this quote, Lahiri demonstrates the constraint that the narrator faces and his inability to make a decision that would change that. In other words, the narrator obviously dislikes his current living arrangement but his hands are tied by the circumstances he finds himself in as an immigrant, without financial resources in a foreign land. As he said, there was no option to escape to the ship’s deck.

Building on this imagery, Lahiri composes this idea of the inability of an immigrant to have self-determination and make his/her own decisions utilizing repetition. This is introduced through the character of Mrs. Croft, an older woman who takes in the narrator as a renter. At first, they have a questionable relationship, with her being very strict but they grow close together, and eventually, the narrator sees her as a surrogate mother and an important person in his life. One of Lahiri’s major ideas is that Mrs. Croft represents American life/culture and that the narrator moving to her house is him starting to assimilate into that American way of life. This is supported by the fact that when the narrator introduces her to Mala, he hopes Mrs. Croft will accept Mala’s traditional clothes and style. This shows that he wants the approval of Mrs. Croft

not only as a surrogate mother but also as a representative of American culture (Lahiri 195). Lahiri works with this symbol to lay the foundation for her use of repetition.

Depending on this symbolism, Lahiri now introduces her point related to the limited decision-making capabilities of immigrants. This is emphasized by the repetition of the word “splendid.” Each evening when the narrator comes back from work, he found Mrs. Croft waiting on the bench inside the house. They conversed and she pressured him to say “splendid” after she talked about there being a flag on the moon (Lahiri 183). The first time Mrs. Croft did this, it caused the narrator to declare: “But she was not satisfied with my reply. Instead, she commanded, 'Say 'splendid' !' I was both baffled and somewhat insulted by the request” (Lahiri 179). With that remark, Lahiri brings yet another occasion where the narrator cannot make his own decisions; this not only points to the insignificant instance of saying “splendid” but rather represents the current situation many immigrants like our narrator sustain. Since Mrs. Croft represents the American way of life, when she pressures him to say “splendid,” it is the same process of how the US pressures immigrants into merging to the American culture. The narrator has no choice but to say “splendid” every time he arrives home when he states, “within days it became our routine” (Lahiri 183). Likewise, immigrants fresh from their native countries, many without financial resources, and desperate for American opportunities are compelled to embrace the American way of living in order to survive. This inability of immigrants to choose if they want to assimilate or not is the message that Lahiri explores through the use of repetition.

Aside from the symbolism of Mrs. Croft and the word “splendid,” Lahiri supports her idea of a limitation on immigrant decision-making through the use of an arranged marriage as a symbol. The arranged marriage is first introduced at the beginning of the story when the narrator reports, “In 1969, when I was thirty-six years old, my own marriage was arranged” (Lahiri 174).

This quote introduces us to one of the decisions over which the narrator has no control and which represents his inability to make decisions that will affect his immigrant experience. Furthermore, when the narrator discusses the details of his arrangement made by his brother, he comments, “I regarded the proposition with neither objection nor enthusiasm. It was a duty expected of me” (Lahiri 181). Basically, Lahiri uses this quote to illustrate the constraint the narrator experiences and his incapacity to execute his own choices. Lahiri connects this moment with her larger theme of decision-making, using it as a symbol for immigrants whose choices are made by the circumstances they find themselves in, rather than by their own determination. Although he later loves his wife, Mala, in the beginning, the narrator feels like a stranger to her, but he must endure this as it is out of his domain (Lahiri 192). Similarly, how he experienced being an immigrant was out of his power; he had to live at a poorly-suited YMCA and in a house with a demanding Mrs. Croft, and overall he had to live in questionable conditions due to his immigration status and background. Thus, through the use of symbolism, Lahiri supports her idea around immigrant decision-making.

Developing this theme further, Lahiri uses the narrator’s struggle with something simple like milk and cereal as a symbol that denotes the narrator’s helplessness to dictate his own immigrant story. As Lahiri demonstrates, due to financial impediments, the narrator had to live in the YMCA where he did not have the luxury of owning a refrigerator. In order to make it work, the narrator “learned to leave it [carton of milk] on the shaded part of the windowsill, as [he] had seen another resident at the YMCA do” (Lahiri 176). In other words, the narrator had to adapt to new conditions because his financial situation did not allow him to enjoy the basic services of a refrigerator. Lahiri uses this moment as a symbol that endorses her point around immigrants being unable to make their own judgments. In simple terms, the narrator wanted to eat something

simple as cereal with milk, but on the account of economic obstacles and the fact that he was still single and did not need a larger dwelling, he was unable to buy a refrigerator and do this. This points to the larger economic and self-determination issues immigrants confront as newcomers to the United States as this is a symbol for those problems. Migrants want to enjoy a stable life with suitable conditions but this is not always the case as many face cultural barriers, financial obstacles, or legal issues that prevent them from enjoying the rights they struggle to obtain.

In conclusion, Lahiri utilizes imagery, repetition, and symbolism to portray the limited extent immigrants can make their own decisions due to the grievous circumstances they experience. As it is evident in today's world, many immigrants come to the United States as economic or political immigrants, and/or refugees. They come with limited resources and often have to settle with the most available option of housing and jobs even if they are not adequate enough. After all, they don't have other choices. They have to settle because of the many constraints they experience as immigrants whether they are financial, legal, or cultural. Lahiri explains this everlasting problem in her writing through the use of imagery of the living conditions of the narrator, through the use of repetition of the word "splendid" which represents pressure to assimilate, and by employing the symbolism of an arranged marriage and milk and cereal to highlight the aspects out of the narrator's control. All of these work together to advance Lahiri's theme about decision-making but at the same time, shed light on the issues all immigrants face.