Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story “Interpreter of Maladies” draws with a strong and colorful brush the intricacies of meeting the exotic other within a context of post-colonial diasporic relationships. The interactions between the local Mr. Kapasi and the Indian-American Das family reveal much of the romanticized, sometimes delusional tones of strangeness and misunderstanding. Until now, such was the narrow scope of Lahiri criticism under which most of her work has been categorized.

What was given less consideration in the literature’s coverage of Lahiri’s work is the independent story-telling she is conveying, an element that is not a direct consequence of her cultural origins. I argue in this essay that this framed view of Lahiri’s writing space – though until now legitimate and fruitful – prevents us from accessing Lahiri’s more general and bare intentions. In arguing for this, I propose in parallel that this circumscribing view of Lahiri’s work, especially of her collection of short stories The Interpreter of Maladies, is due in part because of critics’ willingness to dismiss the short story’s distinct complexity and wholeness as a genre at the expense of losing analytical depth. I will show how the literature has nearly exclusively dealt with The Interpreter of Maladies by making sweeping generalizations over all or several of the short stories at the same time. The short story by the same name, “Interpreter of Maladies”, has also fallen victim to this type of across-the-board analysis, and thus never been scrutinized as an individual work with a broader narrative of family
responsibilities and Karma. It is my intention in this essay to prove that when given a full interpretation under close reading, “Interpreter of Maladies” holds an unexpected complex symbolism, giving a moralistic criticism of western individualism and egotism, especially under the light of familial values. My analysis yields thus a better understanding of the work than previous critics who have felt compelled to analyze the piece within a selection of several of Lahiri’s short stories.

2. The Two-fold Problem of Critical Work on Lahiri

Considering the subject material of the collection of short stories, _Interpreter of Maladies_, and the immigrant identity of its author, it is not surprising that most critics have focused their efforts on analyzing the work as a window to understanding Indian diaspora and post-colonial identity. Stuart Waterman, however, justly laments the stagnating condition of Lahiri criticism and states that “Her publishers . . . have abetted this tendency, commodifying her Indianness for marketing purposes, with vaguely Orientalist cover art” (3), while qualifying the situation as a “backdrop of rather knee-jerk, unstudied labeling” (4). Hence, Waterman urges for a “serious treatment of Lahiri’s work by pausing to consider if this categorization . . . is entirely apt and fair” (4). While this current lack of variety within critical work on Lahiri is certainly problematic, I also seek to dispute the practice of bundling her short stories together, an analytic strategy that contributes in confining critics to that ‘Indianness’ lens.

Bahareh Bahmanpour, for example, rightly asserts that the “in-between situation of such characters of diasporic identity … makes the collection _Interpreter of Maladies_ receptive to postcolonial studies” (43). Bahmanpour then proceeds to offer a focused view of female identity within a selection of these short stories. However, Bahmanpour concedes that even
within her feminist spotlight of the collection, “a detailed exploration of all female subjects of this collection is far beyond any scope of a single article and is yet suggested as a possible future scholarly work” (44). This statement however, seems misplaced within Bahmanpour’s paper, as the driving force of her inquiry was to find a common account of “how the female subject and her identity-crisis is portrayed” (49), a question which she abandons in the conclusion by stating that the question is “faulty and out of place … there is no single way of representing the diasporic trauma involved in negotiating female identities” (49). Indeed, it looks like Bahmanpour’s work hints at a much-needed individual analysis of each separate short story within Interpreter of Maladies.

While Bahmanpour settles for a researched conclusion that her selection of short stories within Interpreter of Maladies were not found to be unifiable, Noelle Brada-Williams surprisingly goes for what seems to be the opposite; that Interpreter of Maladies could be read as a short story cycle. Within her thesis, she proposes that the whole collection may be understood through the permeating theme of “dichotomy of care and neglect” (451), a proposal Waterman comments to “at times feel forced” (9). Indeed, Brada-Williams cautiously reminds us that “readers of the modern short story cycle are often cued to the unity of a collection by a single location and/or a small ensemble of recurring characters that serve to unite the various components” and somewhat anticipatingly remarks that Interpreter of Maladies “features diverse and unrelated characters, a variety of narrative styles, and no common locale” (451) before starting her case. Although I agree with Brada-Williams that the collection “work[s] towards solving the problem of representing an entire community … by balancing a variety of representations rather than offering the single representation provided by the novel or the individual short story” (453) – a point that Waterman acknowledges to “leave the reader convinced” (9) – it is hard then not to ask Brada-Williams in return: Why not settle for a
thorough analysis of each “variety of representation” separately? It is of my opinion that Brada-Williams’ proposed cyclical reading of *Interpreter of Maladies* derives mostly from a particular construal of the definition of the short story cycle genre, rather than a renewed or deepened understanding of the work itself. In fact, Brada-Williams acquiesces to the fact that the “short story cycle is a notoriously difficult genre to define” (451). Given the slippery nature of the short story cycle – except of course for well-established and known works like James Joyce’s *Dubliners* – I believe hence that it is a more far-reaching goal to develop a fuller understanding of the individual stories that constitute *Interpreter of Maladies* rather than to offer a certain genre-theoretical generalization over them.

Despite the majority of Lahiri criticism being aimed at highlighting diasporic and multi-cultural in-betweenness – specifically Indian-American’s – there are some critics that have come forth proposing broader perspectives on Lahiri’s work. After all, Lahiri was born in London and taken to the US at the age of three, over which Waterman observes, “it may be more accurate, in spirit, to describe her as a first-generation American” (3). Veronika Rázusová, for instance, focuses on the role of dysfunctional marriage within Lahiri’s work, a welcomed fresh view that escapes from previous literature. However, even Rázusová fails to break from the practice of bundling Lahiri’s short stories, and offers a generalized comparative analysis over 4 different stories (47). Waterman’s work on Lahiri also paves the way for newer, broader approaches of interpreting her work. Waterman states that “More often, the explicit themes of the stories are generic ones (which is not to say less interesting ones) having to do with couples and families—births, deaths, marriages, breakups, etc.” (4). Waterman also points out that “traditional critical methods like close reading have rarely been applied to her work, almost as though theory has distracted from careful examination of the texts.” (9), and Waterman faithfully does present a close reading of “Interpreter of Maladies” albeit to an extent I consider
yet insufficient.

Taking into consideration the “piecemeal and thin condition of Lahiri criticism” (Waterman 7), two main problems will be addressed and hopefully counteracted within this essay. First, the reluctance in the literature to give the short story genre a full-fledged analysis has been detrimental to understating Lahiri’s works, as they were constantly compared and analyzed in a combined fashion. This point will be resolved as I give in this essay an individual analysis of the single story “Interpreter of Maladies” taken to an unprecedented level. Dovetailed to this resolution is the settlement of the second problem identified in the literature which was the custom of confining Lahiri’s writing space within her immigrant origins, a view which will be overturned by the general and broader symbolism I unearth from “Interpreter of Maladies”.

3. Analysis of Interpreter of Maladies

Once given a sufficient in-depth close reading, it is possible to discern in “Interpreter of Maladies” – aside from the obviously spotlighted chemistry of the local Mr. Kapasi and the Indian-American Mrs. Das – an easily overlooked but crucial relation; one between the characters and the monkeys. I propose that the monkeys represent a permeating medial character in this story and serves as a potent and ubiquitous symbol. More specifically, I argue in this essay that the monkeys occupy a low profile but significant position vis à vis the Das family, to the exclusion of Mr. Kapasi. I identify the monkeys as an incarnation of Karma or a ‘judge of life’ that treats each character accordingly. I shall first try to tease out the general symbol the monkeys represent, using the explicit mention of ‘hanuman’ (348) within the text, then corroborate that view by showing how each character fittingly interacts with that particular analysis of the monkey.
In this short story, monkeys appear as soon as the Mr. Kapasi’s car departs from the tea stall. At their first apparition, Mr. Kapasi explains that locals call them the “hanuman” (348). Hanuman is a central character – and God – of the epic poem *Ramanaya*, and thus is an important figure in Hindu theology. Traditionally, Hanuman is most revered for his representation of the virtue of devotion. According to Doniger, the Sanskrit tradition also sees Hanuman as “steadfastly chaste”. Interestingly, Doniger also remarks that Hanuman is the “child of a nymph by the wind of god”, a point that will be important in explaining the monkey’s interactions with Mr. Kapasi later. Hanuman shrines, when erected separate from other deities, almost always shelter monkeys that know they cannot be mistreated there (Doniger 2014). This general cultural respect for monkeys shows that Hanuman is potentially present in all monkey bodies, a worldview that imbues a sort of divine atmosphere to the ‘common’ monkey. These actual present-day circumstances favor an ‘incarnate’ analysis of the monkeys in “Interpreter of Maladies”.

Hanuman’s attributes do not seem to be haphazardly chosen considering the characters of the story. The children who arguably have the most proactive interaction with the hanuman are mostly excited to see them. This can be seen in the very first meeting with the monkeys when Ronny shrieks “Monkeys!” and “Wow!”(347). A passage also describes that the “children began to get excited . . .” (348). Near the ending of the narrative, when the monkeys “formed a little ring around Mr. Das and the children” (357) – a situation not entirely safe or reassuring – Tina “scream[s] in delight.” (357). It should be noted that Mr. Das, curiously, has no interaction with the monkeys in this up-close-and-personal scene. We shall come back to this observation shortly. The children are also found to be distracted on two occasions by the task of keeping watch for any more monkeys: “The children were quiet, intent
on spotting more monkeys” (352) and “the children had gotten up from the table to look at more monkeys” (352). Such passages illustrate their eagerness.

On the other hand, the adults in the story are not as eager, and – in the case of Mrs. Das – even adverse to the monkeys. Mr. Kapasi treats the hanuman as a mere nuisance as can be seen in the section “Mr. Kapasi beeped his horn.” (348), and understandably was also bothered by Mr. Das asking him to stop the car to take photos of the monkeys. We may infer this, as we know Mr. Kapasi is not in the habit of making frequent stops during his tours: “Ordinarily Mr. Kapasi would not have stopped so soon along the way” (345). Mrs. Das, at the entrance to the hills of Udayagiri and Khandagiri, is seen to describe the monkeys as “giv[ing] me the creeps.” (357). She is the most unfavorable to the monkeys for reasons I shall demonstrate next. Mr. Das, on the other hand, for reasons we shall see shortly, has the least interaction with the monkeys.

The stark difference in the adults’ and children’s perception of the monkeys, coupled with the attributes of Hanuman the God hints at the ‘incarnation of Karma’ role monkeys hold in the narrative. For Mrs. Das the monkeys imply the many faults and responsibilities she owes to her family, which explains her unease of the monkeys. To Mr. Das, who is unsuspecting and oblivious to his wife’s infidelity, is dimly satisfied with his life. To him, the monkeys are not much more than objects within the lens of his camera; hence, he has the least interaction with them. For the children, on the other hand, the monkeys represent their bright future and enthusiasm of life as can be seen in their anticipation and excitement of seeing monkeys.

The high spatial situation of the monkeys is also an indication of their incarnate status. Especially at the end of the story, the monkeys’ aerial situation – the treetops – is emphasized and explicitly described as an observing, even solemn, figure (362), the opposite of what one would expect from excitable monkeys that have just attacked tourists and fed on tasty puffed
rice. In the scene where Mr. Kapasi notices the strip of paper escaping the straw bag, the monkeys make their final appearance; “into the trees where the monkeys now sat, solemnly observing the scene below.” (362). I propose from these properties that the monkeys symbolize the truths and realities – harsh or otherwise – of life, indeed, a sort of ‘manifest judge of life’ or Karma, watching over our characters.

This analysis provides a basis in understanding why it was Bobby that was attacked by the monkeys. His mother, Mrs. Das, is a self-centered person as is relevant in parts of her dialogue with Mr. Kapasi: “I’m tired of feeling terrible all the time,” “I’ve been in pain for eight years,” “I was hoping you could help me feel better” (360). The emphatic use of the first-person singular in the above speech is witness to her character. With an irresponsible and self-absorbed mother, Bobby is ultimately the one bound to collect the strife of life from her infidelity. The attack of the monkeys represents what the future has in store for Bobby, born an illegitimate child. In the story, this is represented by Mrs. Das being the direct cause for the monkeys to attack Bobby: “The puffed rice Mrs. Das had spilled was scattered at his [Bobby’s] feet” (361). We know also that Mrs. Das herself evaded a similar fate unbeknownst to herself: “Mrs. Das continued walking, oblivious, trailing grains of puffed rice” (361), after which Mr. Kapasi follows “quicken[ing] his pace, waving his branch so that the monkeys scampered away, distracted, in another direction” (361). It is evident now that the phrase “distracted, in another direction.” is none other than towards Bobby. Indeed, by not dealing with the monkeys herself, Mrs. Das sends them to Bobby. Hence, by not acknowledging and looking away from life’s problems, Mrs. Das puts her illegitimate son at risk. Combined with the symbolism of the God Hanuman, Mrs. Das can be understood as turning away from the path of devotion and love in favor of her own selfish and individualistic motives. Though at the very end of the story we observe Mrs. Das may have potential to recuperate her responsibilities. I propose as such that
Lahiri seeks to offer symbolically a chance for Mrs. Das’ to redeem herself, and not simply stop at monkey retribution. After the attack, Mrs. Das feels for Bobby and says “Poor Bobby … Come here a second. Let Mommy fix your hair” (362) while taking care of him. It is also interesting to note that when Mrs. Das “whip[s] out the hairbrush” – her object of choice to tend for Bobby – it is at this point that the “slip of paper with Mr. Kapasi’s address on it fluttered away in the wind” (362). This exchange of objects within her bag may indicate that if Mrs. Das chooses to face her responsibilities and care for her children, she may not need Mr. Kapasi, or any other exotic sage to relieve her guilty agony. The monkeys here present themselves as an opportunity to get things straight.

Apart from being attacked, Bobby’s own interactions with the monkeys start to differ from the other children once they are out of the safety of the car. In the same scene where “Tina screamed with delight” (357) and Ronny “ran in circles around his father” (357), Bobby’s instincts are to defend himself as he “pick[s] up a fat stick” (357) and as he “extend[s] it, one of the monkeys approache[s] him and snatch[e]s it” (357). Further through the scene, Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi observe “Bobby and the monkey [pass] the stick back and forth between them” (357). Already, Bobby is struggling with an unyielding and unfavorable fortune.

Of the small amount of interactions Mr. Das has with the monkeys, the most significant action – or inaction thereof – is when he abstains from helping Bobby when the monkeys attack him. When Mr. Das “accidently press[es] the shutter on his camera,” (361) the attack on Bobby is exacerbated. He then says “What are we supposed to do? What if they start attacking?” (361), when in fact they are already hurting Bobby. That reaction may hint at a lack of will to help Bobby in the future, by fear it will bring hardships to his ‘real’ children. In any case, Mr. Das lacks a sense of responsibility too, as first adequately described by Mr. Kapasi when he thinks in his head: “it was hard to believe they [Mr. and Mrs. Das] were regularly responsible for
anything other than themselves.” (348), a statement from Mr. Kapasi that aligns closely to what Lahiri seeks to convey with this short story.

Under this analysis, however, Mr. Kapasi is left out. Although leaving Mr. Kapasi out from the symbolic interaction with the monkeys prohibits the argument from reaching a status of generalization towards all characters of the story, excluding Mr. Kapasi from this analogy actually proves to yield a deeper interpretation of the text. My counterargument consists in seeing Mr. Kapasi as the only character interacting with the monkeys in a secular, corporeal manner. Indeed, Mr. Kapasi is the only local in the narrative and is cognizant of the carnal properties of the hanuman. That is, the incarnated “judge of life” may not interact with Mr. Kapasi in the spiritual domain. Thus, Mr. Kapasi is free from the same symbolic interpretation with monkeys, but, as a result, lends himself to another one. We observe Mr. Kapasi saying “They [monkeys] are more hungry than dangerous,” (357) or “They [monkeys] are quite common in the area” (348). He is also the one that has the less fear of the monkeys and even “hiss[es] at the ones [monkeys] that remained, stomping his feet to scare them” (361). Upon this evidence, we observe that Mr. Kapasi has a “realistic” and completely pragmatic interaction with the monkeys. The judge of life, thus unable to impart omen and impress fate upon Mr. Kapasi, is seen in the following excerpt to momentarily surrender: “The animals [monkeys] retreated slowly, with a measured gait, obedient but unintimidated” (361), the adjective “unintimidated” again hinting at the monkey’s godly identity. Perhaps, noticing that Mr. Kapasi was not prone to their presence, the monkeys leave the judgment upon Mr. Kapasi to be carried out by a more mysterious and unstoppable force; the wind. This is the point where the previous observation of Hanuman’s origins becomes relevant. Hanuman being conceived from a wind God, we may establish the wind and monkeys in a hierarchical relationship. After the monkeys retreat the wind being a more potent force intervenes in Mr. Kapasi’s life. Hence,
when the slip of paper with his address flutters away from Mrs. Das’ bag, “No one but Mr. Kapasi notice[s]” (362), and his delusional hopes are dispersed “higher and higher by the breeze, into the trees where the monkeys now sat, solemnly observing the scene below” (361).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued for a substantial symbolic analysis of the monkeys within the subtext of “Interpreter of Maladies.” This analysis anchors itself on the basis that all of the characters interact in some way with the monkeys, keeping in a manner mostly coherent with a ‘judge of life’ analogy. I have also offered a differential treatment of the Das family and Mr. Kapasi based on their different statuses as tourists and local. Overall, this analysis adds another unexpected layer to Lahiri’s short story that is not derived from her purported “Indianness.” My analysis presents yet a different angle of Lahiri who is decisively aware of the detrimental effects of our modern society’s individualistic, amoral neglect of family values. This paper has also offered for the first time in the literature to focus on a single piece of Lahiri’s short stories, and thus has been able to delve much deeper into her symbolic writing. Further scholarly inquiry and close readings in this fashion will perhaps uncover Lahiri as the contemporary American fiction writer, rather than keeping her confined to her diasporic identity.
Works Cited


