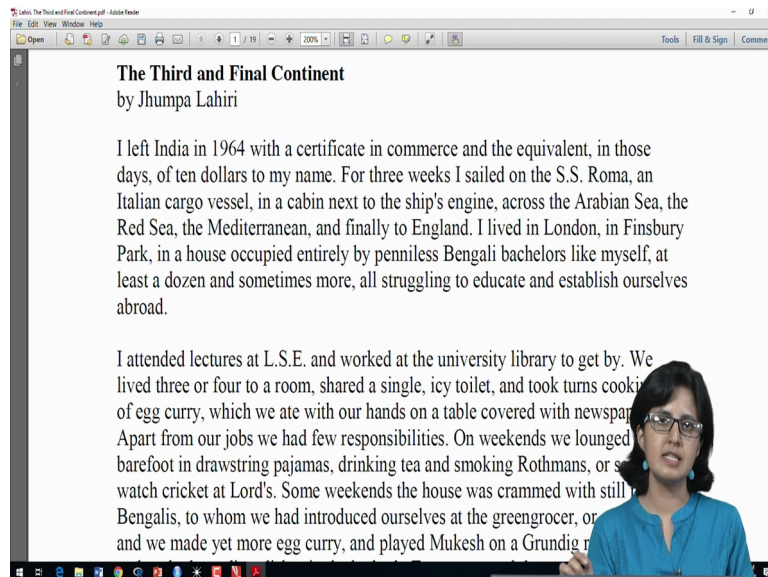


Introduction to World Literature
Professor Merin Simi Raj
Indian Institute of Technology Madras
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
The Third and the final Continent

(Refer Slide Time: 0:49)



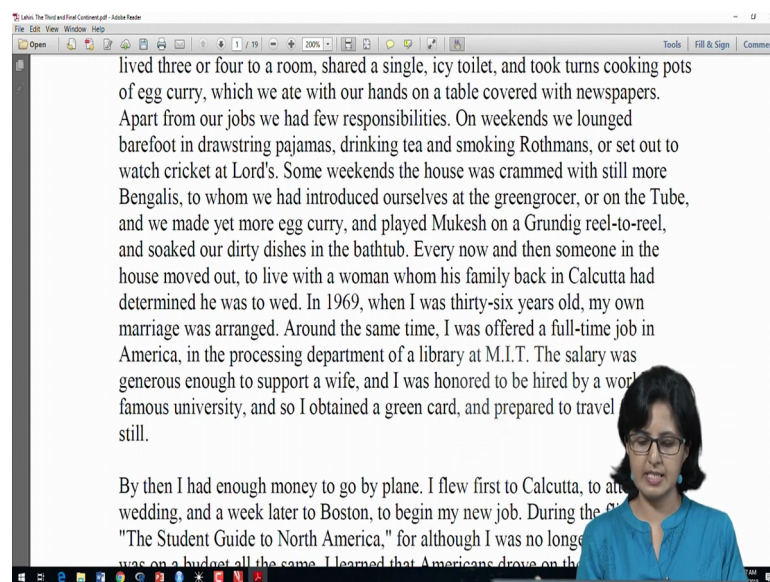
Hello everyone, welcome to today's where we take a close look at the short story, "the 3rd and final continent" by Jhumpa Lahiri. This story is part of the collection (0:25) story is in Bengal Boston and beyond, as we all know it won a prize in the year 2000 and this work is also considered as one of the best document which talk about the experience of immigration from India to abroad specially to America. And in the story as we have noted it talks about a particular kind of a (0:53) experience and it also gives minute details about the various things that Hassan and his family goes through up through his journey across different continents and different countries.

And I use this session to take you through some important aspects of this short story, some of the details which we will use in analysing this section and also in accessing particular (1:22) experiences which Lahiri knows. The story begins by the story begins is a 1st person narrative of, the narrator remains unnamed and he talks about how the narrator left India in 1964 and he get to know right at the outset that in 1964 when he 1st sailed to London, he could not use an aeroplane and he makes a particular mention of that, how his 1st journey his 1st international journey was in a ship, he had to sail and 2nd time he goes to America to Boston he gets to fly.

And by noting down this particular experience the peculiarities and the minute details Lahiri is inviting us into a world where the details captured are very important. And in the beginning at the outset we also get to know about many other penniless Bengali bachelors like narrator who are already there in London and how they share the space, share certain kind of food and how there is an attempt right at the outset to create a certain authentic experience, to create certain kind of home away from home. And I find particularly interesting the 1st paragraph tells us about these sets of people, all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad.

So it is a very different kind of experience of migration here, the narrator and the one that his family was not going abroad just to make a living, they are not going abroad looking for a job which also typically qualifies most of the Third World migration iceberg experiences. Here it is extremely important that he is among those who are trying to go abroad to educate and establish themselves and this goal is very clear, right particular in the 1960s. And the story further tells us about how he had intellectuals at LSE and we also get to know that he is a well accomplished student in that sense and there is a career waiting for him and he is already trying to establish himself with these potentials.

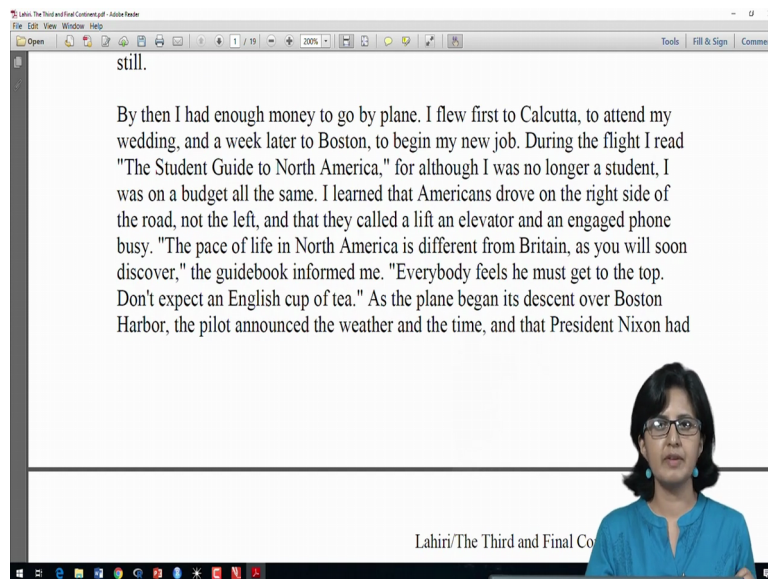
(Refer Slide Time: 3:48)



The story quickly takes us to 1969 the narrator is 36 years old and his own marriage is arranged. In the story, though the focus is on the experience of migration, it also tells in details about the way very peculiar kind of arranged marriage that Indian families have. And the story gives almost typical stereotypical kind of a presentation of an arranged Bengali marriage. And for the end of the story we also see how the narrator does not talk in overwhelming terms about his marriage or the relation that he begins with his wife, it is

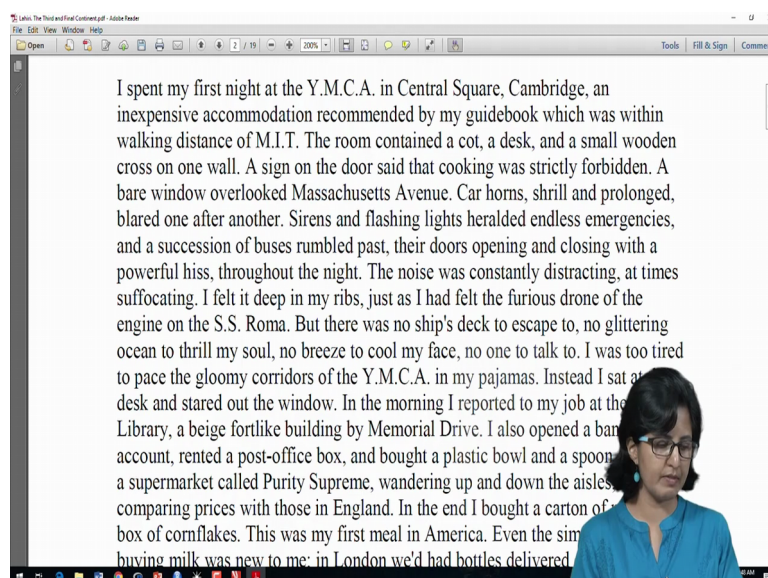
stated in very matter of fact terms. In fact, he seems to be more prepared and more excited to start career abroad to live a new experience abroad.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:58)



But he seems to be rather laid-back when it comes to entering this new relationship which happens to him in a very incidental way and which is also presented in a ironically maintained with. And I find this segment very interesting where he access "The student guide to North America" before flying to America and the story also tells us little later about how he choose to ignore his weeping wife, the newly wedded wife lying next to him and he continues to be read through the guide which will prepare him equip him for a perfect life abroad.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:25)

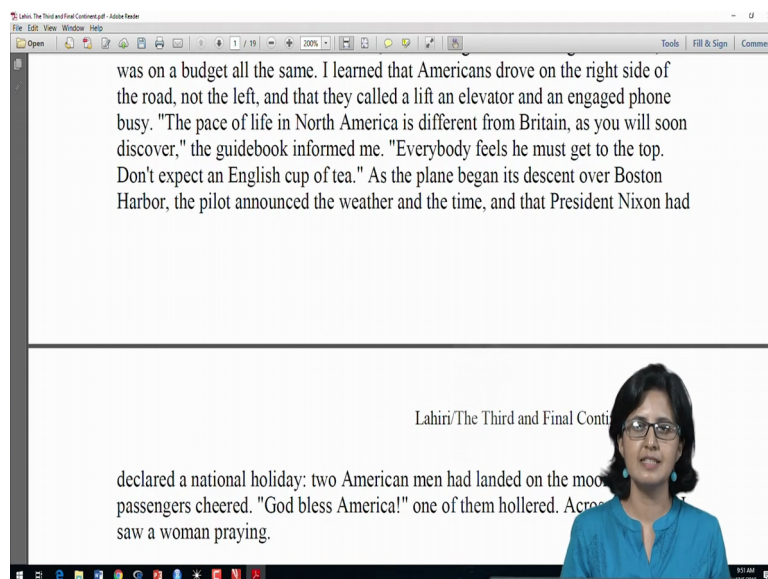


And we are also given to understand about the very similar in which he accesses inexpensive accommodations and he is looking where are these various things that he gets done and it is called as the very-very food experience. There is a mention of food and how he also talks about the experience in Boston in America, it is very different from being in London and this is extremely significant. He does not compare America with Calcutta city which he had 1st left behind but the comparison after moving to Boston from London, the comparison is more with Boston, so from the state of comparing this leaving behind his homeland and moving to a new city 1st which is London, now he moves onto very different immigration experience.

And we also find him spending 6 weeks in YMCA and waiting for his wife's passport to get ready, he takes an apartment on rent and the apartment which he gets to take on rent, very interestingly takes in only (6:38). And it also talks about certain kind of a world from which he is living from Calcutta, uneducated middle-class world and how he manages to get himself within the same kind of setting even in an alien land (6:56) the apartment that he gets to rent out, we find that she is also someone who places a lot of value on education. She is very middle-class, very traditional in terms of value system and there is a very peculiar way in which he manages to fit himself in both these worlds.

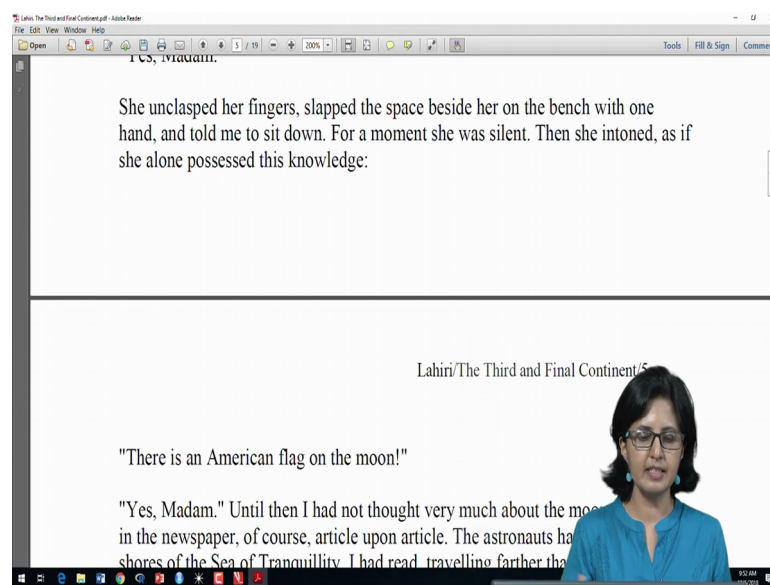
I would also like to remind you that there are a number of not so smooth painful migration experiences that the Third World residents face, but the library stories and particularly this one talks about this very smooth experience which does not have any exaggerated emotions and which does not have any eventful episode to speak.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:39)



Even that happens when he lands in America in Boston very significantly, I will read out this excerpt for you. As the plane began its descent over Boston Harbor, the pilot announced the weather and the time and the president Nixon had declared a national holiday, two American men had landed on the moon. Several passengers cheered “God bless America” one of them hollered across, and I saw woman praying. So this event, this iconic giant leap for the entire mankind as it is described, this event continues to signify the things that he gets to especially during the early weeks of his stay. And as soon as he enters Mrs Croc’s home for the 1st time, we find this event being invoked again, I will read this excerpt.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:30)



See unclasped her fingers, slapped the space beside her on the bench with one hand and told me to sit down. For moment she was silent then she interned at if she alone possess this knowledge “There is an American flag on the moon”. Yes madam, until then I had not thought very much about the moon shot. It was in the newspaper of course, article upon article, the astronauts had landed on the shores of the Sea of tranquillity I had read, travelling farther than anyone in the history of civilisation. For a few hours they explored the moon’s surface. They gathered rocks in their pockets, described their surroundings, a magnificent desolation according to one astronaut, spoke by phone to the President and planted a flag in Lunar soil. The Voyage was hailed as man’s most awesome achievement.

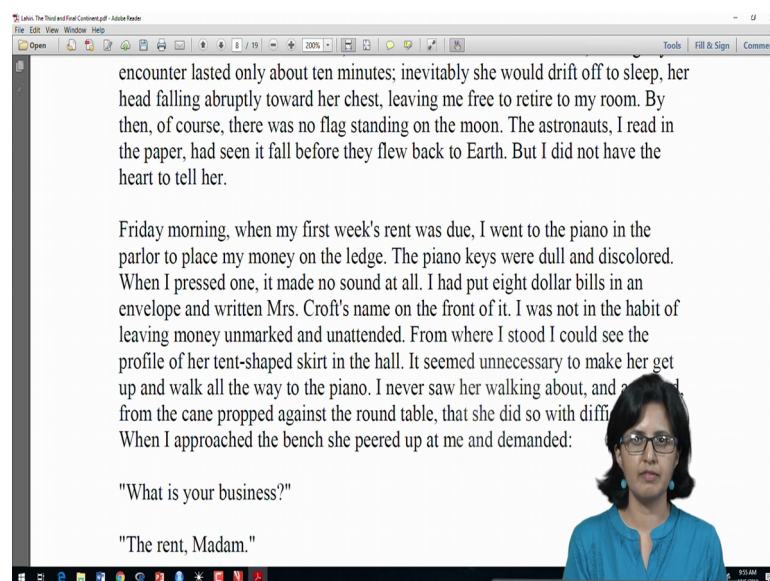
The woman bellowed “The flag on the moon, boy I heard it on the radio, is not that splendid?” “Yes madam” but she was not satisfied with my reply so she commanded “Say splendid”. I was both baffled and somewhat insulted by the request. It reminded me of the way I was taught multiplication tables as a child, repeating after the master sitting crossed-

legged on the floor of my one-room Tollygunge School. It also reminded me of my wedding when I had repeated endless Sanskrit verses after the priest, versus I barely understood, which joined me to my wife. I said nothing.

“Say splendid”, the woman bellowed once again. “Splendid” I murmured, I had to repeat the word a 2nd time at the top of my lungs so she could hear. I was reluctant to raise my voice to an elderly woman, but she did not appear to be offended. If anything the reply pleased her because her next command was “Go see the room”. And this seemingly very maintained and readful incident continues to be very significant in this story because the narrator comes from a background raising once voice in front of elders is not considered polite. Besides he is not a kind who can show that kind of an excitement or who can raise his voice to celebrate anything that matter perhaps.

So here when this woman, the American woman is asking him to say splendid in response of the image of the flag, the American flag being seen on the moon, we find him doing precisely that and this is perhaps one of the 1st instances where he owns this country’s new country’s achievements as his own and he is out to celebrate that in a way that does not come to him very naturally. And it is very interesting how he compares this with the way he is taught multiplication table and the way he got married where the priest asked him a set of things which he did not even perhaps pay attention to.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:21)



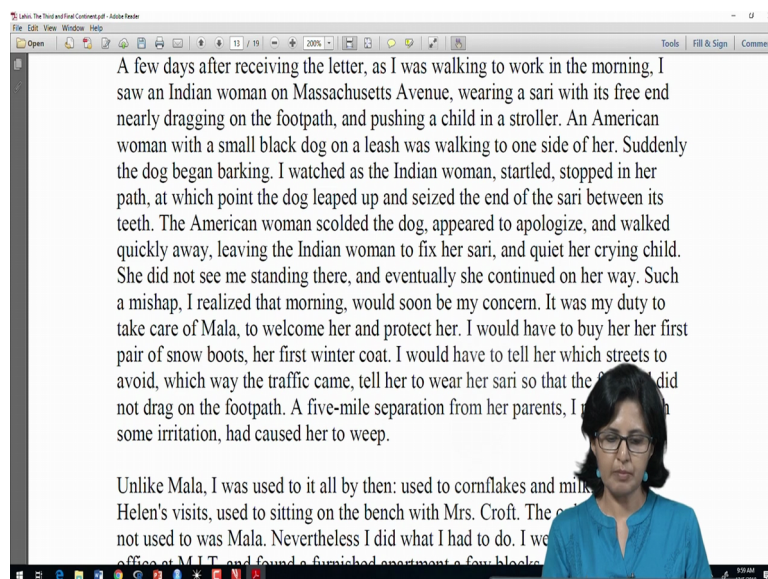
So he talks about his wife Mala, interestingly Mala’s name is mention but the narrator’s name is not. The way he talks about how he got into this union with Mala is very interesting, he

talks about Mala as a woman who is 27 years old and she is not fair, her complexion is not fair and the narrator is telling us that the reason she could not get married for a long time. And this marriage even a (11:43) shipping her to a different continent as far as her parents are concerned, the narrator tells us that this was to save (11:50). And this is also a glimpse into the way arranged marriages work in India and that is the kind of documentation that Lahiri perhaps tries to do as well.

But what could perhaps become a little alarming of this sort of representation is that we want to take that as the norm across communities and across different cultures even diversification nations. And very briefly we are also told about the writer's mother who died 6 years ago and later in the story we find the narrator making comparison between his own mother who was widowed when his father died when the narrator was 16, and Mrs Craft who single-handedly managed to do everything and until she turned 103 or so. In the last session we did speak about the ways in which the 2 widow experiences are compared and how the narrator looks at it from 2 different points.

When Mala finally arrives in Boston, the narrator's response is not overwhelming at all. And since there is no phone, he says he has received a telegram which also tells us about the limited possibilities in the old world and he uses 3 words to talk about the arrival of Mala; he is not touched, it is inevitable and it is meaningless. The event itself does not seem to signify anything at all for the narrator because this marriage is not an event not a significant part of his life during this phase when he is still waiting for his wife to join him in America.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:44)



A few days after receiving the letter, as I was walking to work in the morning, I saw an Indian woman on Massachusetts Avenue, wearing a sari with its free end nearly dragging on the footpath, and pushing a child in a stroller. An American woman with a small black dog on a leash was walking to one side of her. Suddenly the dog began barking. I watched as the Indian woman, startled, stopped in her path, at which point the dog leaped up and seized the end of the sari between its teeth. The American woman scolded the dog, appeared to apologize, and walked quickly away, leaving the Indian woman to fix her sari, and quiet her crying child. She did not see me standing there, and eventually she continued on her way. Such a mishap, I realized that morning, would soon be my concern. It was my duty to take care of Mala, to welcome her and protect her. I would have to buy her first pair of snow boots, her first winter coat. I would have to tell her which streets to avoid, which way the traffic came, tell her to wear her sari so that the end did not drag on the footpath. A five-mile separation from her parents, I thought, with some irritation, had caused her to weep.

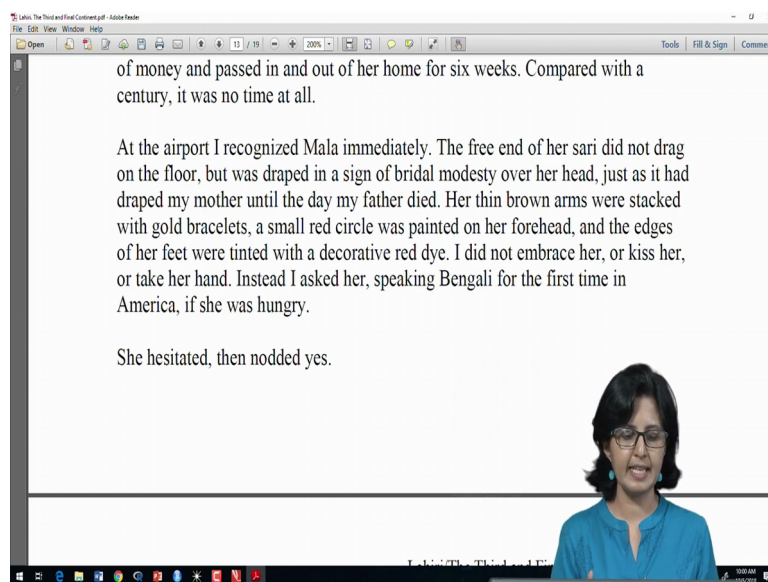
Unlike Mala, I was used to it all by then: used to cornflakes and milk, Helen's visits, used to sitting on the bench with Mrs. Croft. The only thing I had not used to was Mala. Nevertheless I did what I had to do. I went to the office at M.I.T. and found a furnished apartment a few blocks

The screenshot shows a presentation window titled "Lahiri, The Namesake and Other Stories.pdf - Adobe Reader". The main text is from the story "The Namesake". In the bottom right corner, there is a video inset of a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a blue top, who appears to be the presenter.

There is a (())(13:44) picks up just before that where he sees this Indian woman on Massachusetts Avenue I will read out the excerpt for you. I saw an Indian woman on Massachusetts Avenue wearing a sari with its feet end nearly dragging on the footpath, and pushing a child in a stroller. An American woman with a small black dog on a leash was walking to one side of her. Suddenly the dog began barking, I watched as the Indian woman startled, stopped in her path, at which point the dogs leaped up and seized the end of the sari between his teeth. The American woman scolded the dog, appeared to apologise and walked quickly away, leaving the Indian woman to fix her saree and quite her crying child.

She did not see me standing there, and eventually she continued on her way. Such a mishap, I realised that morning would soon be my concern. It was my duty to take care of Mala, to welcome her and protect her. We find this image being almost preserved intact throughout the story, the image of the ideal Indian woman who wears a sari and who refuses to move out of the sartorial code that she is used to. We find Mala almost sticking to these customs, the accessories and to the many-many things which would perhaps help her to retain her identity and when Mala arrives finally, and this is the identity which the writer also to use to described her.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:11)

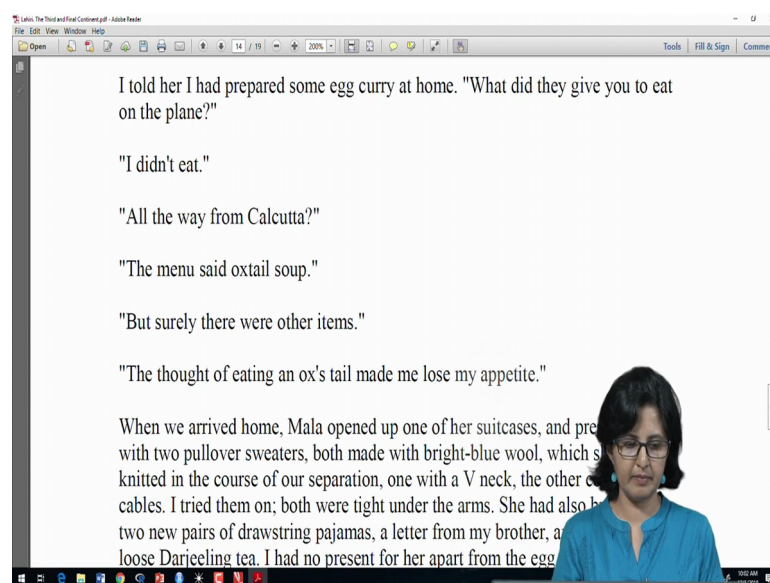


At the airport I recognised Mala immediately, the free end of her saree did not drag on the floor but was draped in a sign of bridal modesty over her head, just as it had draped my mother until the day my father died. The description further goes, her thin brown arms were stacked with gold bracelets, a small red circle was painted on her forehead, and the edges of her feet were tinted with a decorative red dye. I did not embraced her or kiss her or take her

hand, instead I asked her speaking Bengali for the 1st time in America if she was hungry. This is extremely important, the language and food and from the beginning of the story we realise that these are the 2 things which the narrator uses to create an authentic experience in a land which is far away from his homeland.

Language speaking in Bengali, being with other Bengali people or even talking about food or having food as an experience which would bring them close or even having retained the identity. Towards the end of the story as we recalled in the previous session, when he is waiting for his son to come home and have rice, he is also thinking after they have gone, after parents are (())(16:25) he stopped eating rice and stopped speaking in Bengali. These 2 elements seem to be very integral to the ways in which the narrator and his wife and perhaps many others who are having similar kinds of impressions speed similar kind of migration speed. This is holding onto some kind of tendency through language and through food.

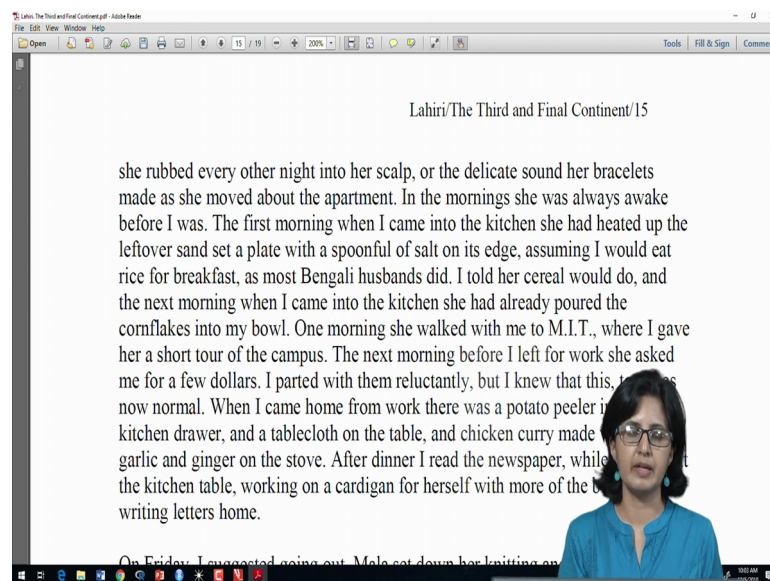
(Refer Slide Time: 16:51)



And it is interesting where they talk about many of the, when it says oxtail soup, the thought of eating an Ox's tail made me lose my appetite. And there is a way in which the family gets to adapt in selecting meals and they retain certain things like food habits or the value systems or certain very very tangible things like pyjamas or the coconut oil or the curries that they bring from home, there is always an attempt to retain the authentic flavour and to remain as Bengali as possible in multiple ways. And incidentally the many images that we get about the

narrator and his wife, they also reinforced this idea in multiple ways.

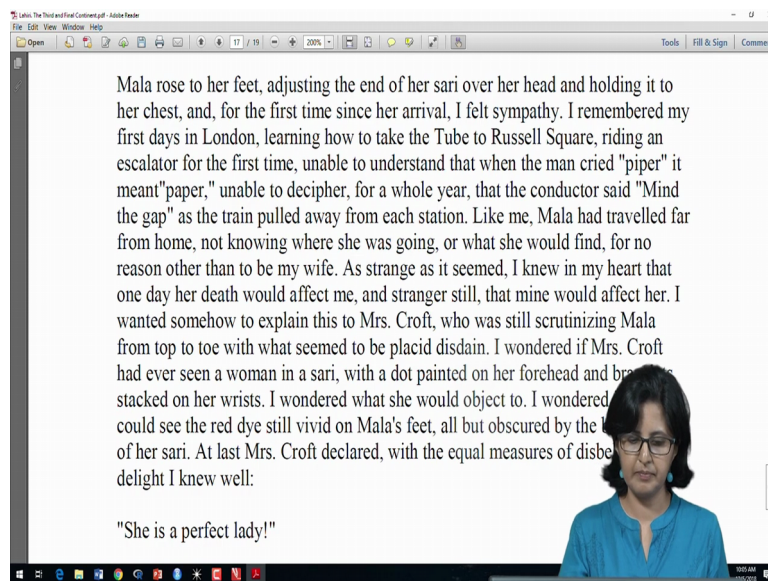
(Refer Slide Time: 17:51)



We find that Mala's experience, the 1st experience as an immigrant is very different from that of her husband's. He had come there with the hope of getting good education and establishing himself in another system. Mala on the other hand is accompanying the narrator only because she is married to him. So there is a limited way in which her identity works, she is taking care of the house, she is taking care of the domestic chores, the domestic affairs, 1st time she goes out to buy a peeler vegetable peeler and also to get some fresh garlic, to buy a good tablecloth, these are the different ways in which she tries to establish himself in this new place.

This is entirely different from the ambitions that the narrator has, we do not of course find him talking a lot about his career or the kind of work that he is doing for 30 years in America. But nevertheless we get to know that there is a certain way in which he has managed to find his roots however so professional they are in this alien land because his son, he had adapted well into this new world, he is attempting Harvard and he is also suspected that he will soon become American Bengali because the only 2 things which are Bengali about him are the rice that he has occasionally when he comes home and the Bengali that they speak at home within the family.

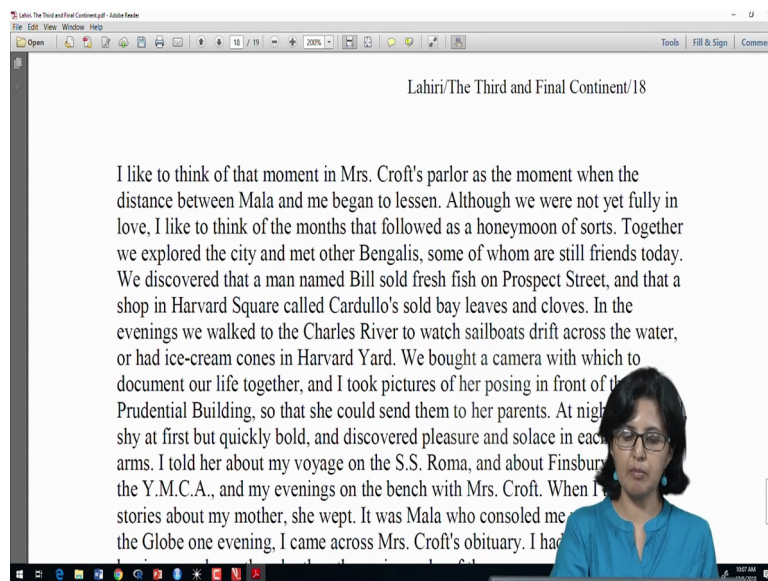
(Refer Slide Time: 19:40)



So instance where he says the distance between them lessens is also very interesting. He is taking Mala to visit Mrs Croft, the house where he lived for about 6 weeks and this is how narrator describes Mala's experience in Mrs Croft's home. "Who is she boy?" She is my wife Madam, Mrs Croft pressed her head at an angle against the cushion to get a better look, "Can you play the piano?" "No madam" Mala replied. "Then stand up" Mala rose to her feet, adjusting the end of her saree over her head and holding it to her chest and for the 1st time since her arrival I felt sympathy. I remembered my 1st days in London learning how to take the tube to Russell Square, riding an escalator for the 1st time, unable to understand when the man cried "piper" it meant "paper". Unable to decipher for a whole year that the conductor said "mind the Gap" as the train pulled away from each station.

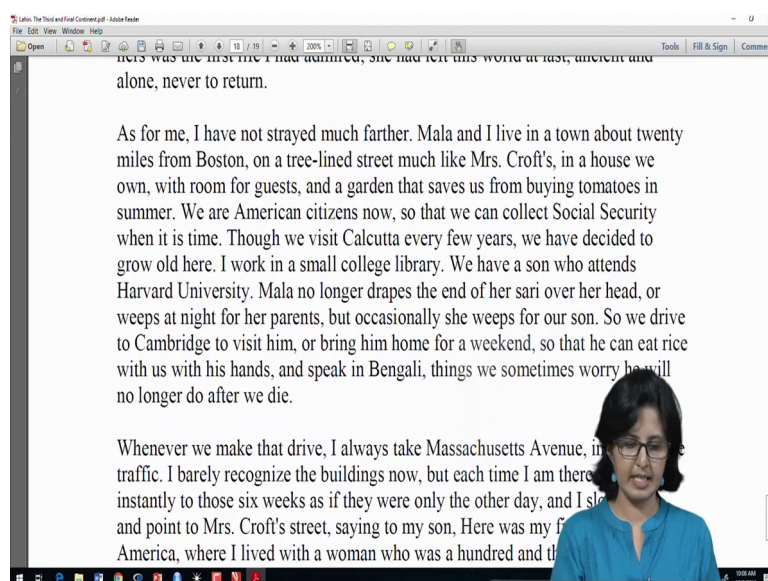
Like me, Mala had travels far from home not knowing where she was going, or what she would find for no reason other than to be my wife. As strange as it seemed, I knew in my heart that one day her death would affect me, and stranger still that mine would affect her, and I wanted some how to explain this to Mrs Croft who was still scrutinising Mala from top to toe with what seemed to be placid disdain. I wondered if Mrs Croft had ever seen a woman in a saree with a dot painted on her forehead and bracelets stacked on her wrists. I wondered what she would object to, I wondered if she could see the red dye still vivid on Mala feet, all but obscured by the bottom edge of her saree. At last Mrs Croft declared, with equal measures of disbelief and delight I knew well "She is a perfect lady"

(Refer Slide Time: 21:23)



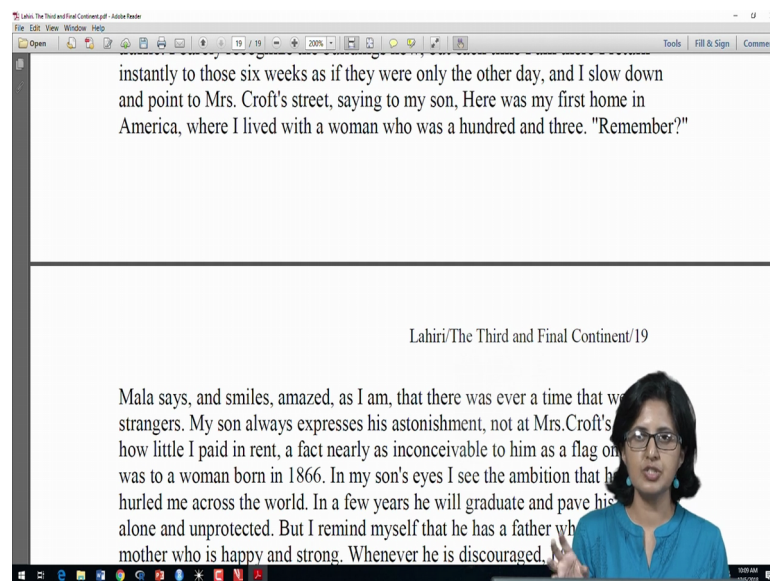
So this instant plays a significant role in bringing them closer he says so, for the 1st time we looked at each other and smiled. I like to think of that moment in Mrs Croft parlour as the moment when the distance between Mala and me began to lessen. We do not even know whether subconsciously the narrator also sees this as a sign of approval, Mrs Croft the American woman who gave him an apartment to stay, the American woman whom he looks as a purely independent woman with strong values, who is able to say “splendid” at the thought of the American flag on moon. He do not know whether she is seeing this as some kind of a legitimate approval that he gets for his wife.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:01)



And taking us to the present he says, I have not stayed much farther, Mala and I will live in a town about 20 miles from Boston on a tree-lined street much like Mrs Croft's, we visit Calcutta every few years but we have decided to grow here. I work in a small college library. We have a son who attends Harvard University. Mala no longer drapes the end of her saree over her head or weeps at night for her parents, but occasionally she weeps for our son. So this is the way he sums up his life at the end of 30 years.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:48)



And he tells us about how Mrs Croft street and the home where she lived until she was 103. They continue to Cedar Street and smile and remember that there was ever a time that we were strangers. And when the story ends significantly, this experience is more about the narrator and his son and it is less and less about Mala herself, it is less and less about how she came there and how she managed to adapt and make a life, it is more about what the narrator things he has achieved. I will read out the final segment, in my son's eyes I see the final ambition that had 1st hurled me across the world. In a few years he will graduate and pave his own way, alone and unprotected. But I remind myself that he has a father who is still living, a mother who is happy and strong. Whenever he is discouraged I tell him that if I can survive on 3 continents then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer.

My astronauts heroes forever spent mere hours on the moon, I have remade in this new world for nearly 30 years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary, I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home and certainly I am not the 1st. Still there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each row in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond

my imagination. And this is how he ends this, narrator compares himself to the astronauts recalling events which happened on the day when he landed in Boston.

The day he landed in Boston, the American had landed and had placed the American flag on moon. So there is a way in which he tries to see his achievement as no less than astronaut's achievement in itself and he thinks he is better because they had spent merely hours on the moon and he has spent years, the first 4 to 5 years in London and then over the 30+ long years in another strange land in America. As we wrap up this discussion, I also want to remind you, I also want you to remember and notice how uncomplicated how smooth the process of migration seems like, this cause of immigration seems like.

And perhaps Lahiri is doing this (())(25:21) to dock him in, the uncomplicated the smooth experienced of migration that a middle-class educated Indian has when he goes into another 1st world in pursuit of good education. And also with the intention of establishing himself whether that new system that new society, but it is really just not embodied the most Third World experience of migration. And not to say that the story should talk about everything but again drawing attention to the many many smaller details and the bigger events that the story chooses to not speak about. In fact the complexity of the story also lies in rules unspoken things about how the narrator's own subjective decision allowed him to overlook the many level things and the bigger things which were happening in America as we spoke about.

America is going through this phase where (())(26:18) is happening that we do not find narrator getting disturbed by any of those things or in 1964 when he is living Calcutta, the Calcutta rights are happening. So we do not find his subject, we do not find his selfhood being affected by any of these things. So as we wrap up this discussion I also want you to think about how there is an unnamed narrator in (())(26:42) Shadow lines, and the kind of experience that narrator in Shadow lines has both them are Bengalis and we will find the Shadow lines protagonist having a great experience.

He stays rooted, he stays rooted, tries to be authentic, he tries to connect with home through many incidents and events which are significant in shaping the political history of a nation and also in redefining the subjecthood the selfhood that he occupies. On that mood I again encourage you to read the story on your own, I hope this will also give you an entry point to access more other writings on (())(27:28) experiences and also to see how differently they are narrated in order to present peculiar kind of narrative that the story tries to program. Thank you for listening and I look forward to see you in the next session.