

Vijay Lakshmi
Pomegranate Dreams & Other Stories
New Delhi: Indialog Publications, 2002. Pp. 230.
Reviewed by Robin E. Field

Vijay Lakshmi's collection of short stories, *Pomegranate Dreams & Other Stories*, begins with a meditation upon the symbolic meanings of the pomegranate. She notes that across cultures the pomegranate is associated with fertility, prosperity, and abundance. Lakshmi's quotation of artist Kathryn Hadley further illustrates the symbolic potency of this fruit: "This small globe carries the power to transform and renew our souls. The seeds of change lie beneath its blood red surface. We need only look within to find all the strength and life we need" (8). Yet Lakshmi complicates a strictly celebratory interpretation of this fruit by citing a Sanskrit proverb that likens the performance of a difficult task to "biting into the pomegranate." Lakshmi uses this dichotomy of signification—prosperity/adversity, renewal/affliction—as the guiding trope of the ensuing eight stories. Her characters, who are primarily immigrant Indian women and their American-born children, experience the turmoil of leaving their homeland—at times reluctantly—and adapting to a country that, in psychological and cultural terms, offers more to their husbands than to them. Despite the lure of American prosperity dangled promisingly before them, these women eventually question whether their lives in the United States can bring the happiness they knew in India.

The title story, "Pomegranate Dreams," chronicles one young girl's interrogation of the promise of a "better life" in the United States. Juhi has high expectations for her family's lifestyle in America; why else would her family leave its lovely house with a large garden and their treasured possessions in India? She is aghast upon seeing their American house, a nondescript rowhouse with cramped rooms and a miniscule yard. Her first year in the United States is largely a disappointment. Her classmates at school are narrow-minded and tease her about her long hair, accented speech, and love of books; her only friends are her brother Bansi and cousin Priya. Her family does not indulge in Christmas gift-giving, instead deferring to Diwali as their preferred holiday. Yet in America, the joyful celebration of Diwali is reduced to a few candles lit by the immediate family in their living room. Juhi cannot understand her family's complaisance about their reduced circumstances, when her own desire for a "better life" cannot be checked.

Juhi soon realizes that prosperity in America is not guaranteed. Her aunt and uncle live in a cockroach-infested apartment in a poor neighborhood. Her cousin Priya runs away from home and eventually becomes a prostitute. And her older brother Bansi joins the Navy, realizing the financial strain that graduate studies would have on his family. Ultimately Juhi acknowledges that some

dreams will take years to come to fruition; that like the kernels of the pomegranate, these dreams must reside deep within, until the day they “burst out of their casing, gleaming like rubies, glowing like pearls” (15). Lakshmi’s portrayal of Juhi and her longings is reminiscent of Bharati Mukherjee’s early protagonists, whose lives are defined by an insatiable desire for the fulfillment of the American dream. Lakshmi’s in-depth exploration in her title story of one immigrant’s discontent with America sets the tone for the subsequent stories, as they question the benefits of trading familial and cultural stability in one’s homeland for the possibility of material prosperity in the United States.

A particularly poignant exploration of this theme occurs in “Touchline,” winner of the Editor’s Prize from *Orbis* (UK). The narrator of this story is visiting her childhood home in India, hoping to convince her elderly mother to move to Philadelphia to live with her and her grandchildren. The practicality of such an arrangement is clear: the daughter and her family will have fewer worries if the mother lives with the family in America, rather than alone thousands of miles away. Yet the mother is reluctant to leave behind everything she knows, from her favorite saris and pet parrot to her very sense of belonging to a people and a country. Despite her daughter’s pleading, she decides to stay in India. The narrator feels a deep sadness in leaving her mother behind, although the old woman obviously is happy to stay where she is. Ultimately the narrator realizes that her sadness extends beyond her separation from her mother; it also encompasses her own separation from her country. During her five years absence, the daughter has suppressed any nostalgia for her past in order to focus on the benefits of her present life, such as financial stability and material comfort. Her mother’s refusal to place these amenities above her cultural and spiritual ties leads her daughter to question her own life choices.

Lakshmi also probes the alienation that arises between tradition-bound Indian women and their westernized husbands and children. In “Mannequins,” the protagonist yields to the urging of her children to wear Western clothes. The story charts her frustration and indecision in selecting a dress, as well as her hope that the change of clothing will transform her into a confident American woman, eliminating her feelings of isolation. Ultimately, the change to Western clothing renders the protagonist even more isolated, as she is performing a role rather than being true to herself.

In the final two stories of the collection, “Distances” and “Smoke Screen,” Lakshmi presents another woman who questions her happiness in America. Anu is married to a successful academic, Manish, and has two bright children and a comfortable home. Yet she is constantly lonely, spending her days performing mundane domestic tasks while her husband works long hours at the university. She is unable to participate in her children’s chatter about friends and school, and watches sadly as Manish effortlessly interacts with them. Anu finds solace in nursing dreams of one day returning to India; she is devastated when Manish

shatters her illusion by abruptly announcing that they will never move back. Yet Manish's seeming indifference to his wife's sadness is complicated by his observation that Anu creates her own loneliness by holding onto the past, rather than building a new life in America. In these stories Lakshmi ponders the relationship between the isolation imposed by cultural alienation and the personal responsibility of the immigrant to adapt to her new surroundings.

"Greenwich Line," the most heartrending story in the collection, chronicles the extramarital affair between Gauri and Jeevan. For seven years the two subsist on stolen weekends and trips abroad, explained to their respective spouses as conferences or library research. Yet on one such trip to London, Gauri, the narrator, realizes that she can no longer straddle the two worlds of her lackluster marriage and her fulfilling affair. She pushes Jeevan to choose between her and his wife and children, and feels betrayed when he says he cannot leave his family. Yet when pressed, Gauri admits that she would not be able to live with the guilt if Jeevan left his wife. Gauri accepts the bitter irony that she and Jeevan cannot abandon their moral code of duty and responsibility to family.

Lakshmi's book makes a significant contribution to the literature of the South Asian diaspora. It explores the nuances in the experiences of Indian women residing in the United States. Similar to Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri, Lakshmi chronicles the tumult of acculturation; yet Lakshmi delves deeper into the psyches of her protagonists, raising timely questions about the importance of cultural identity and personal agency within immigrant communities.

Daylanne K. English

Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. Pp. 146. \$22.95

Reviewed by Axel Knoenagel

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the population of the northeastern United States underwent drastic changes. Large numbers of immigrants came from Europe, and numerous former slaves and their offspring left the southern states for the economic opportunities of the North.

These first forebodings of modernity shook the established society of the American Northeast to the core. It became clear that this society was very unsure of its own structure and of how to go about shaping its future. The perceived means to a better society was the creation of an elite capable of ordering the future. In an age fascinated by the concepts of evolution and social Darwinism, the idea of solving this problem with biological means was almost logical.