

Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian American who writes about immigrants to the United States—their struggles to make a home for themselves and conflicts between first- and second-generation immigrants. Lahiri's first book of short stories, Interpreter of Maladies, won the coveted Pulitzer Prize. In this Newsweek essay, she discusses her own slow process of merging her lives "on either side of the hyphen."

I have lived in the United States for almost 37 years and anticipate growing old in this country. Therefore, with the exception of my first two years in London, "Indian-American" has been a constant way to describe me. Less constant is my relationship to the term. When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s, I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring, I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was generally the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another.

At home I followed the customs of my parents, speaking Bengali¹ and eating rice and dal² with my fingers. These ordinary facts seemed part of a secret, utterly alien way of life, and I took pains to hide them from my American friends. For my parents, home was not our house in Rhode Island but Calcutta, where they were raised. I was aware that the things they lived for—the Nazrul³ songs they listened to on the reel-to-reel,⁴ the family they

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1. Bengali: the language spoken in eastern India and Bangladesh

2. dal: a simmered, spicy lentil dish

3. Nazrul: Bangladeshi poet who supported India's independence

4. reel-to-reel: an early magnetic tape recorder

missed, the clothes my mother wore that were not available in any store in any mall—were at once as precious and as worthless as an outmoded⁵ currency.

I also entered a world my parents had little knowledge or control of: school, books, music, television, things that seeped in and became a fundamental aspect of who I am. I spoke English without an accent, comprehending the language in a way my parents still do not. And yet there was evidence that I was not entirely American. In addition to my distinguishing name and looks, I did not attend Sunday school, did not know how to ice-skate, and disappeared to India for months at a time. Many of these friends proudly called themselves Irish-American or Italian-American. But they were several generations removed from the frequently humiliating process of immigration, so that the ethnic roots they claimed had descended underground whereas mine were still tangled and green. According to my parents, I was not American, nor would I ever be no matter how hard I tried. I felt doomed by their pronouncement, misunderstood and gradually defiant. In spite of the first lessons of arithmetic, one plus one did not equal two but zero, my conflicting selves always canceling each other out.

When I first started writing, I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life. My first book was published in 1999, and around then, on the cusp⁶ of a new century, the term "Indian-American" has become part of this country's vocabulary. I've heard it so often that these days, if asked about my background, I use the term myself, pleasantly surprised that I do not have to explain further. What a difference from my early life, when there was no such way to describe me, when the most I could do was to clumsily and ineffectually explain.

As I approach middle age, one plus one equals two, both in my work and in my daily existence. The traditions on either side of the hyphen dwell in me like siblings, still occasionally sparring, one outshining the other depending on the day. But like siblings they are intimately familiar with one another, forgiving and intertwined. When my husband and I were married five years ago in Calcutta, we invited friends who had never been to India, and they came full of enthusiasm for a place I avoided talking about in my childhood, fearful of what people might say. Around non-Indian friends, I no longer feel compelled to hide the fact that I speak another language. I speak Bengali to my children, even though I lack the proficiency to teach them to read or write the language. As a child I sought perfection and so denied myself the claim to any identity. As an adult I accept that a bicultural upbringing is a rich but imperfect thing.

While I am American by virtue of the fact that I was raised in this country, I am Indian thanks to the efforts of two individuals. I feel Indian not because of the time I've spent in India or because of my genetic composition but rather because of my parents' steadfast presence in my life. They live three hours from my home; I speak to them daily and see them about once a month. Everything will change once they die. They will take certain things with



The Indian god Ganesha, lord of success, remover of obstacles

5. outmoded: dated

6. cusp: edge or turning point

them—conversations in another tongue, and perceptions about the difficulties of being foreign. Without them, the back-and-forth life my family leads, both literally and figuratively, will at last approach stillness. An anchor will drop, and a line of connection will be severed.

I have always believed that I lack the authority my parents bring to being Indian. But as long as they live, they protect me from feeling like an imposter. Their passing will mark not only the loss of the people who created me but the loss of a singular way of life, a singular struggle. The immigrant's journey, no matter how ultimately rewarding, is founded on departure and deprivation, but it secures for the subsequent generation a sense of arrival and advantage. I can see a day coming when my American side, lacking the counterpoint India has until now maintained, begins to gain ascendancy⁷ and weight. It is in fiction that I will continue to interpret the term "Indian-American," calculating that shifting equation, whatever answers it may yield.

DISCUSSION AND WRITING QUESTIONS

1. As a child, Lahiri felt "intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new." Do you think this pressure to choose between two identities is common, especially in children from immigrant families? What other contrasts does the author mention?
2. Lahiri calls the process of immigrating and adjusting to a new culture *humiliating* (paragraph 3). Do you think this is true for all immigrants? Why or why not? Has the immigration experience changed since Lahiri arrived in the 1970s at age three?
3. Do you ever feel that you too must manage two (or more) different lives even though you are not an immigrant? Be specific. If yes, do you feel torn between these lives or do you feel whole?
4. In the last paragraph, Lahiri seems to say that her parents are "real" Indians and she is an imposter; that "everything will change once they die." Do you find anything troubling about this perspective on the origins of cultural identity? Are our connections with the past this fragile?

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Most people juggle multiple identities—as students, as employees, as parents, as citizens, as members of a community, as individuals. How do you think this juggling affects our sense of self? Do you think it is necessary to have multiple identities? Why or why not?

DAVE BARRY Driving While Stupid

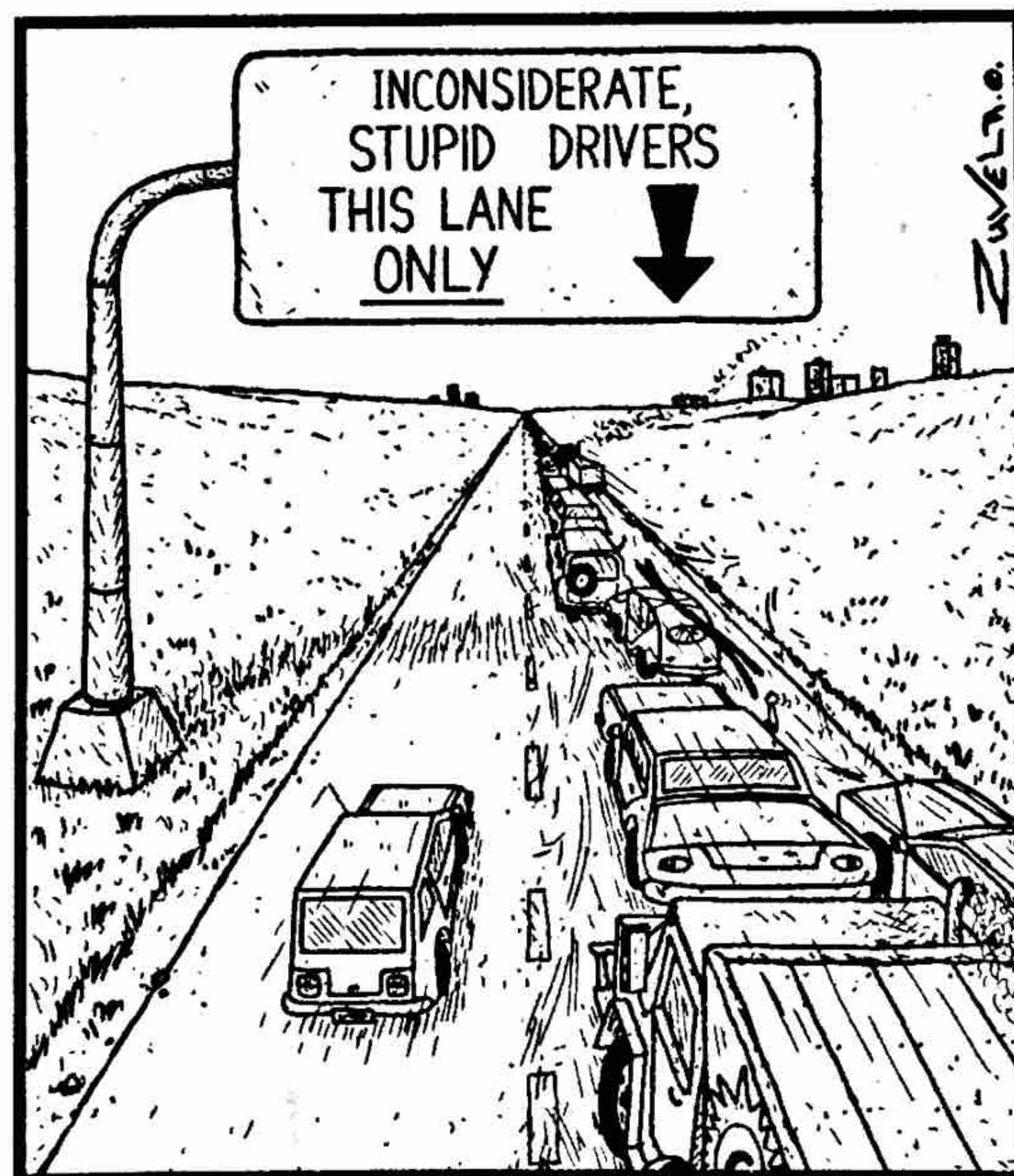
Dave Barry. "Driving While Stupid." MIAMI HERALD. Used by permission of Tribune Media Services.

Humorist Dave Barry loves to poke fun at Miami, his hometown ("Motto: an automatic-fire weapon in every home"). Barry has written over 30 books, none of which, he claims, contains useful information; he won a Pulitzer Prize for his humor columns that until 2005 ran in over 500 newspapers. Currently, Barry aspires to "continued immaturity followed by death." In this Miami Herald column, he takes on bad drivers.

So I have to tell you what I saw on the interstate the other night. First, though, you must understand that this was not just any old interstate. This was I-95 in downtown Miami, proud home of the worst darned drivers in the world.

I realize some of you are saying: "Oh yeah? If you want to see REALLY bad drivers, you should come to MY city!" Listen, I understand that this is a point of civic honor, and I am sure that the drivers in your city are all homicidal¹ morons. But trust me when I tell you that there is no way they can compete with the team that Miami puts on the road.

I know what I'm talking about. I have driven in every major U.S. city, including Boston, where the motorists all drive as though there is an open drawbridge just ahead, and they need to gain speed so they can jump across it.



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1. homicidal: murderous; intending to kill someone

I have also driven in Italy, where there is only one traffic law, which is that no driver may ever be behind any other driver, the result being that at all times, all the motorists in the nation, including those in funeral processions, are simultaneously trying to pass. 4

I have ridden in a taxi in the Argentinean city of Mar del Plata (literally, "Cover your eyes"), where (a.) nobody ever drives slower than 65 miles per hour, even inside parking garages, and (b.) at night, many motorists drive with their headlights off, because—a taxi driver told me this, and he was absolutely serious—this extends the life of your bulbs. When he said this, we were in a major traffic jam caused by an accident involving a truck and a horse. 5

I have also ridden on a bus in China, plowing through humongous² traffic snarls involving trucks, cars, bicycles, ox-drawn carts and pedestrians, all aggressively vying³ for the same space, and where the bus driver would sometimes physically push pedestrians out of the way. I don't mean with his hands. I mean with the BUS. 6

My point is that I have seen plenty of insane driving techniques, and I am telling you for a fact that no place brings so many of these techniques together as Miami, where a stop sign has no more legal significance to most motorists than a mailbox. The police down here have given up on enforcing the traffic laws. If they stop you and find a human corpse in your trunk, they'll let you off with a warning if it's your first one. 7

So I've seen pretty much everything on the roads here. Nevertheless, I was surprised by the driver on the interstate the other night. I heard him before I saw him, because his car had one of those extremely powerful sound systems, in which the bass notes sound like nuclear devices being detonated⁴ in rhythm. So I looked in the mirror and saw a large convertible with the top down overtaking me at maybe 600 miles per hour. I would have tried to get out of his path, but there was no way to know what his path was, since he was weaving back and forth across five lanes (out of a possible three). 8

Fortunately, he missed me, and as he went past, I got a clear view of why he was driving so erratically:⁵ He was watching a music video. He was watching it on a video screen that had been installed where the sun visor usually goes, RIGHT IN FRONT OF HIS FACE, blocking his view of the road. I don't want to sound like an old fud, but this seems to me to be just a tad hazardous. I distinctly recall learning in driver's education class that, to operate a car, you need to be able to see where the car is going, in case the need arises (you never know!) to steer. 9

Of course, more and more, drivers do not have time for steering, as they are busy making phone calls, eating, reading, changing CDs, putting on makeup, brushing their teeth, etc. I recently received mail from an alert reader named Kate Chadwick who reports that she drove behind a man who was SHAVING HIS HEAD, with his "visor mirror positioned just so, windows wide open for hair disposal, and for a significant portion of the ride, no hands on the wheel." 10

But at least these drivers are able, from time to time, to glance at the road whereas the guy I saw on I-95 basically could see only his video. I hope you agree with me that this is insane. I also hope you are not reading this in your car. 11

2. humongous: huge, enormous

3. vying: competing

4. detonated: exploded

5. erratically: without a fixed or regular path