

“Hybridization and Self-Effacement in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction”

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Fecha

I, the undersigned Jesús Escobar Sevilla, as a student of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Almeria, hereby declares under the penalty of perjury, and also certify with my signature below, that my Master's Thesis, titled:

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*I would like to highlight the unyielding support
of my family, friends and my girlfriend Belén,
to whom I owe my most glorious sense of achievement
at the edge of daily life
beyond despair and self-doubt.*

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Introduction

In a world of constant changes, cutting-edge technologies play a tremendous role in enabling a prominent level of mobility and ensuring a vast array of networks of communication that supersede the borders of nations. This easiness at intersecting countries, communities and individuals helps to foster an ongoing rich breeding ground whereby these intertwine, lose and gain from each other, throughout the translation of cultures under diverse relationships of power. The new paradigm of postcolonial and cultures studies is to gauge the interwoven relationships between cultures, and delve into recurrent phenomena that accounts for the resulting realizations of identity, self-representation and power over space. The point to grasp, hence, is to recognize the new patterns from whence diasporic subjects operate, like demiurges, creating their own models out of existing clay, taking the decisive steps to adapt their homeland or shape a variant of themselves in an unfamiliar environment.

As a result, connectivity becomes the medium whereby individuals adopt a way of life, as catalysts of culture, and thus contribute with minor changes to alter the established order. Not surprisingly, diaspora does not only stand for present-day subjects in transit, but it defies, it fleshes out and undermines the absolutes of tradition to turn them anew under the lens of global understanding. As heirs of democracy and as heirs of the deadliest events of recent history, it is our ethical responsibility to delve into the concerns of global citizenship to advocate human rights and a universal principle of solidarity, depending upon the here and now of individuals.

Diaspora is never the limit, but the gateway to achieve this humble endeavor,

and arguably, the glaring violence of war seems distant at times, and yet, its impending pitfall looms large in everyday familiar space, in every act of exclusion, in every hate speech. It always begins as something tiny, unimportant, laughable, but which turns into a crystallized vision of reality that impinges, conspicuously, as a part of the dominant discourse, disregarding perhaps, the intentionality of the demonized group. This would be the case of ethnocentrism, a barrier to mutual understanding, and the exacting cause of stereotyping. The long-term cause then, is to promote an appreciation of diversity and multiculturalism, as living organisms that must not act and speak verbatim from theory, but act and speak directly in a wholehearted commitment with peace. Diaspora, too, envisions the improvement of human condition by gliding myths, values, idiosyncratic social practices and preserving these under the aegis of social consensus.

Taking the lead as a relevant reflection of society, literature stands as a necessary fiction whereby we spend our time, we judge, and we undertake a self-discovery. Such a discovery takes place in the light of diaspora as a heightened sensitivity for the other, gearing individuals towards the nagging doubt, between the self-recognition and the other-orientation. Under the lens of multiculturalism, ethnic communities have underscored their politicized identities together with their frailty, and a relentless thirst for stability. However elusive, any piece of literature cogently poises readers into a story that accounts for current realities, into an insightful moral, and with this aim in mind, the purpose of this essay is to provide a closer look at the nature of diaspora, exactly at a place that best exemplifies the history of multiculturalism, the United States of America.

There is a body of evidence pointing out the US as a commonplace for cultures getting enmeshed, ravaged or incorporated in quest for the American dream. Therefore, an overlooked narrative of displacement is that of the melting pot, depicting the USA as a social space that subsumes diasporic identities under the precept of Americanness. It should be highlighted then, that the hybrid nature of American citizens does no longer linger on such an intense assimilation, because of the rise of technologies and the increasing chances to communicate overseas.

The purpose of this Master's Thesis, is to raise the issue of diasporic agency

and call attention to the conformity, hybridization and the establishment of social spaces through the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri, a pertinent Indian-American hyphenated author that deals with the concerns of Indian diaspora in the US. A short eulogy of Jhumpa Lahiri's contributions to literature will be illustrated in Unit 1.

Then, in Unit 2 prior to any literary analysis, an overview of diaspora and the most recent migration flows of Indians in the US shall be delivered in 2.a. along with a brief discussion on the new diaspora in 2.b. A greater insight into intergenerational relations shall be highly regarded in 2.c. based on Marcus Lee Hansen's articulation of the problem of the third generation immigrant. Moreover, some minor adjustments to the object of discussion shall be redressed in sections 2.d. and 2.e., bringing forth ideological assumptions concerning diaspora too. The cumulative effect of the theoretical background will be deemed relevant, drawing significantly upon the correlation between identity, self-representation, and the interference of space for assimilation.

In Unit 3, an emphasis shall be put on the literary analysis of *The Namesake*, the first novel of Jhumpa Lahiri, which encapsulates the intergenerational tension between first generation immigrants and their descendants. Through the journey motif we shall underscore the recognition of troubled Gogol in 3.b. whereas 3.c. shall serve its purpose to highlight the agency undertaken by leading women.

Unit 4, however, will be held responsible for describing the multifaceted first collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, outlining the cases where the characters fail to cope with their homesickness and the alien environment, that is, section 4.a. These instances shall go in alignment with those of successful adaptation in section 4.b., further shedding light on the examination of diaspora subjects. Finally, section 4.c. shall explore the momentous presence of food in the interface of present with a yearned homeland, contributing thus to the tell-tale mapping of identity and space.

Unit 1 Jhumpa Lahiri, a Hyphenated Life

As far as it goes with the writer Jhumpa Lahiri, it is interestingly remarkable that she occupies a central position as a hyphenated author in North American literature as representative of the so-called South Asian diaspora. She has been highly regarded as the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000 for her collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, and her stories delve further into the interstitial belonging of so-called hyphenated individuals, dealing with marriage, identity formation, and especially, with the encounter between cultures.

After several story publications in renowned magazines like *The New Yorker*, her first attempt to bring about a novel, *The Namesake*, contributed to forging her name as an international best-seller. Tellingly, her wide-held popularity does not only account for the books which shall be the object of the study in this Master's Thesis, but to other works such as *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), *The Lowland* (2013), *In Altre Parole* (2015). Prior to her success, her works had been painstakingly dismissed several times, but she made it through and garnered praise, without shifting the focus on her stories. On the one hand, her success partly hinges on the topic of diaspora and the way of thinking that she bolsters towards the challenges faced by immigrants, both at the social and family level. On the other hand, diaspora has nonetheless been gaining momentum these days almost incognizant to its most intrinsically positive value in literature, zealously revolving around the traumatic side of immigration. In turn, her fiction attempts to pin down the new relationships of immigrants with their homeland, with their adoptive land, and themselves.

Heir of the Indian Bengali customs, born in London in 1967, and “naturalized as American citizen ever since she was eighteen”, she forged her own domain in literature, both as a homage to her family and a personal endeavor to grasp meaning out of her ambivalent existence (Lahiri, 2002:113). In her case, she has been described as a “Indian-American author, an NRI (non-resident Indian) as an ABCD author (ABCD stands for American born confused “desi”) (114). Not surprisingly, Lahiri compared it with the life of Trishanku, a myth where this king can neither access nor create a heaven of their own (Bhatt, 2009:40). Falling under the scope of ethnic-identification, she wanted to fend for herself as part of the majority, even as a writer, glossing over her identification in a self-effacing manner: “My upbringing, an amalgam of two hemispheres, was heterodox and complicated; I wanted it to be conventional and contained. I wanted to be anonymous and ordinary, to look like other people, to behave as others did” (Lahiri, 2011:n.p). Curiously enough, she was named Nilanjana, but she happened to adopt her pet name “Jhumpa”, very much alike to Gogol’s strife for identity in *The Namesake* (Abidi, 2014:4).

Overall, she does not only retain plenty of customs from her Indian heritage, but a fair knowledge of India, she admits, one that approximates to part of her autobiographical experience and that tellingly, provides hindsight into the memories of her parents. On this limited understanding of India, it has been prompted that she does not provide an accurate representation of India, its population, or diaspora phenomena in short (2002:116-8). Notwithstanding, Jhumpa Lahiri does not advocate a great sense of entitlement over her accomplishments, considering that she boasts three masters, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance studies at Boston University. When pushed to illustrate her surreptitious voice, she celebrates the heroism of her parents and other immigrants, and observes that:

Unlike my parents, I translate not so much to survive in the world around me as to create and illuminate a non-existent one. Fiction is the foreign land of my choosing, the place where I strive to convey and preserve the meaningful. And whether I write as an American or an Indian, about things American or Indian or otherwise, one thing remains constant: I translate, therefore I am.” (Lahiri, 2002:120)

She asserts in “My intimate alienation” that she was afraid to face the challenge of writing since little, but that it swore testimony to her unbridled desire to bring together cultures, to ‘translate’ them. Equally, her mother also joined the family together with rapport and a wide range of Indian dishes, whose receipt and materialized love was irreplaceable, Lahiri admits, “Cooking was her jurisdiction. It was also her secret” (Lahiri, 2004:83). Without the support of her family she would not have been able to achieve her lifelong ambition, and withal, her life demonstrates that the propinquity of cultures breeds a new *mélange* of subjects, first localized and, ultimately, realized globally, as a recurrent phenomenon that grapples with the cause of progress and a new appreciation of multiculturalism, through diaspora. The search of a place comes naturally after a staggering displacement, relocating oneself into the desired space-time continuum, into *l’espace vécu*, a *topos* whereby subject and self-representation merge as one. Based on the assumption of mobility, diaspora does not forestall conflict or the existence of barriers, but it does lay the foundations for transit, for the hyphenation of individuals and the denationalization of borders. Taking the case of Lahiri, diaspora hereby entails a far-reaching potential that spans between who we are, who we want to become, and our ability to negotiate such a stance.

Unit 2 Theoretical Framework

2.a. On America migration flows and Post-1965 Indians

No one could deny the broad assortment of cultures mingling these days in the US and that this country has been eminently built upon immigration and the quest for a better life. There has never existed a place that could reflect with such glowing detail, the relationships of the host nation with its correspondent massive migration flows. These flows have been nonetheless concocting various sociocultural realizations out of various sources, depending mainly upon the existing quota laws in the States and the conditions at the issuing country, since “Asian America is formulated by immigration policy and Asian American demographics is dictated by US policy on immigration” (Heinze, 2007:3). The sprawling metropolis San Francisco and by extension, Western North America had so far welcomed South Asian immigrants in the so-called search for Golden Mountain (‘Gam Shān’, in Chinese), which aligned the first Chinese community in the States. The first instances of racial othering could not but drive a wedge issue in confusing the Chinese with Native American Indians and arguably, to deem them all with Blacks as “Calibans of color” (Takaki, 2008:188-89). From now on, the umbrella term “Asian American” or “South Asian” may be used when referring to the subjects in question for the literary analysis, the Bengali Hindu community.

It was not until the start of the twentieth century that the entry of around “6400 Sikhs” had Americans wondering on their “exotic turbans” (2008:300). They came in search of work in the “Washington’s load mills and California’s vast agricultural fields”, Macwan (2014:45) notes. These Punjabi forerunners were pigeonholed as

“Hindus”, the “most undesirable, of all the eastern Asiatic races “with “immodest and filthy habits” (Spivak, 1990:61) and hereafter “savagery” was thought of as something both Irish and Indian (Takaki, 2008:31). Common discontent against these misfits had led to the prohibition of landownership to “aliens ineligible to naturalized citizenship” with the Alien land Act of 1913 (301). As time went by, the vast number of immigrants strung together a series of ensuing Acts attempting to reduce the unleashed tides overrunning the States: the Immigration Act of 1917, called Asiatic Barred Zone Act, the Emergency Quota Law of 1921 and the National Origins Act of 1924 contributed largely to the restriction of Asian immigrants. These set forth a dam that would make headway until a turning point, the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. Given that the Congress had finally undone the restrictions towards this community, Asian whizz kids and above all, the genesis of South-Asian successful migration as we know it would finally be set in motion. Similarly, in India a crucial occurrence would positively favor the settling of proficient transnational workers ashore, after its Independence and its partition with Pakistan in 1947, which framed the new political scenario. Thomas Friedman postulates that:

India mined the brains of its own people, educating a relatively large slice of its elites in the sciences, engineering and medicine. In 1951, to his enduring credit, Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, set up the first of India’s seven Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) in the eastern city of Kharagpur...Given India’s one-billion-plus population, this competition produces a phenomenal knowledge meritocracy. (2005:127)

India was still latching onto its inner turmoil, but amidst the social convulsion, Nehru promoted that “the IITs became islands of excellence by not allowing the general debasement of the Indian system to lower their exacting standards” (127). Therefore, this major adjustment paved the way for a clear-cut milestone in South-Asian migration owing to the contemporary trends reflected in migration flows. While the “old” diaspora circulated among other colonized places, the “new” scatters around world powers like some European countries, Canada and the United States, brain-draining a skillful generation that speaks for the Indian diaspora elite (Monaco, 2015). As Maria Ridda notes from Shukla’s findings “the absence of a colonial history in the relationship between Indian and American cultures [...] means that Indians

migrate with less detailed imaginative maps" (2011:3).

However, this lack of shared past with the US could be beneficial in terms of its *tabula rasa* veiled implications. The 1955 Indian Citizen Act ratified double citizenship for Indians, allowing them to nourish transnational networks and gain the privilege to drive out the recent condition of undocumented aliens, expatriates or refugees. Not only leaving out bureaucratic ordeals, but attaining to more privileges, the current scenario was thus fostering the development of institutionalized transnational communities, even though that "any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion, as a group that lives in displacement" (Mishra, 2006:14). This incipient reality has nonetheless held much attention at Cultural Studies and the dominant pro-discourse of ethnicity whereby fiction emerges as the outstanding social binding of diasporic understanding. For "this field is composed of a growing number of persons who live dual lives: speaking two languages, having homes in two countries, and making a living through continuous regular contact across national borders" (Portes, *et al.* 1999:217).

Jointly, the post-1965 Indian diasporic community was to gain the self-evident support of America through their work ethic and cheap hand labor along the next decades. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan stressed the significance of "affirmative action" in labour and upward mobility, thus commenting on Blacks as depending on the "spider's web of welfare" and that the "only barrier" to success was "within" them (Takaki, 2008:402). Having stated the aims of meritocracy, a racial divide was also posited in the mainstream's short-sighted diagnosis of ethnic communities juxtaposing Asian Americans "success" and black "failure" (403). Apropos the issue at hand, Thomas Friedman presents a fascinating account on the forces that have helped to have the world flattened, metaphorically speaking, pointing out that "India was what was known as "the second buyer" of America (2005:126), increasingly buoying the margins at the presumably vantage point of counting with proficient professionals that could do the same job as an American graduate, but cheaper. Hiral Macwan comments on the big picture:

The 1990s IT wave and rising economy in the U.S.A. attracted numerous Indians

who emigrated to the U. S.A. Today, the USA has the third largest number of Indians. The fact is that the Indian community constitutes such diverse elements as South Asian Hong Kong Muslims, Canadian Sikhs, Punjabi Mexican Californians, Gujarati East Africans now settled in the U.S.A by way of England, South African Hindus etc. (2014:45-46)

Once that the 1996 telecom deregulation was implemented, American shareholders wrangled with the bubble burst by hiring these Indian experts at fiber-optic networks, taking advantage of Internet and their time zone to meet their needs as it happened with the “Y2K upgrading”, a “Y2bug” that demonstrated that a “great mistake in the early 2000s was conflating the dot-com boom with globalization” (Friedman, 2005:131). Notably, upon these economic changes he explains that “the scarcity of capital after the dot-com bust made venture capital firms” (135) and so rendered visible a remarkable remnant of the economic decentralization process of the private sector, which is precisely this top-notch Indian community. Above all, this migration tendency shows that class trumps ethnicity and that this representative group is geared towards success, considering the American spirit of entrepreneurship as a pivotal point in creating a divide among ethnic minorities. The year 1965 and its aftermath, opened the gateway for a new diaspora paradigm, one which allows standardized individuals’ assimilation rather than their marginalization. Late capitalism has surely played a role in enabling the coalescence of countries such as the USA and India, benefitting from the IT liaison and their complementary economic interests:

The Asian American diaspora of today, though formed by US immigration policy, cannot be properly characterized as powerless, since it consists largely of professionals with university degrees homeland as a rupture which becomes “a trauma around an absence that because it cannot be fully symbolized becomes part of the fantasy itself. (Mishra, 1996:423)

The previous case study demonstrates the economic reasons preceding South-Asian diaspora and 1965 as the blueprint between traumatic blue-collar legal aliens of the old diaspora and highly proficient entrepreneurs coming ever since 1965. Interestingly, once that a regular income and a home ascertains the stay of an

immigrant, then what comes into question is the intergenerational phenomenon of feeling accepted into the new culture. But let us ponder on the distinction between the old and the new diaspora prior to any further analysis.

2.b. Diaspora

Regarding upon the term “diaspora”, however, a reassessment of the notion is needed to explain the new divergences in diaspora phenomena and their counterpart labels. For being a diasporic subject is to be one in constant transit and occupying a central yet non-clear-cut position in-between, a never-ending liminality which underscores the swaying hyphen between two cultures. As Vijay Mishra (1996:185) calls it, a “vacuum upbringing” giving rise to the “struggle to occupy the space of the hyphen, the problematic situating of the self as simultaneously belonging here and there” (qtd. in Ridda, 2008:1). Yet, despite its fuzzy boundaries, not all diasporas are the same. From an etymological perspective, it strictly means “to scatter about, disperse” and this conception was used to “refer to a conquered land with the purpose of colonization, to assimilate the territory into the empire” (Bhatt, 2009:37), but the term covers a wide range of realities like the Jew exile from the promised land, or the most recent Balkanic diaspora of refugees among others. A shift in its meaning has allowed its applicability to any kind of movement between places. Likewise, other terms like exile encircle several notions at the same time. Refugees stand at the most unfavorable position leaving their hostile country, expatriates are those who enter a new country while, at the same time, retain their customs and resist assimilation. Broadly speaking, these groups of people share the same nostalgia and desire to conform a collective identity in an alien environment. Depending upon the homesickness that they experience, distinct categories apply to them, according to Safran’s studies on retaining local distinctiveness in a remote host society, which are, in short, refugees, expatriates, alien residents, ethnic and racial minorities (Safran, 1991: 83).

An immigrant “leaves his native country to settle permanently in another country” (Macwan, 2014:45). These immigrants endorse the values of a successful work ethic, mobility and resilience as a privileged group in comparison to those that are forced to leave the country. The underlying desideratum to make a living abroad

entails a subversive “interaction between gender, class, ethnicity and nation-states” (Bhat, 2009:38), bolstered up by the wealthy ones at the right side of history. Visibility comes here as a feature of Appadurai’s “diaspora of hope”, contrary to the “diaspora of terror or despair” (1996:6).

The diasporic subject seesaws between two domains, doubly belonging and detaching from these intersectional contested spaces and it is within these overlapping areas that the subject gains, loses and transforms itself depending on certain contingencies. Nowadays, it is becoming hardly noticeable how immigrants strive for a better life in other countries not generally due to an internal economic or politic crisis but to the desire of improving their lives. Given that a physical home is already ascertained, the wellbeing is rather altered by emotional distress and the need for belonging. Vijay Mishra contends that “even though the establishment of a homeland is not essential to ‘the cultural logic’ of diasporas... it must be conceded that ‘homeland’ figures prominently in the psychic imaginary of diasporas” because in the long foray, there remain the core values, myths, rites and fossilized ideas underlying the erratic flows of ideology (qtd. in Bandyopadhyay, 2010:99). Terry Eagleton argues that “most diaspora writers concentrate on generational differences in exploring how new and old diasporas relate to their land of origin and the host culture” (qtd. in Macwan, 2014:46) since a culture, a model minority ethnicity, anchors under a dominant central space, we understand here culture, as a “homogenization of the good, patriotic attributes of a nation for the sake of exclusiveness, and creation and preservation of an identity” (Bandyopadhyay, 2010:98). Therefore, one arguable contention is that of Edward Said redressing the “permissiveness and relatively liberal philosophies” that are allowing the channeling of cultures into an abrupt stream of ethnic communities (qtd. in 98).

While acculturation involves a loss of one’s roots, what is at stake here, is the way that subjects assimilate and translate their ideological stances into the new domain, taking here the cosmopolitan idea of “coexistence with a difference” (Clifford, 1994:308). Taking here the word “translation” with its meaning “to be borne across”, which is exactly what happens when individuals aim to maintain its culture in a world that supersedes, erodes and unearths the rich soil. Owing to the metaphor of ‘the uprooted’ coined by Handlin in 1973, we speak of assimilation, while Bodnar in 1985

uses the image of 'the transplanted', namely, expatriates, designating cultural pluralism. The newness of migration phenomena suggests that the long-term goal is to achieve a "transformative encounter between the foreign and the native" (Monaco, 2015:74), which is becoming to the intertwining of cultures and states as a transnational revolution, occurring both at the individual, the family and the community level.

The encounter between two cultures holds what Derrida in "Des tours de Babel" calls "the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity as impossibility", a surreptitious liminality that seeks resolution but that an immigrant fails to recognize completely because of its own upbringing when he/she undergoes a confusing transposition (1985:218-27). A deciding factor in such a transfer is that of the family interface, since it acts as a referee, a ruler with whom the second generation needs to negotiate its wrapped bits of the adopted culture.

2.c. Intergenerational relations

When it comes to adapting, the corollary for a long-lived presence of an ethnic community is that of a germinal sense of belonging over the ages. Marcus Lee Hansen analyzed intergenerational relationships in immigrant groups through the phenomenon of "the problem of the third-generation immigrant". To put it simply, he reckoned that "what the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember" (1938:9) and argued that the second generation of migrants feels at an "uncomfortable position" wrangling with a twofold reality where customs, language, religion and parental authority are in constant conflict. In turn, the second generation typically reacts with a rebellious streak whereby the new culture seems a way of escape with a certain sense of unfaithfulness. Some of them have been widely spotted as outcasts, reluctant to conform to the rules of society and prone to commit criminal acts. Hansen comments that "nothing was more Yankee than a Yankeeized person of foreign descent" (8). Nonetheless, the third generation most likely lives without misgivings, without any inherited stigma and would be tentatively compelled to return to its roots.

This accounts for the revival of the South, mostly undertaken by the

grandchildren of the Civil War with an impartial eye. If this blending process unravels in the space-time continuum, then the nation-state inflection will decentralize and unify diverse cultural viewpoints so that “the constituency becomes gradually thinned out as the third-generation merges into the fourth” (14). Exploiting thus the “frontier hypothesis” (18) of migration as a desirable transaction, the “fate of any national group” is “to be amalgamated into the composite American race” (17). The emphasis put on the second generation is stark, in terms that it plays a scaffolding role in favouring the prospective assimilation of its offspring. In addition, Hansen’s findings would tenably fall under the scope of recent research in sociology delineating transnationalism, which accounts for a new reality of assimilation theory. It has been pointed out by the previous studies of Portes *et al.* to which extent intergenerational resilience contributes to enhance the sense of belonging:

The case for second-generation as a ‘strategic site’ is based on two features. First, the long-term effects of immigration for the host society depend less on the fate of first generation immigrants than on their descendants. Patterns of adaptation of the first generation set the stage for what is to come, but issues such as the continuing dominance of English, the growth of a welfare dependent population, the resilience of culturally distinct enclaves, and the decline or growth of ethnic intermarriages will be decided among its children or grandchildren... story deeply attuned to feelings of shame, ethnic identity and intergenerational/cultural differences between South Asian immigrant parents from West Bengal and their American-born children. (qtd. in Shariff, 2008:459)

Under such influence, the minority gears its roots towards the present, negotiating its “social relations in a synchronic dimension” (Lahiri, 2008:1) in an ongoing dialogue fraught with tension. The “tension between desires for assimilation and ethnic authenticity”, Bhalla reveals (2012:113), will enroute individuals into intergenerational assimilation and a “deracialized position in the US through strategic cultural consumption and affluent class aspirations... wherein the group asserts an upwardly mobile ethnic identity in the symbolic realm” (114). The effort needs to be impinged into the collective imaginary without overriding exclusions between contributory parts of society. Eventually, the erasure of mental barriers and “borders as neither the site of assimilation nor the marking of an alien Other” should act as a

cornerstone in understanding the modern diaspora (Alfonso-Forero, 2007:2).

We are dealing thus with the caveat of time and the ensnaring remembrance of the putative homeland, thus retaining a “collective sense of identity...a network of historical connections, spiritual affinities, and unifying racial memories” (Macwan, 2014:2). In a sense, that the strong attachment to the homeland is gradually going to be replaced by the adopted country is but a forgone conclusion that needs to account for the emerging desire to belong in a contested space (Bhatt, 2009:39).

This lengthy process hinges not only on a normative legal status, but on the empowering of its ethnic values as an impasse for a positive public perception of that minority and the avoidance of situations of defenselessness. What sets old diaspora from the new one is the high chances of mobility and the aid of technologies to short distances and promote international communication and belonging. Natalie Friedman evaluates the present situation of the new diaspora out of Zygmunt Bauman's *Globalization. The Human Consequences*:

It challenges the stereotypes of the disenfranchised immigrant who remains in one place once he or she reaches America's shores, trapped by poverty or political and legal restrictions. As Zygmunt Bauman writes (89), immigrants and their children have ceased to be “locally tied” and have entered what Arjun Appadurai calls the world of “global flows” (30). (2008:113)

Perched on the threshold and doubly hesitant, the *pathos* of the immigrant is further explained by Bhatt (2009:47) through the Bharata's Rasa Theory whereby separation, grief and dislocation are drenched in a “politics of recall, [...] a poetics of sorrow” which consists of seven steps, accordingly, as follows: “Memory, return mental /physical, strangeness or inability to understand cultural customs, desire to integrate, transience that someday this will happen, a desire for permanence, absence of belonging/embedding – code mixing”. The diasporic subject, Janus-faced, counts with a ‘double vision’, at once of ‘yearning backward’ and ‘looking forward’ (39) and needs to grapple its hindsight to control the present, as writer Rushdie would say, “obliged to deal in broken mirrors” (qtd. in Macwan, 2014:2). Kivisto exemplifies this “new form of ethnic community”: “For example, European-origin immigrants to the United States forged a collective ethnic identity that linked

fellow ethnics regardless of where in the US they lived...more fluid and syncretistic process of adaptation" (2001:568).

In keeping a balance between these two worlds, other cultures may intermingle but it is the individual who embraces and forges its own domain, either its mother culture, its adopted culture or committing to a bricolage of a third space. Much attention has been given to this notion of the 'third space' posited by Homi Bhabha, in line with Stuart Hall's "hybridity". These notions demarcate a leap forward in the conception of diasporas, no longer binding unsurmountable bipolar cultural spaces but tenable middle grounds for blending in society (Farshid, 2013:2-3). With this aim in mind, the third space is in Bhabha's words but an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" that "opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (1994:4). The problem arises, out of this stranglehold, in the postcolonial encounter of the ideological "I" stance against an unrecognizable character, a ghostly archetype of beliefs, as Bhabha resolves: "Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition" (1994:114).

Notwithstanding, there are some inaccuracies to buckle down on the subject. On the one hand, Bhabha's denomination of "hybridity" leaves a trail of the colonial past in an overly reliant effort to forget, crystallizing clichés and a numbness to create a meaningful future. His fixed depiction of the world flows matches the Appadurai conception of "scapes", such as the "ethnoscape", the "technoscape", the "financescape", the "ideoscape" and the "mediascape" "in the sense of geographical *loci*, spaces with certain practices" (Král, 2007:2-3) but it nonetheless deviates from the present in resorting to "The paradigm of the snowglobe", as Král explains, which are, places that have lost their substance, their fixed notions at the expense of liquidity, on the basis of Bauman's studies upon the flexible nature of cultures (3).

On the other hand, a more critical and suitable term for the new peaceful community dimension is that of transnationalism (Kivisto, 2001; Portes *et al.*, 1999; Vertovec, 2001) and "cosmopolitanism" (Appiah, 2006), because these concepts do

not assert a completely cloistered notion of diasporic subjects but rather confirm a present-day communication between the citizens of a given country and overseas ethnic communities. On this issue, Arjun Appadurai, Homi K. Bhabha, and Stuart Hall display an optimistic attitude towards diaspora, glossing over other contentions framing diaspora as a negative phenomenon. Bauman explains the turn of the screw: "the challenge of modernity was to define identity as something bounded, the challenge of post-modernity was to keep the options open" (qtd. in Král, 2007:11).

The reasons underlying the latest sweeping changes in late capitalism may be accountable for this process. Practically, because of the "timespace compression" of modern times, a rise in hypermobility and the recent advancements in technologies for communicating, Kivisto reckons from previous findings (2001:566). Theoretically, because the ensuing openness of (post-) modernity asserts the denationalization and decentralization of politic-economic architectures of dominance under the influx of globalization. However, 'transnational processes are anchored in and span two or more nation-states' and thus are not 'denationalized', as Faist puts it (2000:210-1), but rather ossified as networks of power from whence money remittances are transacted (Kivisto, 2001). Faist also maintains that transnationalism "supplements the canonical concepts of assimilation and ethnic pluralism" (qtd. in Kivisto, 2001: 565).

Therefore, transnationalism theory has been widely regarded as either a subset of assimilation theory or a complementary counterpart. These economic relationships enhance the positive relation between two nation-states. Kivisto undertakes an inspiring outline of the relatively new concept of transnationalism, which tentatively applies to the latest notion of the space-time continuum in alignment with labour migrants; he does such research taking from Vertovec's findings scrutinizing the definitions for such a term:

- (1) as a social morphology focused on a new border spanning social formation;
- (2) as diasporic consciousness;
- (3) as a mode of cultural reproduction variously identified as syncretism, creolization, bricolage, cultural translation, and hybridity;

- (4) as an avenue of capital for transnational corporations and in a smaller but significant way in the form of remittances sent by immigrants to family and friends in their homelands;
- (5) as a site of political engagement, both in terms of homeland politics and the politics of homeland governments vis-à-vis their émigré communities, and in terms of the expanded role of international non-governmental organizations and
- (6) as a reconfiguration of the notion of place from an emphasis on the local to the translocal. (Kivisto, 2001:550)

It seems interesting that Vertovec underscores in the third point that the umbrella term transnationalism encompasses other names, which, ultimately, seclude the fuzziness of the concept. Moreover, it explains the openness of our times whereby the local, let us say an Indian snack, becomes translocal as a fetish or superior product in other countries and the other way round. This overt interconnectedness allows cultural remittances and more possibilities for immigrants, there counting with multifaceted options for adapting into a new land and maintaining a constant communication with their native land. Defining a homeland, then, is a matter of choice. Nonetheless, the sense of belonging rises exponentially when citizenship turns into a higher active participation in different countries and multiple identities. That transnational immigrants are almost indifferent to the loss of their roots in a so-called “dominant host-nation” (Alfonso-Forero, 2007:2), would be the conclusion drawn out of this new paradigm. As a result, we may draw the picture of cultures and nations as several bubbles colliding, overrunning and intermingling into the cultural milieu, smearing a canvas where ethnic groups do not only abide by surface power and knowledge dyads, or economy, but based on other subtle motivations.

2.d. Cultural motivations

From a culture ideology perspective, it has been also suggested that South Asian diaspora resists many of the pervading myths on American history, be it the “melting-pot myth” (Alfonso-Forero, 2007), or the American Dream itself (Friedman, 2008).

Although integration is at the core of citizenship, the desirable scenario does not only take shape with the prerogative of coexistence and an almost mandatory assimilation, but rather as a ground that respects divergence in the likeness of a Salad Bowl. Furthermore, the American dream myth has been challenged as a *non sequitur* in Asian American literature, Wong exposes that “Non-European, non-Christian immigrant autobiographies are “indifferent” to the concept of a “dream” that is saturated with Christian symbolism of seeking and finding Eden.” (qtd. in Friedman, 2008:112).

No remnants of a Christian's New Jerusalem, or Puritan beliefs about a “city upon the hill” underpinning South Asian migrants are to drive them ashore. Leaving their countries, writing the narrative of wandering and a new ascription to modern global diaspora rather constitute the delineation of such phenomenon. In fact, South Asian migrants are closer to Appadurai's notion of simulacrum as he articulates in *Modernity at Large* that stirs them into earning more money wherever immigrants have the feeling of a greater economic juncture: “More people than ever before seem to imagine routinely the possibility that they or their children will live and work in places other than where they were born: this is the well-spring of the increased rates of migration at every level of social, national, and global life” (Appadurai 1996:6).

The new theoretical paradigm has surmounted the ideology of the melting pot that misguided the conceptualization of assimilation theory. Transnationalism has hereby opened the gates for ethnic groups that maintain networks of communication despite the distance and nation borders. Král describes the inherent paradox of these ties saying that “It is like an umbilical cord, and its reassuring presence makes the experience of immigration less traumatic at first. But, at the same time, this persistent bond jeopardizes the integration of immigrants by reducing their need to fit in” (2007:7). Owing to this leniency, postcolonial studies does not presuppose a complete erasure or assimilation of culture in favour of assimilation, but rather recognizes diversity under one umbrella. Elizabeth Lozano speaks of it as a “bouillaibaisse”:

The “melting pot” is not an adequate metaphor for a country which is comprised of a multiplicity of cultural backgrounds... [We might better think of the United

States in terms of a “cultural bouillabaisse” in which all the ingredients conserve their unique flavor, while also transforming and being transformed by the adjacent textures and scents. (qtd. in Osborn *et al.*, 2014:32)

Nevertheless, a compelling reason to tie their roots to the new country is that of having children. Tethered by the constraints of alienation and the almost loss of one's identity, of one's root, a child embodies the allegory of what Lee Edelman denominates “reproductive futurism” (Song, 2007:347), a germinal certainty that one's culture will remain unscathed and will further contribute to the “ethnic bildungsroman” of a model minority threatened by an underdeveloped representation. If taken as a rule the symbolic power of a reliable romantic partner ascertains a normative role in the dominant discourse, in direct opposition to the queer resignation of having children, similarly, an immigrant that does not preserve its own ethos, engages into a self-acculturation campaign. Thus, the ambivalence of this ethnic duty poses an emotional dilemma in the immigrant leading to the fulfillment of its cultural identity. For immigrants, it is either conniving to its “shared culture” or to “a collective true self” (Hall, 1990:223) and that is where *The Namesake* becomes relevant in taking a firm stance about imaginary identifications and a double positioning of cultures. In knowing the other and underwriting its unsettling reflection, we endorse the uniqueness of our selves, born at a unique medium which could not be otherwise. Consequently, the politics of identity stands alone as a politic of difference, in Derridean terms, as one that spots a “difference” between subjects and that postpones the capture of meaning, a fated deferred meaning (Hall, 1990:4-5). However, the challenge to be met is the negotiation with the sense of otherness, transmuting the dual difference into a manifold reality of differences (Heinze, 2007:9-10).

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* eludes some of the binary distinctions between us and them, between Americans and Indians, between the homely and the uncanny, as far as it tells that the Ganguli family boasts a cosmopolitan role, because of their wealth and a somewhat tolerant environment. Nevertheless, some differences cannot be closed at all, as we will see in some passages of the novel and in her first short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, but they present overall a fascinating insight into the narrative of displacement, occupying the niche of ethnic

representation. Even if this type of writing is not canonical yet, the celebration of diversity will help us to decode, tear down and reconstruct minority literature as a part of the dominant discourse following the “demands for institutionalized multiculturalism, [a] tokenistic pluralism” (Bhalla, 2012:123). Oddly enough, treating cultures from a distance leads to the levity of generalizing, yet it feels even more frenzy to assert a *sui generis* layout of cultures, Said explains in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). There is no gainsaying in such assumption, however, Bandyopadhyay identifies the pragmatic use of cultures held by Matthew Arnold in the 1860s, as one that “palliates, if it does not altogether neutralize, the ravages of a modern, aggressive, mercantile and brutalizing urban experience” (2010:98).

2.e. Politics of Identity

The new age of multiculturalism reflects the capitalist-oriented openness of what seems a higher civilization eminently dotted with hypermobility, high accessibility, and proficient tools for communicating. Appiah (2006) writes on the positive consequences of “cosmopolitanism” and on the global changes of capitalism, contributing to an unimpaired “cross contamination” of cultures that allows a nonviolent “invasion” by Western products (Friedman, 2008:118).

On the one hand, this extended period bereft of violence has bred a “cult of ethnicity”, hinted previously by Arthur Schlesinger (Friedman, 2008; Song, 2007). One that positively discriminates the model minority as agents of change and that nudges multiculturalism to the public *carnavalesque* merchandising of cultures, unconvincingly upholding indelible stereotypes without the aim of driving a wedge issue, but certainly promoting an insidious, unspoken covenant with past certainties. Rajan exemplifies this “benevolent inclusion” out of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, where it says that “in North America, South Asians represent rationality and spirituality – expected to mediate at dawn, hack code all day, and cook curry at dinner” (2006:124). In the same way, these values apply to the code of conduct that has been already commented in the previous section, values that refer to the apparent “taste for entrepreneurship of the Asian community” that sustains their “model minority discourse”, a privileged positioning in spite of other contesting ethnicities (Král, 2013).

On the other hand, this cult has given rise to a certain logophobia in biopolitics, the fear of labelling and unfolding the debris of forlorn violent landmarks in US history. Foucault comments about it:

There is undoubtedly in our society, and I would not be surprised to see it in others, though taking different forms and modes, a profound logophobia, a sort of dumb fear of these events, of this mass of spoken things, of everything that could possibly be violence, discontinuous, querulous, disordered even and perilous in it, of the incessant, disorderly buzzing of discourse. (qtd. in Song, 2007:362)

Spotting thus a dissonant word, a faulty behavior, an “anthropological curiosity” (Song, 2007:350) may be tantamount to defiling the safe space, the sacredness, the ethic of another culture, it being an anathema issue when considering that capitalism goes wholly consonantly along with the welfare of nations and that it “relies on, the hypermobility...the dominance of biopolitics its intertwining with geopolitics” (346) to gather capital and power. The downside of such an international agreement is perhaps an intractable loss of cultures submerging to hegemonic powers.

All in all, the main aim of multiculturalism, Macwan underwrites, is to promote “the co-existence of a number of different culture. For it does not prescribe homogenization and conformity directly. It also does not encourage openly different ethnic religious, lingual or racial constituents” (2014:48). Much better, multiculturalism vindicates the chutnification of cultures, a success story as that of the Banyan tree myth, which establishes its roots in several soils (Bhatt, 2009:1), lodging and dislodging itself at will not exclusively as a state-of-the-art political bickering, but as a sprouting collective desire to belong together.

Unit 3 *The Namesake*. Lahiri's first foray into the novel

3.a. Introduction to *The Namesake*

The Namesake tells the story of the Gangulis, a Indian Bengali family that sets off in search of a better life in the US. The father, Ashoke, was once traumatized by a train accident in India that got his leg injured, however, he made it, and got rescued from the shambles thanks to the remaining sheets of paper of his favourite book on the short stories by Nikolai Gogol. After the accident, he and Ashima got married and went overseas so that Ashoke could achieve a tenure position at the MIT. When they have their first child, they need to name him following a Bengali custom, with a domestic, and a profesional name, but their hopes of receiving a mandatory letter from Ashima's grandmother with a suitable name comes to naught, and out of the blue, Ashoke decides to name him after his favourite author, Nikolai Gogol, in an attempt to pay homage to the writer who saved him in the accident.

As times goes by, young Gogol starts to develop an aversion to his name, because it holds back his growth as a self-conscious teen, and because it does not represent him. Besides, after knowing the miserable life of the Russian writer, Gogol Ganguli matches his failures with the Indian and lousy identity enacted by his troublesome name and soon he becomes Nikhil, a *doppelgänger* that speaks for his American side, for his potential for success.

As children of second-generation immigrants, Gogol and his younger sister Sonia neglect their family values, their visits to India and the meetings with compatriots in American soil. Notwithstanding, while for Sonia this behavior is

temporary and she demonstrates a fluid sense of agency with her couplet name Sonali/Sonia, for Gogol this conflict buoys up ever since, keeping him unmoored from his heritage. Despite his parent's efforts to persuade him and link him with his Bengali roots, Gogol's hyphenated life leads him to diverse romantic partners, there being Maxine the pivotal point where Gogol strives to anchor meaning, taking delight in American scapes like the Ratliffs' house, or in cities where his family do not set foot.

On the wake of such comings and goings, Ashoke reveals to Gogol the true story behind his name, the outstanding importance of "The Overcoat" he had given unto him as a present, the fateful train accident that marked him forever and how his birth had changed his life for the better, however, Gogol remains somewhat unstirred. Later, what really moves Gogol is his father's death. This event triggers a recognition of his spoiled years forsaking his family and thus, he resumes his Bengali customs and gets highly involved in the funeral, further realizing that he and Maxine do not belong together, for she only knows his American side. After some time, Ashima, compels Gogol to start dating another Bengali called Moushumi.

In their meetings, their familiarity brings them together and they marry shortly after. The couple does nonetheless retain plenty of customs alien to their Bengali upbringing, here being Gogol now the one who pledges Indianness, and Moushumi the one in oversighting her roots in favor of a cosmopolitan French highbrow identity. Gradually, time wears out their relationship, illustrating that their ethnicity was not enough to bind them, since Moushumi cheats with another man. Unable to overcome the crisis, Gogol comes home again, noticing how his mother is moving to India, how his sister has adapted successfully, how the ghostly presence of his father calls him to read the book for once and yet, indeed there will be time to start from scratch with the aid of experience, paying homage both to his Indian roots and to his American side, tentatively fulfilling the prophecy of his namesake.

3.b. Geography of Identity and self-representation

In this section I shall deliver an account on the conception of hybrid spaces and its role in Lahiri's fiction, since it connects symbolically with the rethoric of wandering in

identity formation. Far understood as real places where certain social practices are held, their most distinctive quality is that they are never devoid of connotative meaning. Excluding thus geographical places as such, the issue at hand is to gauge how these places function *per se*, socially-bound, in a way that affects the characters and the development of the narrative depending upon the practices involved. I reckon thus, the previous findings of J. Clifford, Bhabha's third space, Appiah cosmopolitanism, Foucault *Heterotopias* and other pertinent articles for this section. Faist considers a convincing definition to these sites: "Space is thus different from place in that it encompasses or spans various territorial locations. It includes two or more places. Space has a social meaning that extends beyond simple territoriality; only with concrete social or symbolic ties does it gain meaning for potential migrants" (2000:45–46).

Furthermore, as previously highlighted, the immigrant dwells in a liminal position between two mental spaces, something that for the first generation entails a willing disposition and for the second generation a "circuitous logic of inheritance and the obliqueness of identity", resolves out of this tension (Munos, 2008: 108). Considering that the self imbibes from disparate sources of culture, the positioning of the subject seems itself unlimited, albeit for the environment and the accidental space, culture and identity inherited. Not without an inner negotiation, the "vacuum upbringing" where the subject stands is what Vijay Mishra describes as the "struggle to occupy the space of the hyphen, the problematic situating of the self as simultaneously belonging here and there" (qtd. in Ridda, 2011:1). The strife for self-definition impinges upon the distinction between external factors assumed as identity, and intrinsic factors that account for a subjective self-representation.

More than ever, this is the time of spaces, of highly inflected social customs in multifaceted environments that allow the concurrence of diverse ethos at a limited intersection. Clifford presents its social component ascertaining that "an urban neighbourhood, for example, may be laid out physically according to a street plan. But it is not a space until it is practiced by people's active occupation, their movements through and around it" (qtd. in Lahiri, 2008:2).

The flexible nature of spaces allows the juxtaposition of multiple identities,

affiliations and overseas relationships, which have been classified as kinship groups with remittances, transnational circuits that require some minor trading at the least, and transnational communities that join together in a collective effort of yearning (Faist, 2000:202-10). However, transnational social spaces consist of “the geometrical or geographical space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions” (97), an admonition that blurs the panoptic certainty that concrete and abstract practices are enacted under surveillance, under the divide of being accepted or denied.

An interesting point to ponder for the literary analysis is that of Foucauldian heterotopias, since it illustrates the uncanny presence of places that suggest a different reflection of reality. If an American household retains Indian customs, it is the case of a “heterotopia of compensation” (1986:8), a cultural reproduction that challenges the second space, the adopted one, with an uncanny reflection of the native land, shaping thus an illusory third space.

For Natalie Friedman this goes in alignment with the rhetoric of wandering and the recognition of home, in a dialectic journey of re-creating India and keeping in touch with a “fallacious *desh*”, of reframing each place, each group affiliation and gaining agency (2008:115). Not surprisingly, an initial entry depends on the befriending of co-nationals so that the space becomes familiar and meaningful. This aching compulsion to find people who are familiar accounts for the Gangulis holding parties with other Bengalis, meeting them regularly, as it occurs in *The Namesake*, and also sprawls over in one of Lahiri’s most well-known stories, “When Mr. Pirzada came to dine”. In this sense, it has been suggested that families are:

A complex structure consisting of an interdependent group of individuals who (a) have a shared sense of history, (b) experience some degree of emotional bonding, and (c) devise strategies for meeting the needs of individual family members and the group as a whole. (qtd. in Bahri, 2013:n.p).

Robin Cohen matches this dependence on previous links to make a start, claiming that “a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background” (qtd. in Bharwani, 2010:141). Insofar

immigrants maintain transnational networks, their homeland continues to be present, somehow. Against the impossibility of utopias, heterotopias do exist as refractory illusions whereby our desires and social practices are bent, spurred and distorted, abridging the gap between the real and the conceivable, through an appreciation of the Other. For instance, when in *The Namesake* Gogol's visit to the cemetery aids him to connect symbolically to the first Pilgrims of the country, not in terms of ethnicity or conflicted identities, but as individuals with extravagant names like him. The heterotopia brings his singularity to his notice:

For reasons he cannot explain or necessarily understand, these ancient Puritan spirits, these very first immigrants to America, these bearers of unthinkable, obsolete names, have spoken to him, so much so that in spite of his mother's disgust he refuses to throw the rubbings away. (Lahiri, 2004:71)

In the case of Gogol, his self-representation does not befit his due identity. Thus, the new land becomes a space of ethnic resistance where the Hindu Bengali custom of naming cannot be fulfilled as their grandparent's letter gets lost in transit, and registering two names is not feasible, the American bureaucracy forces the Gangulis to turn his pet name into a good name. The "fatal intersection of time with space" (Foucault, 1985:1) represents a pivotal point in the identity formation of Gogol in *The Namesake*. It is indeed his self-consciousness what stands out and crystallizes his irksome overt readiness to feeling excluded. Contrariwise, Gogol's parents make a sane investment in their diaspora, first acquiring a normative house where to belong, and "This is a small patch of America to which they lay claim" (Lahiri, 2004:51). Moreover, Ashoke's tenure confirms his social accepted role, "with his name etched onto a strip of black plastic by the door" (48). Accordingly, Bahri (2013:n.p) interestingly notes "Engels' contention that the family develops in conjunction with private property and the need to establish a clear line of inheritance". Such a purchase confirms both a legal and an allegorical affiliation with the US.

Having grown up, Gogol dovetails the inscription at the mail post saying "GANGREEN" (67) as a mark of exclusion, especially after reckoning that his accent and behavior is more akin to that of Americans than his parents, "For by now he is

aware, in stores, of cashiers smirking at his parents' accents, and of salesmen who prefer to direct their conversation to Gogol, as though his parents were either incompetent or deaf. But his father is unaffected at such moments..." (67-8). In this sense, Indian customs become an intergenerational hotbed for discontent, for Gogol and Sonia prefer to take up the American life, "Celebrate Christmas than doing pujas to Durga and Saraswati, prefer to enroll in ballet classes and play softball instead of reading "(66).

When these kids feel pampered with a great deal of entertainment, coming naturally as Americans, it is not without great rebuff that they must study "handouts written in English about the Bengali Renaissance, and the revolutionary exploits of Subhash Chandra Bose" (66), have Bengali parties every week, go back to India or learn fastidious names:

There are endless names Gogol and Sonia must remember to say, not aunt this and uncle that but terms far more specific: *mashi* and *pishi*, *mama* and *maima*, *kaku* and *jethu*, to signify whether they are related on their mother's or father's side, by marriage or by blood. (81)

Hence, Gogol and Sonia will play a crucial role in redefining the domestic space and transmuting it into a third space, one where Thanksgiving is changed, one where the departure to India fails to promise a source of inspiration, because "Gogol's sister has an allergic reaction to jackfruit; someone is stabbed in a compartment of their train; and after their return to Calcutta, Gogol and his sister become ill with a stomach ailment (85-6)". They enact a touristy confusion over India and would rather "trade in the Taj Mahal for the relief he finds when he returns home to his cupboards filled with familiar labels: Skippy, Hood, Bumble Bee, Land O'Lakes (87).

Tellingly, for Himadri Lahiri (2008) a home is the place for the "ethos of sancted practice", a place for replicating any custom that evokes their Indian heritage and that invests in its preservation. This being a commonplace for intergenerational tensions in *The Namesake* when swaying from the domestic Hindu domain to the American outside world, the treatment of spaces in Lahiri's fiction is not only undergirded by a symbolic concurrence of items like food, clothes or customs, but

also shaped through the rebelliousness of the second generation, adding a multidimensional agency dealing with the journey motif. However, while Sonia presents a more fluid understanding of cultures, Gogol will remain stagnant in his *hamartia*, encapsulating his rigid identity over a self-effacing position, the one of having a different name, a different life.

3.c. Gogol and the journey motif

The duplicity of names suggests a pet name, a *daknam*, for relatives and close ones, and a proper name, a *bhalonam*, for the professional life outdoors. Since “Every pet name is paired with a good name, a *bhalonam*, for identification in the outside world. Consequently, good names appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories, and in all other public places” (Lahiri, 2004:26), this moment will exact the namesake trope through the novel, as Ashoke decides to pay tribute to his favourite author, the one who happened to save him from the train accident, Nikolai Gogol. Moreover, the symbolic identification with the Russian writer and his story “The overcoat” underwrites the process of growing up being accustomed to one’s identity and self-representation, therefore he claims that “We all came out of Gogol’s overcoat” (Lahiri, 2004:78), the Dostoyevskyan remark for appreciation of Nikolai’s work, and why he decides not to stand out and tell him his secret, so that Gogol finds out answers by himself.

However, the act of naming is never self-motivated, but rather imposed and inextricably bound to parental desires. This renders ultimately “the violence inherent in the act of naming” as Derrida illustrates in *De la Grammatologie*, a burdensome fate that crystallizes the identity of a person before his self has been formed (qtd. in Král, 2013:n.p). The name of Gogol would not be controversial, if it did not eschew the symbolic hierarchy of the US or India, but conversely, it harks back to an elusive heritage which does not feel his own: “For by now, he’s come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constandy to explain. He hates that his IMDS Working Paper Series name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that is neither Indian nor American but full of all things Russians” (Lahiri, 2004:75-6)

Certainly, Král (2013) emphasizes it as an “epistemic as well as performative [violence], in the sense that it turns otherness into a pathology” and turns the *heimlich* into a visible mark of the uncanny, of what should not have been revealed. When Gogol is five years old, he is “afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn’t know. Who doesn’t know him” (Lahiri, 2004:56) and so he will nonetheless undergo a faltering symbolic relation to find peace in his self-representation ever since, “changing names rather than places” (Král, 2007:n.p). Even though “individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared” (Lahiri, 2004: 28), they bestow a self-definition under one parental aegis, however, Gogol cannot look up to the Russian writer because of his wretchedness, “Gogol’s life was a steady decline into madness...he was reputed to be hypochondriac and a deeply paranoid, frustrated man” (91).

Shariff (2008, 2010) identifies his crisis of filiation owing to Lacan’s theory of forename and family name and the duly regard of Žižek’s interpretation. Accordingly, she claims that his crisis acts as *mise-en-abyme* for setting a certain symbolic order and releasing the tensions between his I (O) ego-ideal and also with his i (o) ideal ego. While the former stands for the symbolic identification of the family name, the paternal authority whereby the world takes shapes preceding the subject, the latter ideal ego comprises the imaginary identification of the subject in its first name. Then, “i(o) is always already subordinated to I(O); it is that which dominates and determines the image, the imaginary form in which we appear to ourselves likeable” (qtd. in Shariff, 2008:n.p). The imaginary point of identification constructed in the subject seems to connect the primitive sense of self with reality, always reflecting the evolution through the knowledge of the Other.

In changing his name from Gogol to Nikhil, he does not only adopt a name that reflects his Americanness just the same as his peers, thus tracing his desirable imaginary representation, but rejects the given nickname Gogol so that “it’s easier to ignore his parents, to tune out their concerns and pleas” (Lahiri, 2004:91). This overstrained rant to become Nikhil seems a case of a crisis heterotopia, whereby he comes across the uncanny reflection of behaving without self-consciousness, sustaining thus his “jouissance, his kernel of enjoyment” for making his fantasies true (Shariff, 2010:12). This paradigm shift seems enticing enough to keep him going out

of his comfort zone, for “it hadn’t been Gogol who kissed Kim. Gogol had nothing to do with it” (Lahiri, 2004:96)

Notwithstanding, one of the most remarkable comments about Gogol’s travel trope is that of Heinze, (2007) elucidating the ghostly resemblance in Gogol’s steps with the story of “The Overcoat” and the phantom Akaky Akakievich, which is “lost in transit” (n.p). The attested contention of such a dialectic journey goes through different stages in “The Overcoat” and in *The Namesake*: first, resisting a fixed identity after acknowledging his “singularity”, second, “donning an overcoat” with his new name, third, becoming “the doppelgänger” when his Nikhil identity does not match the representation of his self, endorsed by his acquaintances, fourth, when this transfers into the “namelessness” before Moushumi, and last but not least, with the final “arrivals and departures” of Gogol coming into terms with his heritage and learning that his identity is not a binary solipsism, but a steady negotiation with his two cultures and the chance to create a third space that acutely represents him (Heinze, 2007).

There is a yawning gap between generations and their methods to anchor their hyphenated states into the makeshift homeland and find comfort. Gogol’s movements to and fro, illustrate his inner states. In a conscious effort to change his overcoat persona, Gogol frequents places like Yale and New haven to escape from his Indian background. Visiting the Taj Mahal with his family gave Gogol a sense of purpose studying architecture and defying the paternal authority too. However, Gogol comes to endorse the nagging confusion of the second generation, and paradoxically, he does not countenance his ethos or his telos:

One day he attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English. He feels obligated to attend; one of the presenters of the panel, Amit, is a distant cousin who lives in Bombay, whom Gogol has never met. His mother has asked him to greet Amit on her behalf. Gogol is bored by the panelists, who keep referring to something called *marginality* [my emphasis], as if it were some sort of medical condition [...] “Teleologically speaking, ABCDs are unable to answer the question ‘Where are you from?’ the sociologist on the panel declares. Gogol has never heard the term ABCD. He eventually gathers that it stands for “American-born confused deshi.” In other words, him [...] all their friends always

refer to India simply as *desh*. But Gogol never thinks of India as *desh*. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India. (Lahiri, 2004:118)

The disconnection with his roots is stark, to the point that it is not without disaffection that he considers such event a nonsensical one. Similarly, he will further proceed with his life glossing over “The Overcoat”, and his family opposition to his new name or girlfriend.

In adopting this name and unleashing his frustration he becomes his American self and ironically resembles Akaky Akakievich in Gogol’s story, but “He doesn’t feel like Nikhil. Not yet.... But after 18 years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feel scant, inconsequential” (105). Off he will set in search of a safe space where his Nikhil mask feels convincing and surrounds him with pleasures, because “He cannot imagine being with her in a house where he is still Gogol” (114). And yet, he dates Ruth, an “accomplishment” (116), an incidental first dating with seems a momentous time for Ashoke and Ashima to foreshadow the dire consequences of doing so, “They’ve even gone so far as to point out examples of Bengali men they know who’ve married Americans, marriages that have ended in divorce” (117).

Later, his father displays a self-effacing attitude revealing the story behind “The Overcoat” and his namesake, to make him connect again within the family hierarchical symbolic order:

Gogol listens, stunned, his eyes fixed on his father’s profile. Though there are inches between them, for an instant his father is a stranger, a man who has kept a secret, has survived a tragedy, a man whose past he does not fully know. [...] Against instinct he tries to imagine life without his father, a world in which his father does not exist. (123)

Yet, his cosmopolitan routes and overcoat identity have tied him up to Maxine, arguably, a WASP (Caesar, 2007; Bhatt, 2009), who forestalls ethnic differences with a link from a middle to an upper-class position. This staid link is further commented by Bhalla as a relation of power whereby Gogol increases his belonging:

Gogol’s ivy-league educational privilege, and his desire to leverage his cultural capital to attain a higher social class...uncritically depicted South Asian

aspirations for upward class mobility, celebrated an unexamined Indo-chic ethos, and encouraged collusion with the model-minority myth. (2012:110)

The more that Gogol gets involved with the Ratliffs, the more that he neglects his family, with his telephone conversations going on the wane and a non-fulfilled visit home at Christmas. Gogol "is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own" (Lahiri, 2004:141), and still he revels in such a crisis heterotopia, living temporarily what he had always desired:

The family seems to possess every piece of the landscape, not only the house itself but every tree and blade of grass. Nothing is locked, not the main house, or the cabin that he and Maxine sleep in. Anyone could walk in. He thinks of the alarm system now installed in his parents' house, wonders why they cannot relax about their physical surroundings in the same way. The Ratliffs own the moon that floats over the lake, and the sun and the clouds. (154-5)

Gogol feels envious of Maxine's material world and her blatant belonging, not only geophysical but psychological, supported by a long tradition of ownership and symbolic identification which as Munos questions, does not count with an "identity-as-difference" heterotopia mirroring to provoke a denial of her family, but rather perpetuates a "reification in the conformity to pre-existing models" (2008:113):

[...] this is a place that will always be here for her. It makes it easy to imagine her past, and her future, to picture her growing old. He sees her with streaks of gray in her hair, her face still beautiful, her long body slightly widened and slack, sitting on a beach chair with a floppy hat on her head. He sees her returning here grieving, to bury her parents, teaching her children to swim in the lake, leading them with two hands into the water, showing them how to dive cleanly off the edge of the dock. (Lahiri, 2004:156)

As time goes by, the farcical stay of Gogol cannot equate the stale privileged conformity of Maxine, for "Now that it is just the two of them it seems to him," Lahiri writes, "more than ever, that they are living together. And yet for some reason it is dependence, not adulthood, he feels" (142). Maxine's parents bring about the topic of India to establish a common ground which fails to connect the Ratliffs with Gogol: "Eventually the talk turns to India. Gerald asks questions about the recent rise of

Hindu fundamentalism; a topic Gogol knows little about.” (134). In addition, a friend of the Ratliffs called Pamela also assumes that Gogol is entirely Indian because of his appearance and believes that he must be luckily immune to diseases for having lived in India, “‘But you’re Indian,’ Pamela says, frowning. ‘I’d think the climate wouldn’t affect you, given your heritage’” (157).

These were signs of the Ratliffs’ circle foreshadowing Gogol’s doomed relationship with Maxine. If they were to know each other’s more, or better said, if Gogol was to know himself better and truly disclosed himself achieving a post-liminal identity crisis position. For it is precisely Ashoke’s death the moment of *anagnorisis* then, when Gogol returns home to make amendments with his roots, in the likeness of the prodigal ethnic son (Bhalla, 2012:110). Should Gogol happen to maintain his infatuation with Maxine, he would perhaps reckon that “mixed marriages evolve from a defiance of paternal authority stance into a return-to-tradition position once feelings and love fade away”, as Cantizano and Ibáñez (2010:28) underwrite.

They loved each other, but Gogol soon exerts his Bengali customs in the funeral and breaks up with Maxine, in a remorseful attempt to clean the slate and pay homage to his father. “He doesn’t want to be with someone who barely knew his father, who’s met him only once” (Lahiri, 2004:170), someone that wears black over a Bengali rite that demands white colours. Later, glowing in despair, Gogol visits his father’s apartment and revolves around his belongings “he does not want to inhabit an anonymous room. As long as he is here, he doesn’t want to leave his father’s apartment empty” (177).

From now on, he will be torn apart from his loss and would happen to acquiesce, as Ashima compelled him, to try dating Moushumi. His job will not be as promising as expected and, after a failed marriage, an emotional breakdown buoys up in response to losing the track, in both an awareness of his parent’s bravery, maintenance of transnational links, and connectedness to the place:

He wonders how his parents had done it, leaving their respective families behind, seeing them so seldom, dwelling unconnected, in a perpetual state of expectation, of longing. All those trips to Calcutta he’d once resented — how could they have been enough?...Gogol knows now that his parents had lived

their lives in America in spite of what was missing, with a stamina he fears he does not possess himself. (281)

He makes a comparison of his attitude with that of his parents and dreads lacking such power. Reassessing his bond with his family helps him notice their sheer heroism, that they had spare no expense in his education, that they had been "Faithful to the rules of Christmas" (285), that they had displaced themselves in favor of his upbringing, but his whiny banality had prevented him from them, "to draw him home, to make this train journey, again and again" (281). Hence, the journey motif connects symbolically with the trope of paternal negation and "the centrality of [male-male or father-son] trope as the primary trope in imagining diaspora, [which] invariably displaces and elides female diasporic subjects" (qtd. in Bahmanpour, 2010:44). However, *The Namesake* does take the spirit of place to a level that recognizes the contingencies of diaspora in identity formation, as a consensual reality that brings, where applicable, individuals together, because "In so many ways, his family's life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended, one incident begetting another" (287).

Gogol comes clear withal, and decides to open the book his father had given him, taking heed to a new awareness of his diasporic condition that enables him to connect emotionally with the symbolic order. It is suggested that, from now on, he will cease to reject his heritage and that he evolves as a so-called third generation individual who wishes to relive the past to make it meaningful at present. Arguably, he will start to appreciate his double heritage and exert a more fluid identity, like his sister Sonia, aiming to lay claim over his namesake.

3.d. Women, self-effacement and agency

I would like to hereby put an emphasis on the methods employed by Jhumpa Lahiri's characters to manifest their distress and exert their agency. First, I shall have a close eye on the role of women in *The Namesake* and then in the following section, proceed examining some relations falling under the scope of estrangement, be it for identity and self-representation reasons or a faulty communication in *Interpreter of Maladies*.

An engendered difference of asserting agency has been distinguished in the use of domestic space, pointing out that “ghar– the home [is] an inherently spiritual and female space” while “bāhir– the outside world [...] is inherently male and dominated by material pursuits” (Alfonso-Forero, 2007:853-4. Such statement reflects the dichotomy of Indian culture, which stands up to American practices and which for South Asian Diaspora has been somewhat transmuted and redefined. Alfonso- Forero insists on the difficulty of “relinquishing the tradition” at the expense of assimilation in convoluted issues like the traditional Indian role for women, because a feminist stance would not contemplate their marginal confinement or the inconsistent preservation of Indian culture from their part while males proceed with a natural assimilation process. Especially, if we consider women’s paramount role in ensuring the Third World sustainability of tradition, as Ridda explores in Gopinath’s essay “Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion” quoting that “women’s bodies, then, become crucial to nationalistic discourse in that they serve not only as the site of biological reproduction but as the very embodiment of a nostalgically evoked communal past and tradition” (qtd. In 2011:7) .

Endowed with such an allegorical investment, we can appreciate the same unhomeliness stemming from unmet expectations in characters like Ashima, Moushumi and as we shall see later in *Interpreter of Maladies*, with Mrs. Sen, Shoba, Boori Ma, Bibi Haldar and Mala. All of them women restricted to undertake the role of the subaltern, a self-effacing position that seeks to dislodge the fixed notion of Indian women preordained at home, at evoking the past whereas men can self-indulge with the present delight of an American life. The humility resulting from such a miscommunication should owe gratitude to the healing power of spaces and their ability to reverse situations and enhance personal agency. For Ashima, it is not until she gives birth to Gogol that she starts to realize of her expatriate condition, and the problems to cope with her role in an alienating space:

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner,

Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (Lahiri, 2004:49-50)

Only when she starts going outside with Gogol, she adopts a humanized condition and a normative role where to project her inner self and gradually pledge a normative role in society "she is repeatedly stopped on the street, and in the aisles of the supermarket, by perfect strangers, all Americans, suddenly taking notice of her, smiling, congratulating her for what she's done. They look curiously, appreciatively, into the pram. 'How old?' they ask. 'Boy or girl?' 'What's his name?'" (34). Albeit she does not tell her Bengali friends that Gogol dates a non-Bengali at first, she does not confront him, neither she opposes to his departure or stay with Maxine. Eventually, it is through the telephone that her presence is evoked to Gogol, but she will not smother him any further, not even after Ashoke's death, because she will be nonetheless fulfilling the prophecy of her name and "true to the meaning of her name, [Ashima] will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (275-6). She has taken her time to acknowledge her evolution as a transnational immigrant, sending Christmas cards, making telephone cards, going back to India every other year, driving like Western women, accepting her widowhood and an empty nest syndrome. However unexpectedly, her initial expatriate condition has faded away, for she feels that the USA is her home too:

She feels lonely suddenly, permanently alone ... she feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign.... For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she worked. She will miss throwing parties ... She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. (279)

Whether to assert a sense of entitlement over things, or keeping a distance from them depends on the level of agency of the subjects, and Ashima always preferred to grant their children's wishes despite her loneliness and self-interest, complying thus with the maternal role of bestowing a rich profusion of love. She has learned to occupy her own emotional space in the US, evoking home, changing some customs, finding a job and losing contact with her family to delineate a new

sense of belonging. Although her representation is not in the spotlight, *The Namesake* depicts the wisdom of the first generation and the confusion of the second.

Alternatively, Moushumi achieves an enduring refraining from her Bengali customs by building up her own third space, not as a hybrid intersection between the Bengali and American, but by claiming agency through French, its language, its culture, its cities. She designs a cosmopolite alternative that shatters her inherited values in favour of a new life with Graham:

Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture had been her refuge – she approached French unlike things American or Indian without guilt or misgiving or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever. Her four years of secret study had prepared her at the end of college, to escape as far as possible. (Lahiri, 2004:214)

Once that she breaks with Graham, she pursues an orgiastic release from expectation by irreverently committing a disavowal of identity over a crisis heterotopia, over a stage where she does not see herself tethered by her Bengali background, where she can unravel her fantasies abroad as if she was a French native:

With no hesitation, she had allowed men to seduce her in cafes, in parks, while she gazed at paintings in museums. She gave herself openly, completely, not caring about the consequences. [...] She allowed the men to buy her drinks, dinners, later to take her in taxis to their apartments, in neighborhoods she had not yet discovered on her own. [...] There were days she slept with one man after lunch, another after dinner. (215)

Brimming with confidence, though, her failed marriage arrangement with Graham leads her to the same mental emotional space of Gogol, aiming to fulfill “a collective, deep-seated desire – because they are both Bengali, everyone can let his hair down a bit” (233). Their familiarity seems uncanny, as they get confused for brothers at a bar and “share the same coloring, the straight eyebrows, the long slender bodies, the high cheekbones and dark hair” (203), and yet for once, their

ethnicity serves its purpose as a *locus standi*, as a point where to start again from scratch and hold onto, and “the fact that they are united in their resignation makes the consequences somewhat bearable” (219). Moreover, Gogol and Moushumi bring about a decision which does not come from them intrinsically, since it enacts a “mono-ethical marriage [...] a means to keep their tradition and roots in a Western context (Mukherjee, 2010:39). This familiar duty behooves to an intergenerational plight, where R. Field discerns that:

In *The Namesake*, marriage is a complicated manipulation between the traditional expectations of immigrant parents and the desires of the second generation...Lahiri...underscores how cultural similarities do not necessarily lead to personal compatibility, as this marriage crumbles by the end of the novel’ (173) ‘delicate balance between cultural prerogatives and personal agency (168) (qtd. in Bhalla, 2012:115)

In next to no time Moushumi attempts to restore her former life, detail by detail, which is no mean feat. One of Moushumi’s friends calls him accidentally Graham, hinting that Graham and Gogol akin, or that friends like Astrid and Donald may not tell the difference between both partners, “sometimes he has the feeling they still think she’s with Graham” (239). She has nonetheless renewed her vision of her heritage through Gogol, accepting his easiness with his new name, his vitality, accepting their marriage. Although notably, she will not change her surname to Ganguli once married, because she still wants to assert her agency in using her surname Mazoomdar, a blueprint of her academic life and disavowal of heritage.

Another day the topic of changing names is raised and Moushumi, unaware of Gogol’s desire to avoid bringing the subject, ostracizes Gogol emotionally revealing that “Nikhil changed his” name (243). Her circle of friends, ironically enough, are the only ones to catch the reference to the writer Nikolai Gogol, and yet Gogol feels abashed at the disclosure of his traumatic secret. Complications arise when their relationship turns stale:

And yet the familiarity that had once drawn her to him has begun to keep her at bay. Though she knows it’s not his fault, she can’t help but associate him, at times, with a sense of resignation, with the very life she had resisted, had

struggled so mightily to leave behind. He was not who she saw herself ending up with, he had never been that person. (250)

She hoards and blunt resentment that leads her to meet again Dimitri Desjardins, a past infatuation of her, a sneaky way out of her weary marriage. Mandatory silence, loss of agency, unfaithfulness follows, for Moushumi feels unable to demand a divorce, or speak her mind. Deep down, she feels a lurid kinship with Gogol, but she cannot help bottling down her romantic idealization of Dimitri and undertaking what an Indian would never do, given the solemn sacredness of marriage. When Gogol finds out about it “for the first time in his life, another man’s name upset him more than his own” (283), but it does not help him any better to find solace, because “they had both acted on the same impulse, that was their mistake. They had both sought comfort in each other, and in their shared world, perhaps for the sake of novelty, or out of the fear that that world was slowly dying” (284). Unlike any other character, she is a non-conformist and does not rely on whatever expectations put on her, for Moushumi represents thus a *rara avis*, who assumes a blunt schism with her loathing past and who illustrates her agency in pursuing this melancholic alternative stance against her symbolic order.

Unit 4 *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*

4.a. Lost in the hyphen between the *Self-Other*. “A Temporary Matter”, “Interpreter of Maladies”, “A Real Durwan”, “Sexy”, “Mrs. Sen’s”

Interpreter of Maladies (1999), Jhumpa Lahiri’s first foray into storytelling, has been regarded as a set of stories that contribute to a deeper understanding of diasporic life, marriages and human relationships as a “short story cycle” that sets the foundations of a suggested disaffection in the story of “A Temporary Matter” but closes triumphantly with “The Third and Final Continent” (Brada-Williams, 2004). She has also pinpointed the tension between “care and neglect” along the stories, endorsing a valuable appreciation of love weaved elegantly over subtle nuances and the symbolic relationship with objects. Hence, the liminal diasporic positioning of the characters generally tries to anchor meaning on deceptive signs leading to a *faux pas*, as we shall see in this section or rather makes headway in the light of successful adaptation, a greater sense of rapport, or agency, as illustrated in section 4.b. Indeed, the controversial decision to place “A Temporary Matter” as a story of self-assertion lies on the premise that Shoba’s departure demonstrates an unusual enactment of her role as Indian woman, while Shukumar’s reversal of roles also undergirds the influence of new values percolating through diaspora.

A story that tops the issue of spaces is “Interpreter of Maladies”. Here, an infelicitous communication occurs between a female tourist with her family and an Indian guide, as a postcolonial writing of the novel *A Passage to India* of E.M. Forster (Lewis, 2001). From an omniscient narrator viewpoint we reckon that Mr. Kapasi works as an Indian tour guide part-time and that he works as a translator of Gujarati at a doctor’s office. Full of contempt, he keeps a life with little passion and comes across

a tourist family who demand his services. "The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did" (Lahiri, 1999:43), they came from New Jersey to Kanarak in Orissa, to visit some temples and know the local culture, although their blatant triviality prevents them from connecting with the spirit of the place and its ethos. Their children say "monkeys" instead of "Hanuman" (47), as Mr. Kapasi points out, and we see a sense of hinted neglect in the Das family, for they do not do their best to help their children, "Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered about who should take Tina to the toilet [...] she did not hold the little girl's hand as they walked to the rest room" (43). They treated their children without interest or great authority, for they were self-absorbed in their matters: "They were all like siblings [...] Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves" (49).

However, we notice an uncanny reflection evoked at this place from part of Mrs Das, as a way of taking heed to this uncharted territory where to give vent to her frustration. The visit to the Sun Temple opens a heterotopia from whence Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi ponder a new personal chance to appease themselves. Tellingly, the temples boast an impressive range of ornaments dealing with Indian mythology and it also foreshadows "Nagamithunas, the half-human, half-serpentine couple" (57), a fatidic sexual encounter between distinct species. It all began from the eyes of Mr. Kapasi, getting gradually attached to the figure of Mrs. Das, "In the rearview mirror Mr. Kapasi watched as Mrs. Das emerged slowly from his bulky white Ambassador, dragging her shaved, largely bare legs across the back seat" (43), presenting thus a gradual infatuation for her. "He observed her. She wore a red-and-white-checkered skirt...a close-fitting blouse styled like a man's undershirt" (46) and these are only but futile daydreaming thoughts of an unhappy husband who once hoped to be "serving as an interpreter between nations" (59).

Nonetheless, Mr. Kapasi gets aroused by Mrs. Das when she looks at the bright side of his translator job, highlighting that he was as useful as the doctor and that it was "so romantic" (50). Mr. Kapasi falls head over heels on this red herring, and in his wishful thinking he plans their future conversation. The signs get more and more recurrent, and their conversation seems more engaging than before, since

"Mrs. Das had taken interest in him [...] ignoring her husband's requests that she pose for another picture, walking past her children as if they were strangers" (58). Fraught with eroticity, Mr. Kapasi believes in her conniving gestures, complying with the "East-meets-west technique" of the "Western Freud stereotype" (Rajan, 2006:130). This is so, because in a sense, it is not their ethnicity what brings them together, but the hyphenated condition of Mrs. Das what makes her both appealingly familiar and essentially exotic to Mr. Kapasi.

She asked for his address to share the pictures of the trip and gives Mr. Kapasi a "scrap of paper which she had hastily ripped from a page" (55). In a wild flight of fantasy, Mr. Kapasi reacts writing with utmost care. He lingers on the idea of prospective communication and attempting to stir into action, "Perhaps he would compliment her strawberry shirt, which he found irresistibly becoming. Perhaps [...] he would take her hand" (60). To bolster his flagging ego, Mr. Kapasi seems eager to maintain a relationship with her overseas, even if she departs and above all, despite his marriage. He was waiting for an unfettered impulse of her, confessing that her marriage was disastrous, or that she liked him. Shortly after, she tells him that Bobby is not from her husband Ral, but from a Punjabi friend she had an affair with some years ago. Mrs. Das confronts Mr. Kapasi in an ethical quandary, "I told you because of your talents...Say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy" (65), and hence, Mr. Kapasi chooses not to suggest anything at all. He circumvents her spoken demand, whether by his professionalism or by a self-effacing tactic to neglect his delusions and help her, what follows, is that he asks her if "is it really pain you feel Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (66). His approach does not condone, neither comes up against her secret. He "felt insulted that Mrs. Das should ask him to interpret her common, trivial secret" (66) and aimed to help her with great agency, but "he knew at the moment that he was not even important enough to be properly insulted" (66). It comes clear here, that the two of them had set unrealistic expectations on the other person, in an effort to tackle their maladies in a highly suggestive space. Mrs. Das' awkwardness goes into a standstill, when she notices that Bobby is being attacked by the monkeys and urges Mr. Kapasi to help him. The promise of future communication encapsulated in the "slip of paper with Mr. Kapasi address in it" (69) gets lost on the run, and Mr. Kapasi feels he would better recoil and leave the family

alone to avoid any major disruption.

While in “Interpreter of Maladies” there was an ambivalent desire to communicate resulting in failure, the story “Sexy” renders an account of a blatant fetishization of the *Other* through ethnic identification. Bahmanpour contends that it is “not always the immigrant *Other* who is victimized but also the native Self can fall prey to the process of Othering” (2010:49). Hence, an Indian Bengali called Dev and an American called Miranda come across each other, out of curiosity. The story begins with Miranda hearing a gossip from her Indian friend Laxmi about an adultery. After a casual encounter in a shop, Miranda glimpses that he is not wearing a ring, he springs into conversation with her, and they start dating in spite of Dev mentioning that he has a wife.

Their relation is wildly positive and revolves around spending time in dates and in bed. Both have a fair knowledge of the culture of the other, and they set different expectations on the relationship. “At first, Miranda thought it was a religion. But then he [Dev] pointed it out to her a place in India called Bengal, on a map printed in an issue of *The Economist*” (Lahiri, 1999:84). Sworn to secrecy, Miranda sees a flicker of despair when buying a Hot Mix at an Indian shop they tell her that it is “Too spicy for you” (99). To an extent, she eroticizes Dev for his appearance, accent, his scent, his manners, and the like. “Now, when she and Dev made love, Miranda closed her eyes and saw deserts and elephants, and marble pavilions floating in lakes beneath a full moon” (96). However off-putting for her expectations, Dev has a normative life with his wife and must efface the evidence of his adultery by pledging an alibi “At first Miranda and Dev spent every night together, almost. He explained that he couldn’t spend the whole night at her place, because his wife called every day at six in the morning from India, were it was four in the afternoon” (88).

The initial emphasis that Dev had put on the relationship was but a pretext to get laid. He had grown careless and has started to wear a tracksuit to manage his alibi of going to the gym, and he was spending less time with Miranda, assuaging his weekly stress on quickies, relinquishing his spice. Garg interestingly notes the eagerness of Miranda to get attached to Dev, first by impressing him with her body, buying lingerie and an expensive cocktail dress; second, by buying a wide range of

food like a “baguette and little containers of things Dev liked to eat, like pickled herring, and potato salad, and tortes of pesto and mascarpone cheese” (2015:93). In a moment of insight, Miranda recognizes that he was not going to move forward in the relationship and she simmered the conflict until the ceasing of communication, “She would tell him the things she had known all along: that it wasn’t fair to her, or to his wife, that they both deserved better, that there was no point in it dragging on” (110).

In “A real Durwan” and “Mrs. Sen” an embodiment of uprooted individuals is presented. For the lead protagonists, the jettisoning of their golden pasts reinforces their yearning by occupying spaces unattached to their former glory. While Boori Ma has lost her home and as a Partition refugee deported to Kolkata, Mrs. Sen has been forced to go ashore with her arranged marriage. Both are expatriates without a name, so they make a determined effort to consolidate their identities through external identification. For Boori Ma, talking about her previous bounty helps her to cope with the unaided estrangement of neighbours at her non-normative job as a *durwan*, a gatekeeper, “under normal circumstances this was no job for a woman” (Lahiri, 1999:73), and neighbours treat her with a meek skepticism, “‘Boori Ma’s mouth is full of ashes, but she is the victim of changing times’ was the refrain of old Mr. Chatterjee.” (72). Boori Ma plays a marginal role in society, and insists on the veracity of her stories “Believe me, don’t believe me, it was a luxury you cannot dream” (79), and only recalling helps her regain composure:

In fact, the only thing that appeared three-dimensional about Boori Ma was her voice: brittle with sorrows, as tart as curds, and shrill enough to grate meat from a coconut. It was with this voice that she enumerated, twice a day as she swept the stairwell, the details of her plight and losses suffered since her deportation to Calcutta after Partition. (70)

For Mrs. Sen, working as a babysitter seems legitimate, but it does not help her feel connected to the place, since she still dwells in the communal cooking she did with the *bonti* blade, the fish she cooked, or the thought of having a “chauffeur in India” (113) and so, “hates driving” (131). Through this negative comparison commingling with their present condition, their psychic condition interface with reality and

ultimately becomes materialized. In the case of Boori Ma, as an endorsement of collective rejection, and for Mrs. Sen as an upheaval of neglect going on a neurotic trip for fish. Nagarani quotes the paper “The principle of Evil” from Jean Baudrillard to announce this apprehension with objects such as the fish, the saw, the blade, and vermilion for the head, cassettes for hearing their voices or the lack of object:

It is not desire that we cannot escape, but the ironic presence of the object, its indifference, and its indifferent interconnections, its challenge, its seduction, its violation of the symbolic order (therefore of the subject’s unconscious as well, if it had one). In short, it is the principle of Evil we cannot escape. (2010:95)

As it indicates, evil signifies a tension between the subject and the thought of an object. On the one hand, Mrs. Sen, the material self cannot be attained, and so she infringes her unspoken obligations with Eliot, and in one of her long way driving quests for fish she has a car accident in which, there were not any casualties, but the symbolic violation of her duty gets her fired, while defending herself saying that “Mr. Sen teaches mathematics at the university” (134). On the other hand, Boori Ma gets condemned to ostracism once that a sink of the building gets robbed. Without Mr. Dalal support, the neighbours reify their fear towards the *Other*, towards the alien who has been occupying their space and rally against Boori Ma.

4.b. Spaces of self-assertion. “A Temporary Matter”, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, “This Blessed House”, “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”, “The Third and Final Continent”

Let us begin with “A Temporary Matter”, a typical diasporic Indian household where the husband Shukumar “invariably marveled at how much food they’d bought”, because “it never went to waste” (Lahiri, 1999:7) as far as his wife, Shoba, proved a great “capacity to think ahead” (6) and take care of such abundance as a cook, a wife, the angel of the house.

Notably enough, this thriving couple plunged into darkness after the miscarriage of their baby, a turning point with a double binding result. One is that “he and Shoba had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible” (4), and that Shoba had lost

herself into sheer apathy regarding the household chores and “now she treated the house as if it were a hotel” (6), and that they had “friends they now systematically avoided” (9). Another implication is the incidental electricity cut-off, which opens up the possibility for appeasing their numb silence. While for Shukumar it triggers a reversal of normative roles and a deeper attachment to cooking uncanny for an Indian male, it does nonetheless entail the converse for Shoba: a chance to sever with her sadness. After having revealed some minor secrets with the makeshift candles, Shukumar’s hopes of renewal get decisively thwarted when Shoba announces that she was moving away: “I’ve been looking for an apartment and I’ve found one,” she said, narrowing her eyes on something, it seemed, behind his left shoulder. It was nobody’s fault, she continued. They’d been through enough. She needed some time alone. She had money saved up for a security deposit” (21).

Apparently, what Shukumar had interpreted as signs of amelioration, were though, his own delusions. Shoba’s engagement into the candle conversation could not forfeit that she had been emotionally shattered, and that her silences demonstrated a traumatic alienation from the loss of their baby. It is hence, that Shukumar breaks a promise to Shoba, thus taking revenge and revealing the uncanny, that when the baby had died he knew that it had been a boy:

He had held his son, who had known life only within her, against her chest in a darkened room in an unknown wing of the hospital [...] and he promised himself that day that he would never tell Shoba, because he still loved her then, and it was the one thing in her life that she had wanted to be a surprise. (22)

Although now they are torn apart, it is in this transnational context that Shoba displays a new intensity of agency unthinkable in their homeland and that Shukumar changed his role for a while. We must not demur in the bleak ending to notice that owing to the new hyphenated space, they have been able to act otherwise.

What seems most striking at the short story “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” is its ability to enact a peaceful resolution to a politic conflict overseas that may have possibly driven apart a unique relationship. It all begins, as Lilia the child of the family narrates, when their parents had settled and were looking for some transnational links, “in search of compatriots, they used to trail their fingers, at the start of each

new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world” (24).

Lilia’s family and Mr. Pirzada establish a routine, from whence we are left the impression of sameness, a certain sameness based on the same nostalgic solidarity of recalling “Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands” (25). Save for the exception that “Mr. Pirzada is Bengali, but he is a Muslim” (26), once she is told about Partition Lilia observes no special difference “the three of them operating as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear” (41). And yet, it might seem more tenable that their meetings ended, for they are transgressing what their respective countries dictate and, to put it bluntly, the US has helped to delineate their own transnational third space, neither Indian or Pakistani, but also ironically help to neglect the transnational links charged with pain. America constitutes then, their peaceful domain where to select the best of their symbolic filiations, altering their irksome dividing contingencies as something rich, familiar and new. Lilia’s awareness of the subject seems to her futile and uncanny, for she somehow understands Mr. Pirzada’s anxiety with the clock, watching the news and giving vent to his yearning, but she is helpless:

I imagined Mr. Pirzada’s daughters rising from sleep tying ribbons in their hair, anticipating breakfast, preparing for school. Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged. (Lahiri, 1999:30-1)

The shared fear that looms over their house is so real at that safe distance that she “prayed that Mr. Pirzada’s family was safe and sound”, however beliefs she had shared before, because she had developed this uncanny kinship with people she did not know, and that she even had to consult it at school:

No one at school talked about the war followed so faithfully in my living room. We continued to study the American Revolution, and learned about the injustices of taxation without representation, and memorized passages from the Declaration of Independence. During recess the boys would divide in two groups... Redcoats

against the colonies. (Lahiri, 1999:32-33)

The contrast between the inside and the outside world besets her, because it also bemuses her that such a telling story was not included in the syllabus, as her father had prompted “What does she learn about the world?” (27). Soon, he finally departed and got home safe and sound with his family, leaving behind his petty candy rituals that helped to bond with Lilia. It is then that she truly understood “what it meant to miss someone who has so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months” (42).

An interesting case of exclusion is that of Bibi Haldar, a young Indian woman who bears a mark of exclusion because of a congenital disease that provokes hysteria and epilepsy seizures. The story wrangles with the viable “treatment” of this lady through the narration of a communal “we” that holds accountable of her malady as a shared burden “that baffled family, friends, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets, and fools” (158). Bahmanpour accurately compares Bibi with the female subaltern of Spivak, because she defies the “ethnic cultural codes” and, yet bereaved of a normative role or belonging, her story is one that intertwines the “*Self/Other*” interface (2010:48).

Bibi has been so far bred as a disabled woman, without a further reaching such as doing chores, or finding a partner, and tellingly, “she wanted to be spoken for, protected, placed on her path in life. Like the rest of us, she wanted to serve supers, and scold servants” (160). Nonetheless, she embodies a demystified, whole deracinated position at “the storage room on the roof of our building” (159), and as someone liable to be contagious. Doctors and other neighbors advocate that she needs a man, but ironically, her notorious qualities had already taken by storm the city and she was incapable of doing any better. “Bibi had never been taught to be a woman; the illness had left her naïve in most practical matters” (163), and thus, it followed, that she would not be able to get a job, a man, or treat her ailment. There is a collective disbelief and detachment from part of society, and Bibi’s circle of helpers, because “she was not our responsibility, and in our private moments we were thankful for it” (167). To this moment, she occupies a marginalized condition in her own homeland, which frames her at the subaltern space along with a fated

stigmatization.

The marking of her exclusion, although based on previous evidence, forestalls and elides any other sense of agency stemming from her, because her self-efficacy has been demonized under the label of the *Other* “She was a bane for business, he told her, a liability and a loss. Who in this town needed a photo to know that?” (164). Under panoptic forces, the city has functionally scarred her identity and by extension, her chances for blending in. However, she decides to “set up house on my own” to prevent the baby from getting sick and claims that “The world begins at the bottom of the stairs. Now I am free to discover life as I please”. By the same token, she has apparently stopped her husband’s chase, however, time confirms, that she is pregnant:

For years afterward, we wondered who in our town had disgraced her. A few of our servants were questioned, and in tea stalls and bus stands, possible suspects were debated and dismissed. But there was no point carrying out an investigation. She was, to the best of our knowledge, cured, (Lahiri, 1999: 172)

Rebirth comes naturally, once that she cares for a baby more than what people prescribe to her, and in doing this, she presents a re-assessment of the ethical responsibilities for Indian women, not only overcoming her excruciating pains and her subaltern role, but gaining a tremendous sense of agency as a non-married mother.

“This Blessed House” begins with the cataphoric identification of mysterious objects in a recently bought house “they discovered the first one in a cupboard” (136). Sanjeev and Twinkle, come across the mystery, in the primitive sense of something which has started and is yet to be resolved, stepping thus into an assumed blank space. The wishful thinking of an empty space that they are discovering is but an instance of a postcolonial reading of “assumed ownership”, one that glosses over the existence of previous occupation (Kuortti, 2007). They are the only Hindus in the neighbourhood, and the presence of the “Christian paraphernalia” (136) has subsumed their sense of ownership inside a superior alloy of culture, one that hints an inscrutable purpose over the array of objects. Consequently, Twinkle undertakes a constant raid of the goods hidden throughout the house and gladly accepts their faux-familiarity beauty devoid of religious implications. She constantly

brings about a different object and demonstrates a fluid adaptation of identity, not confining to her Hindu upbringing, or thinking of its Christian connotations, but in a sort of bricolage, building up new personal meanings:

The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (Bhabha, 1994: 9)

Therefore, Sanjeev needs to find homeliness in a space which defiles his symbolic order, because Twinkle does not want to throw away these items and would rather keep them everywhere in the house, for him "She was like that...It made him feel stupid" (142). Sanjeev resistance to the items hinges on the non-concomitant flexibility of Twinkle and on that for him, the objects "lack a sense of sacredness" (138). She maintains that "'we're not Christians. We're good little Hindus" (137), but in turn, this disturbs Sanjeev and nourishes his skepticism for the semi arranged marriage, because "At the urging of her matchmakers, they married in India, and hundreds of well-wishers whom he barely remembered from his childhood" (143). Indeed, Twinkle brims with enthusiasm and everything falls into place for her, she upholds, "Face it. This house is blessed" (144), and yet, Sanjeev was not yet fully realized with his new wife, "a pretty one, from a suitably high caste, who would soon have a master's degree. What was there not to love?" (148). Twinkle cooks something different that both amazes and estranges Sanjeev with malt vinegar found in the house and Sanjeev reacts boastfully inquiring about the ingredients and the methods employed. Later, Sanjeev invites some workmates to their house and Sanjeev wishes to keep the virgin figure out of the garden, as well as other items, while Twinkle tries to exonerate him from his prejudices. They set out a menu that represents the healthy-contaminated space they occupy:

The menu for the party was fairly simple: there would be a case of champagne, and samosas from an Indian restaurant in Hartford, and big trays of rice with chicken and almonds and orange peels, which Sanjeev had spent the greater part of the morning and afternoon preparing... worried that there would not be enough to drink, [he] ran out at one point to buy another case of champagne just

in case. (Lahiri, 1999:150)

The guests come by and Twinkle takes them by storm with her bubbly personality and casually groups them in an unexpected “treasure hunt” that keeps them at bay from the planned party (153). They go to the attic while Sanjeev, infuriated at his wife’s protagonism, feels tempted to “sweep Twinkle’s menagerie into a garbage bag...tear down the poster of weeping Jesus, and take a hammer to the Virgin Mary” (155). Then, an analogy can be drawn of her as the mad woman in the attic whose presence appals Sanjeev’s fortitude. The turning point in the story is when she gloriously returns from the attic with “a solid silver bust of Christ” shedding undeniable beauty (156). Sanjeev contains his anger before such enlightened gathering:

He hated its immensity, and its flawless, polished surface, and its undeniable value. He hated that it was in his house, and that he owned it...Unlike the other things they’d found, this contained dignity, solemnity, beauty even. But to his surprise these qualities made him hate it all the more. Most of all he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it. (157)

The unfamiliarity and grandeur of such piece of art overturns any outrageous comment from Sanjeev, and complying with the wide-held support for her wife, acquiesces to keep the bust, and takes it with care “careful not to let the feather hat slip, and followed her” (157). A glimmer of hope and understanding broods over their house now, for he has accepted her purifying agency and he has ceased to stand in the shadow of humility and abnegation.

“The Third and Final Continent” is tale of a humble translation of cultures whereby solitude lies at the core of spaces. Confinement and different levels of agency are attributed to its characters: Mrs. Croft, a 103-year-old lady who finds comfort at home and a detachment to society, an unnamed narrator who has recently moved to America to study and rents a room at Mrs. Croft’s house, and Mala, an Indian expatriate who had to agree on an arranged marriage with the narrator (Caesar, 2005). Hence, the story underscores the significance of rooting to a place, so to speak for the narrator and Mala, or alternatively, root in a period of time, which applies to Mrs. Croft’s unawareness of present. The narrator seems to be a proficient

post-1965 Indian in search of better academic prospects.

Since his arrival, the hustle-and-bustle of the city distresses him as well as establishing a new routine: "The noise was constantly distracting, at times suffocating. I felt it deep in my ribs, just as I had felt the furious drone of the engine on the SS Rome [...] 'The simple chore of buying milk, was new to me; in London, we'd had bottles delivered to our door'" (175). Starting his daily grind with "a small carton of milk and a box of cornflakes" he negotiates his lack of belonging. Soon, in Mrs. Croft's house he raises awareness about her strict habits, like when they should "Lock up" (178) the doors, or when she scolds her daughter Helen for wearing a skirt "too high above the ankle" (186). In short, she demonstrates a customary comfort within her house and a sheer aversion towards the outside. Equally, the narrator prefers his solitude rather than the exterior, or his homeland, and still, he is an alien in the US.

There is, however, an event that brings them together, that is, the landing of the moon. Mrs. Croft raises the hot news and requires him to "Say 'splendid'! But she was not satisfied with my reply...I was both baffled and somewhat insulted by the request" (179). In doing this, they establish a common ground for communicating, as strangers. Mrs Croft keeps insisting on this trained duty each time she says "'there's an American flag on the moon, boy!'" (182). Although this stridency becomes a routine after time, the narrator cannot help recalling his latest days in India, recalling the traumatic loss of his mother and his unappealing new wife. After their marriage, he "did nothing to console her" (181), because he had accepted it as an obligation, rather than an inner desire. "The marriage had been arranged by my older brother and his wife. I regarded the preposition with neither objection nor enthusiasm, it was a duty expected of me, as it was expected of every man" (181). Moreover, he also wished not to be intrusive with the lady landlord, but as Mrs. Croft inquired him to put his ren money "on the ledge above the piano keys" (184) and he did not like leaving the money unattended, he "bowed slightly and lowered the envelope, so that it hovered just above her hands" (184). It seemed for Mrs. Croft a kind thing to do. As time goes by, he finally had to depart with a bittersweet closeness to Mrs. Croft, because "I was not her son, and apart from those eight dollars, I owed her nothing" (191). There was a slight chance that their solitude or planned routines were to

contribute to their bonding, however, it was but a contractual relationship and the age barrier could not be trespassed.

The faux intimacy evoked with Mrs. Croft is soon to be substituted by Mala's arrival in the US. The spaces seem blank, devoid of meaning, and the outburst of ink unable to flow for them. Mala admits being "very much lonely", and he "was not touched by her words" (189). So uninvolved in their love, he comments on it as a duty, to which he does not get used, demonstrating the hurdles of bonding with a stranger because of a social construct, "I waited to get used to her presence at my side, at my table, and in my bed, but a week later, we were still strangers" (192). One day taking a stroll, they happen to pass by Mrs. Croft's house and he decides to greet her. Mrs. Croft tells having had an accident and calling the police, and waiting for a response, the narrator says "Splendid!" This impromptu humorous remark makes Mala laugh. Mrs. Croft alleges that "she is a perfect lady!" (195) and, as a result, his perception of Mala as another hyphenated individual triggers a new heightened sensitivity:

Like me, Mala had travelled 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. (195)

Conducive to adaption, Mrs. Croft's spirit emboldens the narrator sense of agency, mustering an enduring courage to assimilate into the unfamiliar environment with the aid of a promising relationship with Mala. Hence, a healthy cross contamination has occurred between Mrs. Croft and the narrator, bestowing a more participative sense of communion and heroism.

Finally, it might not be an outstanding tale, he reckons, as those of astronauts, but they have surely faced each plight in a self-effacing manner, not taking anything for granted, neither magnifying their diaspora journey, which has borne them across a vast array of spaces, people and moments. He concludes with this brilliant reflection of his life and the lives of all immigrants:

While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have

remained in this world for nearly thirty 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 first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond the imagination (198).

4.c. Symbolic filiations: Food

As a commodity endowed with transnational significations, the presence of food can seldom be incidental, but rather a means to establish a locus of difference between cultures, namely the Hindu Bengali and the American. Scholars have underscored the tremendous impact of food in evoking diasporic subjectivity and its diegetic significance in Lahiri's narrative (Alfonso-Forero, 2007; Bhatt, 2009, Choubey, 2001; Friedman, 2008; Garg, 2012; Mitra, 2006; Ridda, 2011; Singh *et al.*, 2012; Williams, 2007) as an object that connects symbolically with the realm of the diasporic subject and its yearning for a lost homeland. Not surprisingly, food or *jhalmuri* in Bengali, occupies a privilege terrain in setting the foundations for belonging whereby rituals can be enacted accordingly on an alien shore. Even if the ingredients were not to be the same, it is precisely this very reproduction – albeit an approximation - what helps immigrants preserve their customs, regardless of the authenticity of their ingredients.

Borne between countries, Western multiculturalism takes heed in Bhabha's "translational transnational" of subjects (1994:173). In *The Namesake*, this happens with Ashima resorting to a concoction to recall *Desh* and appease her uprootedness, "Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones." (Lahiri, 2004:1).

The reification of yearning, enacted thus by means of cooking and disposing ingredients, leads the diasporic subject to a greater sense of rapport. Tellingly, chiefly grounded upon racialized subjectivities lies the premise of food as a medium of self-assertion and agency that abridges the mental space between the makeshift and the Edenic homeland (Williams, 2007). Despite a prior impasse preventing new dishes to alter the stance of Ashima and preferring to "eat chicken with its skin" (Lahiri, 2004:5)

she will nonetheless consent her children's assimilation into the American life by indulging them with American dinner "as a treat" (67), celebrating Christmas or cooking Turkey in Thanksgiving with Indian seasoning, paving in the way for a surrogate Hindu Bengali family (Alfonso-Forero, 2007) adjusting their culture.

They learn to roast turkeys, albeit rubbed with garlic and cumin and cayenne, at Thanksgiving, to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around snowmen, to color boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter and hide them around the house. For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati. (Lahiri, 2004:64)

Additionally, Garg comments on the value of food, between "other ostensible symbols", for retaining and perpetuating ethnic identity and quotes Terry Eagleton "If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food – it is endlessly interpretable – materialized emotion" (2012:74). In these terms, Williams (2007) ponders the metaphor of food and the multifaceted implications of transnational cooking by deeming it an "act of defiance and liberation" that admittedly, "for Kessler gastronomic theory [...] opens doors to double and triple meaning". In this case, the Gangulis do not only change their cooking customs in favour of their children, but garner the transformative potential of acculturation. Having paid tribute to one's culture with "humble approximations" (Lahiri, 2004:1) it is about time to saddle the lack of belonging in the alien limelight.

Notably, we have *per contra* Mrs. Sen, who exemplifies a denial for assimilation, a sense of grief revolving around her cravings for fish, something that anticipates not only her culinary inappropriateness but her liability like Eliot's previous babysitters (Williams, 2007). Mrs. Sen's namelessness and lack of bearings lead her to go to incredible lengths in her nostalgia, drawing from the contrast between communal gatherings and fellowship against her current private solitude. Food, in this case fish, is the quintessential element in the Bengali diet, whereby a vivid exercise of recalling leads her to comparing her both countries (Choubey, 2001). "Everything is there. Here there is nothing" (Lahiri, 1999:113). Her memories stir upon the process of cutting vegetables with the *bonti* so that her displacement is

metonymized by fish.

Whenever there is [...] a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night [...]. It is impossible to fall asleep those nights, listening to their chatter. (115)

Hence, the dialogic distinction between domestic space, *ghar*, and exterior space, *bahir*, can be substantially vaulted, as noted by Ridda “through an emphasis on food... marker of the local and global practices involved in transnational urbanism” (2011:2). There being food a “correlative object” that comprises the banal yet suggestive power of rituals, it encodes practices inextricably linked to home, for example Mrs. Sen vindicating for the *bhekti* and its due preparation, finding solace in the American substitute. She added that in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky. They ate the tail, the eggs, even the head. It was available in any market, at any hour, from dawn until midnight. (Lahiri, 1999:123-4). Accordingly, Garg (2012) writes on the paramount importance of fish and rice in Bengali culture noting the epigram of Janice Marikitani’s poem “making fish is a political act.” and Garg also collects Krishendu Ray’s comments:

Rice and fish become particularly potent symbols of Bengaliness precisely because outsiders, be they other Indians or Americans, are considered unable to appreciate them or incompetent in handling the bones. Rice and fish is considered a real insider delicacy.... There is also a sense that you have to keep doing it – repeat the recipes over and over and keep eating rice and fish in the Bengali style. There is anxiety that it will vanish if it is not repeatedly performed [...] Through repetition, rice and fish become the quintessence of Bengaliness. (qtd. in 2012:80)

However, as Williams (2007) elucidates, this conversion “paradoxically satiates and reinforces nostalgia. It responds to homesickness simultaneously triggering it further.” This notion of homesickness epitomized by food might be identified with the need for grasping meaning in aspects of selfhood that William

James called the material self, most probably, to restore the balance of the social self (Caesar, 2007).

Stemming from this desideratum for banalities, the unhomely stirs (Bhabha:15), giving rise to situations of mental discomfort in *Interpreter of Maladies* whereby their characters translate their uprootedness through the discrete and revealing use of food. Consequently, Mrs. Sen heightens her compulsion with fish in going with Eliot far from his house, transgressing her obligation, becoming an anthropological curiosity with an oddly “blood-lined bag between their feet” (Lahiri, 1999:132), ensnaring themselves in the car accident, her dismissal and so on.

Lahiri uses food as *mise en scène* to elegantly counterpoise a narrative that “gives rise to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to ‘lost origins’” (Singh *et al.*, 2012). Ridda (2011) draws on Turgeon and Pastinelli’s article ‘Eat the World’ to explain this dialectic shift:

Eating evokes a process whereby space is compressed and miniaturised as food moves from the field to the market to the home, and then onto the table, the plate and the palate [...]. Eating puts the outside world into the body [...]. As well as producing a geographical inversion (the outside in), food consumption brings about a physical conversion (the inside changes the outside). These close associations between the biological, the geographical and cultural domains are what make food so effective in essentialising identities and domesticating space. (251)

“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” exemplifies this symbolic filiation with food as a “catalyst for solidarity and transnational belongings in this diasporic household” (Monaco, 2015:82) and a means to capture their sameness and mitigate his homesickness. In Bahri (2013), the concept of family is perused in line with the findings of Sabatelli and Bartle’s ‘Survey Approaches to the Assessment of Family Functioning: Conceptual, Operational, and Analytical Issues,’ from whence family stands as ‘a complex structure consisting of an interdependent group of individuals who have a shared sense of history, experience some degree of emotional bonding, and devise strategies for meeting the needs of individual family members and the group as a whole’. Then, Mr. Pirzada supersedes the common notion of a relative

sharing the “same language [...] same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands” (Lahiri, 1999:25). Still, the “lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged” (31) persists and it is only by eating together that the sense of communion increases, especially reinforced by the candy consumption ritual between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia, presumably in the likeness of the wine and bread in Christian rites or the Hindu practice of eating deity's leftover as *prasad* (Garg, 2012:78). Later, the situation becomes untenable after Mr. Pirzada's farewell, the ritual redundant “Since January, each night before bed, I had continued to eat, for the sake of Mr. Pirzada's family, a piece of candy I had saved from Halloween. That night there was no need to. Eventually, I threw them away” (Lahiri, 1999:42).

Another example of food disclosing aspects of the self is that of “A Temporary Matter”, where the food motif accounts for a reflection of Shoba's love/isolation syncretized with the binary emptiness /abundance of food (Williams, 2007) and hinted subtly by Shukumar's viewpoint considering her “capacity to think ahead” (Lahiri, 1999:6) and that he “invariably marveled at how much food they'd bought” “it never went to waste” (7). The consumption of Shukumar and his apparent reversal of the miscarriage by adopting her previous normative role has nonetheless deceiving consequences for their relationship that these intimate dinners and Shukumar's elaborate dishes cannot outweigh.

Arguably, food opens the possibility of a postcolonial sexual encounter in “Sexy” and *The Namesake*, foregrounding the exotic relation between the minority and the model dominant ethnicity, between the Self and the Other, between Miranda-Dev, Gogol-Maxine. In both instances, the cosmopolitan pilgrim Miranda, and Gogol, racializes its desire for the Other. While Miranda's confrontation is freighted with speed and was only foreshadowed by the affair that she had been previously told, her visit to an Indian shop comes clear as a pre-liminal warning when the Indian cashier tells her that the snack is “Too spicy for you” (Lahiri, 1999:99). Partly based on this symbolic identification with the Other, her affair with Dev is first capitalized to seduce him with lingerie (Garg, 2012:81). Unlike Miranda's Western peers, Dev fails to comply with her expectations and so she resorts to food and prepares a “baguette and little containers of things Dev liked to eat, like pickled herring, and potato salad,

and tortes of pesto and mascarpone cheese” (Lahiri, 1999:93). Likewise, Gogol gets involved in Maxine’s family, apparently surmounting the barriers of ethnicity with upward class mobility as a trump card and therefore delectates himself at their orgiastic-like American life (Friedman, 2008):

He loves the mess that surrounds Maxine, her hundreds of things always covering the floor [...]. He learns to love the food she and her parents eat, the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat bakes in parchment [...]. He learns that one does not grate Parmesan cheese over pasta dishes containing seafood [. . .]. He learns not to put the wooden spoons in the dishwasher [...]. He learns to anticipate, every evening, the sound of a cork emerging from a fresh bottle of wine. (Lahiri, 2004:137).

There is a stringency, though, to notice between the pervasive role of food and its subsequent intergenerational differences. While the first generation usually deems it as just staple food for survival, the second generation tends to commodification, there harbingering an eagerness to consume treats (Williams, 2007). To recap, it harks back to the Marcus Lee Hansen’s problem of the third-generation immigrant, a phenomenon which holds accountable to the second generation “politics of forgetting”, to losing roots in favour of adaptation.

Bhatt coincides in the “prominent nature of these markers of identity like food, clothes, language, religion, myths, customs, individual community, rites of passage” (2009:6) in building up a sense of the familiar or *heimlich*, to put it in Freudian terms, out of the uncanny world, the *unheimlich* and given that “food is a critical medium for compliance with and resistance” as commented by Jennifer Ho (Williams, 2007), it swiftly becomes the locus of difference for subjects that want to position themselves in-between, shaping up a cosmopolitan third space for self-assertion. Gogol, that is, his Bengali customs, become sworn to secrecy at the domestic sphere whereas the public receives his Americanized image, but it is Ashoke’s death what gives the screw another turn and gets Gogol coming into terms with his roots by way of eating Indian food again: “Craving the food [he]’d grown up eating, [he] ride[s] the train out to Queens [to] have brunch at Jackson Diner, piling [his] plates with tandoori chicken and pakoras and kebabs, and shop afterward for basmati rice and the spices that

need replenishing" (Lahiri, 2004:229).

Queens, among other neighbourhoods with transnational spaces, foster the erasure of boundaries and the mental space division between American-Indian sites. Ridda (2011) gathers Shukla appreciation of these transplanted venues:

It exists as a place with goods to offer residents and visitors. These veritable Market places, replete with Indian restaurants, food stores and sari stores, beauty salons, record stores [...] evoke images [...] through which India as a fantasy is made real". Indians meet there, eat there, and buy and sell there, and essentially perform an Indianness that functions to consolidate their migrant subjectivities. (Shukla: 84)

In addition to the previous movements contributing to the symbolic evocation, it does help to look at certain analogue situations of *The Namesake* where Gogol comes across a disheartening ambivalence over the uses of cutlery and food, diametrically opposing its family customs and those of his partners. While Maxine's family displays a laid-back attitude towards the serving and the first impression over dinner sets Gogol at odds, his family, *id est* Ashima, devotes much of her time in preparing several dishes (148), a surplus that ashames Gogol. Befuddled at receiving "a bunch of cutlery" (131) from Gerald and seeing so little effort in their meal, Gogol makes a contrast:

His own mother would never have served so few dishes to a guest. She would have kept her eyes trained on Maxine's plate, insisting she have seconds and then thirds...But Lydia pays no attention to Gogol's plate. She makes no announcement indicating that there is more. (Lahiri, 2004:133)

Regardless of her ethnicity, Moushumi also resembles this laid-back way of life, distancing herself from cooking. When she cooks with Gogol, some "coq au vin", she confirms again her safe third space and that her mother "is appalled" of her likings (209).

An interesting second-generation character is Twinkle. In "This Blessed House" "food symbolises disruption of normative households and becomes an alternative mode of communication." (Williams, 2007). While Sanjeev huddles in his

comfort zone, “she finds a bottle of malt vinegar” (Lahiri, 1999:136). For now, they are aware of other objects, but it is precisely the dish Twinkle cooks the thing that Sanjeev does not loathe at all. The new recipe gives rise to distrust, yet Sanjeev is both attracted and repelled by it (Garg, 2012).

Apart from Twinkle, the unnamed narrator of “The Third and The Final Continent” also illustrates a proficient adaptation devoid of cultural biases, one that openly embraces the wide range of options available at a multicultural environment. He “bought a small carton of milk and a box of cornflakes” (Lahiri, 1999:175), an ordinary meal that triggers his quest for making a living in a foreign land. His final remark self-effaces the merit of his achievement with Mala, with their experience as immigrants, but it does account for the value of these minor changes and adaptations, exemplified by the bowl of cereals with milk. Thus, the ultimate realization of the former immigrant is to merge “the contention in the bi-polar world differentiating between an authentic citizen and the “other” (Williams, 2007) into a more fluid, culture milieu, where food enriches our understanding about the increasing chutnification of countries and cultures.

Conclusions

As previously discussed, this Master's Thesis has attempted to outline the correlation between, identity, space and culture in alignment with diaspora phenomena. Diaspora has been best accounted recently, as a transnational model of belonging whereby subjects demonstrate their sense of agency according to their time-space limitations and the imbalance between the putative homeland and the current soil. Despite nation-states hold manifold and intricate relationships, what hereby matters is the easiness to travel, to broaden horizons, and to re-discover our possibilities. We are all, naturally, diasporic subjects. Whether to belong to one place, to one time or to one nation is but an enforced assumption of tradition whereby communication must honour us as an allegorical instrument for cooperation and self-identification.

In occupying a personal cultural space, subjects negotiate their identities attaining to their domestic space, broadly, if they hold an expatriate or uprooted condition as first-generation immigrants. They can handle their myths, rituals, music, food, personal relationships at will. The new paradigm of diaspora beckons not only the intermingling of cultures, but a more fluid, selective and non-binary personal agency. Having built on the US as a historical enclave of multiculturalism, this research has widened the focus of previous literature to imbibe from various sources.

Drawing largely on the notion of the 'third space' posited by Bhabha, Appiah's 'cosmopolitanism', Bauman's 'Liquid modernity', and studies on transnationalism, this study has come to endorse a different perception of diaspora,

insisting on the paramount role of the immigrant in society. Tellingly, the presence of an immigrant shrouds a transformative potential which does not only hinge on the individual, but on the veiled symbolic filiations of community networks. There being their arrival and interaction with natives, an encounter between the Self and the Other, between the familiar and the uncanny.

Aside from the theoretical background – especially grounded on postcolonial theory – the literary analysis has attested to the veiled implications of characters when resorting to demonstrate their agency or standing far from the field of action in a self-effacing way. A special interest has been given not only to these processes, but to the role of minor characters, and the role of the subaltern to demand a bridging of cultures, a reciprocal understanding between East/West in the land of the free, strictly, with the positive migrants flows of Indians coming to the US since the 1965. In these terms, Lahiri's fiction becomes the domain of ethical responsibility and ethnic awareness, conveying the dignity and relatable personality of immigrants. While moving from one place to other has direct physical implications, it is quite becoming to assert that subjects cannot forestall the inherited burden of culture and that fiction serves its purpose to highlight and anticipate the state-of-the-art relationships of the world, bringing under its lens the imperative need to relate with the environment and make it better.

As *The Namesake* suggests, while first-generation immigrants prefer to maintain transnational relations and means to evoke their homeland, second-generation migrants tend to prefer the values of the makeshift homeland, giving room thus, tentatively, to a tenable revival of their inherited customs in a blatant cosmopolitan journey of self-discovery.

In addition, the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* have been intentionally subdivided as instances of adaptation or emotional breakdown, further complying with the other-orientation and building onto the anchoring of identity in a hybrid space, either with the aid of cultural reproduction, either with the means to establish a genuine content of character, conformity in the new soil.

There is, I believe, a great deal of compassion and an empowering of equality in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction and there must be, not by pure chance, many other treats

in her writings and diaspora literature which help to hold readers spellbound, but in short, it is her ability to compose relatable characters, easy-to-follow stories with hooks for the lay reader and surreptitious details for the seasoned reader what strikes us the more. To deal with diaspora thus, is to deal with the history of evolution, in an effort to understand ourselves better, to know the place for the first time.

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