

Negotiating Cultural Difference in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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It is the goal of this paper to analyze the depiction of identification processes in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*; once most of the stories in this collection involve narratives of dislocation, most of them of migratory experience, this study very specially focuses on borderline negotiations of cultural difference. Stuart Hall's strategic and positional concept of identity (2005) as well as H. Bhabha's concept of culture's "in-between" (1996) or "third space" (1994) underlie this analysis. After commenting on the place occupied by Lahiri herself as a writer who is a member of the Indian diaspora in America, analysis proceeds by describing a number of identitary processes that occur in the stories; finally, negotiation of cultural difference in this short story collection is exemplified by a detailed analysis of one of the stories, "The Third and Last Continent."

Once Lahiri's characters are, typically, Indian citizens resident in America or American citizens born of the Indian diaspora in America, the notion of cultural identity becomes crucial for this analysis. As Hall states (1996), identity may be conceived as the cultural experience shared by people of a common ancestry and historical experience, a conception that emphasizes similarity. Although this fixed conception elides individual differences, it allows for the construction of a sense of belonging to a national or cultural group. A second way of conceiving cultural identity is to consider the differences which come into being through the continuous interplay of historical and institutional sites, and of specific modalities of power (HALL, 1996, p. 69). The foregrounding of difference in identity construction implies the recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other

and the perception of its 'constitutive outside' (what it is not, or lacks) that a 'positive' meaning is constructed. Identity comes to being, thus, in and through *différance*—every identity has its 'margin' or excess, and it is precisely this capacity to exclude and leave out that allows identities to function as 'points of identification and attachment' throughout their careers (HALL, 2005, 3-5).

Bhabha conceives of our new international order as inseparable from the histories of postcolonial migration, cultural and political diasporas, displaced peasant and aboriginal communities, exiles and refugees. As such, it invites a process of redefinition of essential identities, suggesting a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of national imagined communities. This hybrid space opens up a space of translation, a revision which rests on the notion of cultural difference. Thinking the limit of culture as a problem of the *enunciation* of cultural difference allows Bhabha to take advantage of the enunciative split and use its implications for cultural analysis, transferring the destruction of the logic of synchronicity, and the consequent construction of a linguistic Third Space, to a cultural in-between space: the "non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space—a third space—where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences" (1994, p. 217-188). In their liminal condition, postcolonial cultures "translate", and therefore reinscribe the social imaginary of their disjunctive times and places (1994, p. 5-6).

Such a space, as Rushdie asserts when referring to the émigré writer, is "not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy." The word 'translation', he reminds us, comes etymologically from the Latin for 'bearing across'. Speaking in the name of "those of us who emigrated" he defines the Indian writers who, like him, emigrated as ones who,

“having been borne across the world” are “translated men”. In contrast with the views that something always gets lost in translation, Rushdie clings to the notion that something can also be gained: “We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork, and as we result (...) we are not partly of the West our identity is at once plural and partial” (1992, p. 15; 17). For this reason the migrant is “capable of writing from a double perspective”, as insiders and outsiders—a “stereoscopic vision is perhaps what [they] can offer in place of ‘whole sight’” (p. 19).

Such is the space occupied by Jhumpa Lahiri, who inhabits what she herself has defined as a “perplexing bicultural universe”. Born in London to Bengali immigrant parents from Calcutta, she moved to America at three, often vacationed to her parent’s homeland in her childhood and youth, and became an American citizen at eighteen. As a writer, Lahiri has been described “as an American author, as an Indian-American author, as a British-born author, as an Anglo-Indian author, as an NRI (non-resident Indian) author, as an ABCD lost and found author”¹; Indian academics describe her writing as “Diaspora fiction”; in the US, she is said to write “immigrant fiction” (LAHIRI, 1999). The writer confesses to be baffled by these labels, but it does not matter to her whether she writes as “an American or an Indian, about things American or Indian or otherwise”—what remains relevant is the assertion of her individuality as manifested through the creation of a foreign land of her choosing in an act or translation in which she conveys and preserves what is meaningful for her. As Lahiri states, “I translate, therefore I am” (LAHIRI, Jhumpa on Jhumpa).

Although the prevalence of diasporic displacement in her stories foregrounds both the

¹ ABCD stands for American born confused “desi”, an acronym coined by Indian nationals to describe culturally challenged second-generation Indians raised in the US.

translational and transnational façades of culture, at the very heart of her stories is what Hall has referred to as the familiar modern sensation of displacement, Heidegger's *unheimlichkeit*, or the feeling of not being at home, a feeling that, as the Indian scholar notices, we do not need to travel far away to experience (2003, p. 25). This feeling pervades the first story of the collection, "A Temporary Matter", in which a young couple slowly drifts apart after their baby is born dead. Grief stricken, they become estranged from themselves, from each other and from their home. Gone is the time when they talked to each other or exchanged intimacies; the hours Shukumar spends at home is directly proportional to the time Shoba takes on additional projects and works extra hours—she comes to display the inclination to treat her house more like a hotel. Although Shukumar recognizes that "they were not like this before" and Shoba can hardly recognize herself in her newly sloppy appearance, lack of disposition for cooking and for entertaining friends, neither of them is able to break this chain of isolation.

The couple's miscommunication springs from a failure to interpret signs, once each of them disregards the non verbal messages emitted by the other spouse. Communication failures recur in *Interpret of Maladies*. Kapasi and Mrs. Das, in the title story, mistake the signs they send each other. Infatuated with the vision of Mrs. Das' bare legs and with her high evaluation of his interpretative abilities, Kapasi aspires to a greater intimacy than it would be legitimate to expect between a tour guide and a tourist. On the other hand, Mrs. Das misinterprets his capacity as a professional interpreter of troubles, thinking him to be able to give her the solace her troubled mind so greatly misses. The story abounds in misinterpreted signs: in spite of being an experienced tour guide, Kapasi overlooks the facts that the Das are picked up at a hotel, dress as foreigners do, display tourist

paraphernalia (tour guides and a potent camera) and have a strong American accent of the kind he listens in American television programs—all these signs are not enough to make him aware that these people with dark skin who look like Indians are not really Indians. Even after Kapasi's Indian style greeting with the palms pressed together is answered with a strong handshake by Mr. Das, he still needs to ask him if he is Indian born. It is only after he learns that both Raj and Mina are American citizens by birth that Kapasi begins to notice some cultural differences, like the intimacy with which he refers to the wife, calling her Mina when speaking to his daughter, and his inability to understand the words of an Indian love song that a man sings to his wife.

The puzzlement experienced by Kapasi before what seems to him to be surprisingly alike and yet different is magnified in stories which are told from the perspective of children who must negotiate difference in hybrid multicultural spaces, as in "When Mr. Pirzada came to dine" and "Mrs. Sen's"; in "Sexy" it is again a child, Rohin, who inadvertently makes the main character aware of the true status of her relationship with her lover. In the first of these stories, ten-year old Lilia gets acquainted with a Pakistani citizen, Mr. Pirzada, who is located in the university directory by her parents, Indian immigrants who still resent the facts that in America neighbors never drop by without an invitation, doctors do not make house calls and supermarkets do not carry mustard oil. At the same time, the girl has to come to terms with the facts that this man who looks more or less the same as her father, speaks the same language he speaks, laughs at the same jokes and like her father takes off his shoes before entering a room, eats supper with his hands and enjoys pickled mangoes with his meals is not truly his compatriot—while her father is Indian, Pirzada is from Pakistan. The differences in color in a map that, her father insists,

demonstrate India and Pakistan to be different countries seem to her very weak proofs before the facts she witnesses. Since the story is told at the height of the secession war that resulted in the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan, the girl is made to attend to divided allegiances—at home she is called the attention to what happens in her parents' land; at school she is censored if she does so; because she ignores much about Indian Revolution and the partition her father thinks she does not learn what is relevant at school, where she learns all about the American Revolution. On the other hand, Pirzada is also depicted in the construction of his new identity position in America, experiencing cultural shocks as when he declares himself unable to understand how and when to thank in America (“The lady of the bank thanks me, the cashier at the shop thanks me, the librarian thanks me when I return an overdue book (...) If I am buried in this country I will be tanked, no doubt” (p. 29)) or when he ignores the purpose of the “orange vegetables on people's doorsteps”. Halloween is also one of the moments that best illustrates Lilia's hybrid space in America—she is given Burpali sacks that had once contained basmati rice to collect candy, and several people tell her they had never seen an Indian witch before.

In “Mrs. Sen's” intercultural negotiation gets a novel viewpoint: eleven year old Eliot observes his baby-sitter home, lifestyle and unrest as he is taken care by her in her own home—since Mrs. Sen doesn't know how to drive, his mother agrees to drive him to her place in the afternoon. Differences between American and Indian culture are readily perceived by him: the shoes lined on shelves, the curved blade used to chop and slice vegetables, Mrs. Sen's peculiar scent of mothballs and cumin, the centered part of her braided hair, shaded with crushed vermilion (which he first takes to be a cut, but then learns to be the Indian correlative to a Western wedding ring), the sari she would wear at

all times, even at the beach, and her passion for fish, which she would eat back at home at all times. Eliot soon learns that “home” means India for Mrs. Sen, for whom America is just the place she was taken to by her husband. In contrast with her Indian relatives who, repeating stereotyped knowledge of America, think she lives there like a queen, and that all she has to do is “press buttons and the house is clean”, for Mrs. Sen “everything is there”, in India: there she has a chauffeur and, therefore, does not depend on the husband to drive her places; besides she misses the communal support and friendship that characterizes relationships in her home place.

As in “When Mr. Pirzada came to diner” and “Mrs. Sen”, “Sexy” is set within a multicultural perspective in which Americans are made to negotiate cultural difference with members from the Indian diaspora. Two plots run parallel in the story: at the same time as Laxmi’s cousin’s family is torn apart as her cousin’s husband abandons the family because of a woman he meets in a flight from New Delhi to Montreal, Laxmi’s co-worker Miranda starts a relationship with a married man while his wife is out on a trip. These relationships stand in sharp contrast with Laxmi’s own sound relationship with her husband, depicted in the photo that shows the couple in a romantic pose at the Taj Mahal, “the most romantic spot on earth”. Like Shukumar, Miranda fails to read the signs of exclusion that seem to warn her she is trying to penetrate a world in which she is an alien, a world whose language and alphabet she is unable to master, and whose food proves inadequate to her. Like her namesake in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Miranda remains a rather naïve girl, who lacks in world experience and displays a great tendency to get emotionally attached. Therefore, she fails to see how, since their first meeting, Dev refuses to take her as she is and not only tries to naturalize her Indian by associating her name with Mira, but also clings to her on the

sole base of her sexy appearance, a truth that is only made clear to her through Rohin's intervention.

Like the first story in the collection, "This Blessed House" depicts a young couple born to the India diaspora in America. After a four-month arranged wedding, Sanjeev and Twinkle experience some disturbances in their relationship, which are especially revealed by the way they react to the discovery of Christian objects in their newly bought house. Twinkle, whose parents live in California, and who seems to have had a more American upbringing, exults at the discovery of each new object, as if it all were a mere treasure hunt; Sanjeev, more attuned to the Hindu culture, insists they should not have Christian objects at home. Twinkle, however, will have her will respected, an attitude that makes her husband wonder whether he shouldn't have chosen one of the prospective brides whose pictures he received and who, unlike Twinkle, could sing, sew and cook without consulting a cook book, and who would not object to his decisions. On the other hand, Sanjeev accedes his wife is petty, and from a suitably high caste; he is somehow reassured about the propriety of his marital choice when his guests praise his wife and cling to her company.

In the two stories set in India, "A real durwan" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar", difference is foregrounded through that 'constitutive outside' that sets both Boori Ma and Bibi Haldar as outsiders in their own communities. As long as Boori Ma remains a destitute among poor people, she is considered an efficient *durwan*² and even compared to the ones who work in the most selected neighborhoods; her stories of past opulence, although a kind of disquieting factor, are not really taken in consideration because she is not believed to tell the truth. As soon as the residents acquire the means to refurbish the building, Boori Ma becomes the Other who will endanger its reputation. As stated by a resident, it is the fact

² A *durwan* is a kind of caretaker, who must clean the property and see that it is not disturbed by intruders.

that they now “have valuables” that really weighs on her dismissal. Similarly, Bibi Haldar stands in contrast with the other women because of her epileptic fits, due to which she is considered unfit for marriage and secluded from any society apart from the women with whom she does the laundry or scrubs scales from fish. Before her cousin’s unwillingness to promote her wedding, which is said to provide her cure, it is this feminine community that supports her, teaching her all that a bride-to-be needs to know, and later, giving her the assistance she needs as a mother. Although not displaying inter-cultural negotiations of difference, the story reveals an India that oscillates between traditional Hindu wisdom and the faith of an Indian minority, Christianity. Oriental and occidental medicine blend in the attempt to cure Bibi, who is treated by allopaths, homeopaths and ayurvedics, holy water from seven holy rivers is brought to her, and she is both given amulets and taken by train to kiss the tombs of Christian saints and martyrs.

In spite of the fact that in most of the stories the characters experience some diasporic displacement, in the last story of the collection, “The Third and Final Continent”, the main character is followed along his displacement from his native India to England and thence to America., and emphasis is given in his capacity to survive in three different continents. Unlike the great majority of the other stories, told by an omniscient third person narrator, “The Third and Final Continent” is told by a first person anonymous narrator, who initially invites the reader to accompany him as he sails on an Italian cargo across the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean and finally arrives in England. Like so many other poor immigrants, he shares a room with members of his ethnic community, living in north London with other penniless Bengali bachelors who, like himself, struggle to educate and establish themselves abroad.

Five years later, at 36, he has his marriage arranged by his family and is offered a full-time job in America. By then with money enough to fly, he goes to Calcutta by plane, attends his wedding and in a week flies to Boston to begin his new job. He readies to life in his third continent by reading manuals, where he learns that Americans drive on the right side, that they call a lift an elevator and that life has a different pace in America. On arriving there, he is baffled by the noisy streets. Perception of his new land is given in terms of what it lacks—comparing his inexpensive room at YMCA to the cabin he occupied in the *SS Roma*, he perceives it has “no ship’s deck to escape to, no glittering ocean to thrill [his] soul, no breeze to cool [his] face, no one to talk to” (p. 175).

In spite of these and other differences, he soon learns how to survive: he opens a bank account, rents a p. o. box, buy a bowl and a spoon at Woolworth’s, discovers how to save by buying milk and cornflakes instead of hamburgers and hot dogs, and how to fill a thermos with boiling water so that he might have four cups of tea for the price of one in a coffee shop. As soon as these basic survival techniques are mastered, a step ahead is given when he rents a room on Massachusetts Avenue, living for the first time with someone who was not Indian, the elderly Mrs. Croft. There he is given first hand contact with American civil religion, patriotism, being obliged to perform a daily ceremony in homage of American heroes: every day, as he arrives home Mrs. Croft bellows “A flag on the moon, boy”, a phrase to which he must retort to by saying “Splendid!”

In this period he begins to plan his married life. As it is customary among the Indians, his wedding had been arranged, and Mala had been described to him as someone who could cook, knit, embroider, sketch landscapes and recite poems by Tagore. According to custom, Mala was now living with his brother and his sister-in-law, once she

was now considered to be part of his household. The five nights spent together had not been enough to provide him any real intimacy with her, and he had made no effort to console her when she cried, missing her parents. The letter he receives from her misses any salutation, and contains only a few lines which do not touch him. However, he knows that they are bound together, and that Mala by now wears an iron bangle on her wrist and applies vermilion powder to the part in her hair to signify she is a bride. His responsibility as her provider and protector begin to weigh on him, and he anticipates the problems she might have while wearing her sari on American busy streets. As a final preparation for her arrival, he rents a furnished apartment a few blocks away from the MIT.

His first encounter with Mala in America is not marked by any demonstration of affection; however, it provides him with the opportunity to speak Bengali for the first time since arriving in that country. Although still uncomfortable with each other's presence, they eat with their hands, another thing he had not yet done in America. Mala praises his food and the house; he tells her she does not need to cover her head there. By the end of the first week, she already knows her way in the neighborhood, and has started furnishing her kitchen with the utensils and goods she needs; she insists on dressing in her best saris, as if for a party, even when walking nearby, though. It is around this time that her husband decides to introduce her to Mrs. Croft, who pronounces her a perfect lady. Both Mala and her husband are delighted and, for the first time, they look at each other and smile.

This acts as a turning point in their relationship, which contributes to lessen the distance between them. Together they explore the city and meet other Bengalis, making good lasting friendships. Together they discover where to buy fish and Indian spice; they buy a camera to document their outings, and experience an increasing intimacy.

By the end of the story the narrator summarizes his achievements in America—he now has a house of his own; both he and Mala are American citizens, entitled to collect social security when it is time. They cultivate ties with India, but decided to end their days in America. They have a son who attends Harvard University, with whom, occasionally, they eat rice with their hands, and speak in Bengali, habits they suspect their son will not keep after they die. Whenever his son is discouraged, the narrator reminds him that his own survival in three continents is proof enough that he can also succeed—while the astronauts spent mere hours on the moon, he has been in the new world for almost thirty years. True heroes, the story suggests, are not necessarily the ones who are famous for great deeds, but rather the ones who succeed in every day life, being able to negotiate a meaningful placement in their own communities.

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