



Day 248 – Curves, Tyler Brown

Jhumpa Lahiri, the Interpreter of the New Indian Diaspora

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ABSTRACT: Published in 1999, at the turn of a new century and on the threshold of the third millennium, Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, among many other awards) is a collection of stories charting the new Indian diaspora, in the aftermath of the 1965 reformation of the American immigration policy. This paper proposes a textual analysis of Lahiri's debut work through the lens of diasporic discourse, in order to show how the poised and elegant voice of the Indian-American writer significantly sheds new light on diasporic literature, mediating between ethnic and global issues.

KEY WORDS: Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, (Indian) Diaspora, migration, globalization

ABSTRACT: Pubblicati nel 1999, all'inizio di un nuovo secolo e sulla soglia del terzo millennio, i racconti in *Interpreter of Maladies* di Jhumpa Lahiri (vincitore del Pulitzer per la narrativa, tra molti altri premi) narrano le vicende della nuova diaspora indiana, nel periodo immediatamente successivo alla riforma del 1965 della politica americana sull'immigrazione. Il presente articolo offre un'analisi testuale del libro di esordio della Lahiri attraverso la lente del *diasporic discourse*, al fine di mostrare come la voce equilibrata e elegante della scrittrice indiano-americana contribuisca, in modo significativo, a spargere nuova luce sulla letteratura della diaspora, mediando tra questioni etniche e globali.

KEY WORDS: Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, diaspora (indiana), immigrazione, globalizzazione



I was certain to find the familiar sting of salt, but what I needed to know was what kind: kitchen, sweat, tears or the sea.

Monique Truong, *The Book of Salt*

It goes without saying that migration turns out to be one of the major issues in our contemporary world where two words, “globalization” and “postcolonialism”, are continuously questioning the boundaries of national identity. Globalization being the triumph of the logic of the free market, individual consumerism and human capital, represents the obvious consequence of the hegemonic neoliberal policies which have been paramount for the last three decades. Postcolonialism, on the other hand, offers an alternative perspective in opposition to human and environmental exploitation and the supremacy of economics over political initiative. If neoliberal economics tends to shape our society by emphasizing financial success and personal entrepreneurship, and by enhancing a “time-space compression” (Krishna,

2009: 2),¹ where economic progress is inevitably linked to claims of cultural superiority, according to Western standards, postcolonialism, on the contrary, raises doubts about the inequalities and distortions provoked by globalized modernity.

Hence, migrants have become emblematic figures of the present cultural space, where globalization and postcolonial resistance cohabit, generating a surge of descriptive terms in order to identify “our modernity at large”,² such as transnationalism, *transculturation*, *hybridity*, *creolization*, *diaspora*.³ Alongside technological and electronic transformations, human migrations are part of modern cultural dynamics where interactions between local and global tend to be no longer marginal and rare encounters (Appadurai, 1996: 10): mass-migrations are changing the contours of the world, allowing for a rethinking of how communities are forged. The “diasporic public spheres” theorized by Appadurai are metaphors of an unstable modernity, where separating the world into discrete nation-states is becoming quite impossible. Indeed, the present multi-faceted and fluid society is constantly affected by travelling and accommodating to foreign cultures. In depicting human dispersal, (un)successful assimilations, frictions and conflicts in migration, literature reflects a “liquid modernity”⁴ where circulation and transplantation of migrant subjects erode the myth of cultural unity. Marked by global capitalism and migration, late modernity produces transnational entities that have to negotiate between home and homelessness. Writers attempt to offer critical perspectives over the challenges enacted by cultural displacement, trying to come to terms with the

¹ It was the geographer and social theorist David Harvey the first to articulate the concept of “time-space compression” in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989) to refer to the way capitalist commodity production and flexible accumulation have reformulated the relationship between time and space. Globalization, for Harvey, is a process that tends to “annihilate space through time” (Harvey, 2000: 59).

² My reference is to the title of Arjun Appadurai’s anthropological investigation.

³ These concepts are all complex ones that embrace time, space, culture, nation and globalization and they have been differently used in several domains (literary studies, history, anthropology and social studies). The term *transnationalism* was coined by the writer Randolph Bourne to indicate a new way of thinking about the relationships between cultures. He deplored the early 20th century American society with “hordes of men and women without a spiritual country” (Bourne, 1916: 90), arguing that the USA should be more cosmopolitan in integrating ethnic minorities. *Transculturation* encompasses the transformative encounter between the foreign and the native. The anthropologist Fernando Ortiz uses the term in opposition to “acculturation” because transculturation does not only entail acquiring another culture, “it also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of one’s preceding culture” (Ortiz, 1995: 105). *Hybridity* is a key term in postcolonial discourse and its main theorists are Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak and Paul Gilroy. In Bhabha’s words the concept does not describe a mere combination of two entities. It is, instead, an “interstitial passage between fixed identifications”, a space in-between that “opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha, 1994: 4). Used in linguistics to designate “the process by which one or more pidginized variants of a language [...] are extended in domains of use and in the range of communicative and expressive functions they must serve” (Rickford, 1997: 172), *creolization* has been employed in cultural studies as well. According to the Caribbean poet Edward Brathwaite, it is “a way of seeing the society, not in terms of white and black, master and slave, in separate nuclear units, but as contributory parts of a whole” (Brathwaite, 1971: 307). For the word *diaspora*, see the following pages in this paper.

⁴ The reference here is taken from the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in his *Liquid Modernity* (2000).

in-between condition linked to migratory displacements and to the trauma of impossible homecomings (Mishra, 2007: 10).

In the light of the above-mentioned terms employed to describe the plethora of semantic nuances of the modern openness and mutability, this paper proposes to examine Jhumpa Lahiri's⁵ debut work, *Interpreter of Maladies*, under the lens of diasporic discourse. Lahiri's voice enters a long standing tradition of diasporic writers from the Indian subcontinent, alongside V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Bharati Mukherjee and Anita Desai, to name but a few. Yet, through her second-generation perspective and her concise prose, Lahiri's stories "zoom in on small happenings and circumscribed settings, maintaining a spatial focus on the home and a formal and thematic focus on the slight, inconspicuous, and fleeting events and affects in daily life" (Koshy, 2011: 597). Therefore, Lahiri adds a new creative insight into diasporic discourse. My paper also aims to show how, in her efforts to understand human condition in terms of migration, *Interpreter of Maladies* sheds new light on the themes of diasporic literature, anticipating some of the extreme piths of her latest works. After a brief analysis of the word "Diaspora" in the domain of cultural studies, with a specific focus on the Indian subcontinent, the paper explores the textual and thematic structure of Lahiri's collection, linking its main points to diasporic discourse.

In his critical examination of the term *diaspora*, Stephane Dufoix maintains that it is an abused and "inflated" word (Dufoix, 2008: 108). Coming from the Greek verb *speirein* (to sow, or to scatter) and from the preposition *dia* (over), diaspora, thus, means "to scatter over" and it designates the dispersal, throughout the world, of people with the same territorial origin, who share "fellow feelings" (71) because of a sense of empathy and belonging to the same community. Although the term was originally used with a religious meaning until the 1950's (Dufoix, 2008: 17), it later came to describe the historical dispersal of populations who had lost their homelands, such as Jews, Armenians and people of African origin, whose diasporas are regarded as paradigmatic by scholars. According to Dufoix, the term is one of the latest buzzwords in literary criticism: embracing modernity, globalization and transnationalism, the broadening of its meaning comprises the coexistence of both the local and the global, in light of the growth of human, financial, information and cultural movement on a world level.

William Safran's investigation goes farther. He claims that the diasporic community includes several categories of individuals (refugees, expatriates, alien residents, ethnic and racial minorities) living outside their homeland and sharing a series of common features, such as a history of dispersal, visions and

⁵ Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London in 1967 to Bengali parents who settled in Rhode Island (US) in 1970. She wrote two collections of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), and two novels, *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland* (2013). She is currently living in Rome, experimenting writing in Italian: her first Italian work, *In Altre Parole*, was released in January 2015, containing a series of personal essays about her linguistic and cultural voluntary exile in Italy.

memories of the lost homeland, alienation in the host land, yearning for an eventual return and collective identity (Safran, 1991: 83). Yet, beyond these ideal shared characteristics, Diaspora is not a separatist term, since it awakens transcultural movement and transnationalism, a sense of solidarity crossing both spatial and temporal boundaries. It also encompasses the struggle to retain local distinctiveness in a remote host society. Diaspora discourse hence promotes coexistence with a difference, an idea of cosmopolitanism which questions the nation-state ideology (Clifford, 1994: 308). With regard to identity, Diaspora studies feature a shift from the traditional and rigid ideas of identity to more cross-cultural conceptions, produced by hybridization and intercultural encounters.

A key text in the field of Diaspora studies is Avtar Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996), a theoretical investigation of the economic, political and cultural dimensions of contemporary migration, specifically about South Asian communities. Brah describes Diaspora as "conceptual mapping which defies the search for originary absolutes, or genuine and authentic manifestations of a stable, pre-given, unchanging identity" (Brah, 1996: 196). Diaspora space is therefore a site of translocation, a space in-formation, which reveals the ephemeral nature of boundaries and includes all human beings in that location, since "Diasporic space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location [...] where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed".

As noted above, Diaspora studies have been particularly interested in the works of South Asian writers as worthy examples of diasporic literature. Nowadays, it is estimated that about 25 million Indians live worldwide,⁶ with the Indian community being the second largest Diaspora after the Chinese one. As far as the Indian Diaspora is concerned, 1955 represents a milestone in the history of South-Asian migration, since that year represents a demarcation line between the so-called "old" and "new" Indian Diaspora. The first wave of Indian migrants was oriented towards other colonized places, such as Fiji, Malaysia, South Africa, Trinidad and Surinam, where they moved between the early 19th century up to the post-war period, when, in 1947, India gained independence from Britain. These older diasporas present migrations dictated by the classic capitalism of the British empire, with labourers searching for work in sugar, tea, or rubber plantations. The "new" Diaspora, by contrast, came with advanced capitalism, hypermobility and globalization: triggered by the 1955 Indian Citizen Act, which ratified double citizenship for Indians migrating to some European countries, Canada and the United States, this modern and late-capitalist migrant wave is the final step of the long journey of the Indian Diaspora and it represents the privileged site of the diasporic discourse about Indian dispersion (Mishra, 2007: 3).

⁶ The estimation, retrieved in the website of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (<http://moia.gov.in/>), makes a distinction between NRI (non-resident Indians) living, studying, or working abroad, and PIO (people of Indian origin) who are not Indian citizens, but were born to migrants of Indian descent.

The “new” Indian Diaspora was particularly attracted to the United States where the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act (known also as Hart-Celler Act after the names of its two proponents) abolished the quota system, which had previously determined the American immigration policy. With the Hart-Celler Act, new ethnic communities started to settle in the country, particularly from South Asia and the Middle East, since the technical skills of immigrants were the main focus of the new American migration policy. Thus, thousands of migrants coming from the educated middle-class which left India constituted a brain drain, including highly specialized professionals (medical doctors, engineers, scientists, university professors, and doctoral students) who crossed the American border in search of material and financial success, seeing the United States as a vast place of opportunity.

For Vijay Mishra, the Indian diasporic imagery corresponds to “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 2007: 14). Based on the loss of the motherland, an absence generating a traumatic and never-healing wound, the mourning for the lost homeland is then transmitted to the subsequent generations. Its diasporic transmission crosses the rigid boundaries between inner and outer, between here and there, transforming mourning into melancholia. Diaspora discourse therefore conveys the complex and fluid reality of national and cultural belonging in globalizing modernity, revealing moments, traces and fragments of a lost past. Inspired by Clifford, Mishra, in theorizing diasporic imagery, acknowledges that the sense of displacement is the common denominator of all diasporas, resulting in countless attempts to (dis)connect, mix and identify across the globe. The diasporic experience, in short, involves a significant crossing of borders, which may be the borders of a region, a nation or a language. The Diaspora, as a consequence, produces tensional crossings, encouraged by the rapid and radical changes in modern mobility and connectivity.

Published in 1999, at the turn of a new century and on the threshold of the third millennium, Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* was an international bestseller: with her collection of short stories, the Asian-American writer won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the [Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award](#) in the following year. The collection includes nine short stories, (some of which had already appeared in American reviews, such as *The New Yorker* and *Epoch*), investigating the troubled and controversial position of dislocated subjects who, in most cases, finding themselves caught up in problematic attempts to accommodate, end up with failures or (un)resolved assimilations.

Seen from this perspective, the work responds to the anxieties resulting from Lahiri’s “two lives”. In an interview to *Newsweek*, the Indian-American writer states that writing is the only space where she is able to locate and confront the “two worlds” (Lahiri, 2006) she straddles, an ambiguous and complex condition she cannot cope with in her real life. Hence, *Interpreter of Maladies* embodies Lahiri’s bicultural and bilingual heritage, a chaotic identity reflected in the numerous labels applied by scholars to identify her

literary hyphenated status and her writing: “Indian-American”, “British-born”, “Anglo-Indian”, “NRI” (non-resident Indian) and finally “ABCD” (American-born confused desi)⁷ regarding her ethnic status; “Diaspora fiction” and “immigrant fiction” with regard to *Interpreter of Maladies* (Lahiri, 2002: 113). In her work her characters are almost all “translators, insofar as they must make sense of the foreign in order to survive” (Lahiri, 2002: 119): they shuttle between India and America and their translations, like “endless going back and forth” (120), attempt to voice feelings of dislocation and isolation, together with a search for and denial of real communication.

An in-depth reading of the stories, however, discloses the invisible frontiers of disrupted identities that these migrant citizens cross, regardless of the visible and geopolitical borders between India and US. The solidarity which bonds Lahiri’s characters yields cross-cultural encounters which transcend differences in race, age, religion and gender. The subtitle of the work, “Stories from Bengal, Boston and Beyond”, indeed, evokes Lahiri’s focus not only on the dual opposition between West and East, since the adverb “beyond” describes an in-between diasporic space which blurs spatial and temporal binaries and provides hints of the global and ethnic concerns that the Indian-American writer conjures up in her fiction. The frontier becomes an indistinct line, “an elusive line, visible and invisible, physical and metaphorical, amoral and moral” (Rushdie, 2002: 411), implying a journey of deprivation, mourning for (im)possible homecomings and potential advantages for the future generations (Lahiri, 2006).

The nine short stories in the collection go beyond the stereotypical clash between India and America: they offer resistance to the worn-out clichés of Indian exoticism because of their “not too spicy” tones (Shankar, 2009: 41). Lahiri explores human nature in a diasporic cultural context where individuals are “forced to face the great questions of change and adaptation” (Rushdie, 2002: 415). Her prose captures the out-of-context lives of expatriates and first-generation⁸ Americans of Indian origin, with their alienation, sacrifices and struggles, and with their need to relate with themselves and with each other. Lahiri confronts an *ethnoscape* of “tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals [who] constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree” (Appadurai, 1996: 33).

By examining the textual and structural components of Lahiri’s debut work, I will show that, if her characters are the cultural interpreters of her global-ethnic status, the maladies they suffer from are diasporic metaphors epitomizing the psychological, social, historical, and cultural unease ensuing from their efforts to accommodate and cope with their changing positions in life.

⁷ Desi means “Indian”. The acronym ABCD designates confused second-generation Indian migrants raised in the United States.

⁸ In her latest works, *Unaccustomed Earth* and *The Lowland*, Lahiri shifts her focus to second and third generations.

Analysing the structural patterns in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Noelle Brada-Williams observes that, in spite of the repetition of certain motifs (arranged marriages, difficult or problematic human relationships, denied communication and the general sense of displacement connected to the immigrant experience), Lahiri achieves cohesion and coherence in her plots through the recurrent dichotomy between care and carelessness, a subtle narrative tactic which permeates all her stories (Brada-Williams, 2004: 456). Although the gender, age, religion, and race of the actors involved in the interactions change throughout her collection, Lahiri balances the alternation between care and lack of care in order to symbolically join the stories, with the enclosed apprehensions, homesickness and sense of collective identity her narrative accounts entail.

Interpreter of Maladies is, nevertheless, an unusual story-cycle, since Lahiri challenges some of its main features. Not only do her characters travel to and from India and North America, both at a spatial and figurative level, they also display similarities and differences in language and ethnic descent. Furthermore, the narrative devices employed by the Indian-American writer complicate the textual framework of the cycle, because of the alternation between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrative viewpoints. Another confusing narrative element concerns focalization: even when the narrative technique is the third-person omniscient one, Lahiri varies the internal focalization through different characters, – she generally creates a double perspective, even though she employs a first-person plural point of view in one of her stories. Switching between various modes of narration allows for clear transitions between storylines, breaking the sequence of a traditional story-cycle pattern.

In my analysis, however, the stories are grouped respectively with regard to the geographical setting, and to the differences in race and age of characters: of the nine stories, three are entirely located in India, while the remaining ones are set in the US. The stories of this first group, in their turn, can be divided in two categories, with regard to the ethnic origin of the protagonists: two of them (“A Real Durwan” and “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”) feature two Indian women, while “Interpreter of Maladies” (the title story) combines both an Indian-American family with an Indian citizen. The six stories of the second group are all set in an American suburban landscape, but they can also be divided into two categories: those where children interact with adults (“When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine”, “Sexy”, and “Mrs Sen’s”) and those where sentimental discord is central (“A Temporary Matter”, “This Blessed House”, and “The Third and Final Continent”). In spite of this categorization, Lahiri mixes motifs and patterns, with characters sharing similarities in gender, race, and attitudes in all her stories; thus, my grouping is only a conventional and arbitrary choice used to analyse the collection.

In “A Real Durwan”,⁹ Boori Ma is an elderly Partition refugee. Deported to Kolkata, she lives in the stairwell of a building, where she works as a sweeper. In spite of her Indian identity, she is perceived as “the other” by the tenants of the building for her clear eastern accent.¹⁰ They, indeed, hide feelings of scepticism about her chronicles of a magnificent past: “Have I mentioned that I crossed the border with just two bracelets on my wrist? Yet there was a day when my feet touched nothing but marble. Believe me, don’t believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them” (Lahiri, 1999: 71).

The residents label Boori Ma a “super entertainer” (73) for the “litanies” of her previous comfortable life: she awakens contempt and charity in them and the formula “Believe me, don’t believe me” is a refrain tagging all her accounts. Boori Ma, symbolically, dwells on the threshold between present and past, here and there: she embodies one of the numerous post-Partition endo-diasporas in the South Asian continent, where the community of a nation “is incongruent with its national boundaries.” (Koshy, 2011: 600). The old woman is an expatriate, the victim of a traumatic experience of loss, her grief encompassing not only the issue of her ethnic identity, but also her affective domain, since she has lost her family and all her possessions. Besides, her transgressional nature is also displayed by a job (that of caretaker) which places her in an interstitial position, since “under normal circumstances this was no job for a woman” (Lahiri, 1999: 73). Ironically, her being a “victim of the changing times” (72), in the eyes of the residents, leads her to an unpredictable conclusion: blamed for negligence and, as a consequence, identified as responsible for a theft occurred in the building, she is kicked out of the lodging with all her things.

The story is indicative of the gradual disintegration of the traditional values which forged old communities: the fellow feelings which used to keep people together tear apart and leave space to human scattering within the very boundaries of the Indian continent, generating dislocation and isolation. Boori Ma, in addition, suffers from the “changing times” of a globalizing modernity, because the turning point of the story, the theft, takes place when the building is being modernized in its outlook, a change resulting from capitalism and growing consumerism: “Boori Ma’s mouth is full of ashes. But that is nothing new. What is new is the face of this building. What a building like this needs is a real *durwan*” (82).

This final remark, by one of the tenants, conveys the difference between a new socio-cultural era (symbolized by the façade of the building) and Boori Ma’s disrupted and almost illegal identity: seen as a clown who mesmerizes people with her chatting, and bereft of a name –Boori Ma means “old mother”– she is positioned on the fringe of the community. The old Indian refugee is the archetypical representative of the ethnic dispersion generated by a controversial and painful history.

⁹ The Hindi word *durwan* means “caretaker”, “keeper”.

¹⁰ Boori Ma comes from East Bengal (now Bangladesh). After Partition, East Bengal became part of Pakistan (see footnote 13).

In “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”, the protagonist is a young Indian woman, who, like Boori Ma, dwells in a liminal position: Bibi experiences carelessness and alienation from both her relatives and the villagers because of her sufferance from hysteria and epilepsy. Her eccentric behaviour arouses detachment and isolation around her. Unlike Boori Ma’s, Bibi’s story is set in a remote suburban landscape, far from clear historical references and social capitalist changes. She is the only character in the collection affected by a real physical disturbance. Yet, Bibi shares Boori’s diasporic identity: the unknown nature of her illness condemns her to confinement in “the storage room on the roof of our building” (Lahiri, 1999: 159) and her marginalization is embodied by her female otherness: “Bibi had never been taught to be a woman; the illness had left her naïve in most practical matters” (163).

After consulting several doctors, who prescribe various ineffective treatments, Bibi Haldar is eventually advised to find a husband and get married. Lahiri’s ironic strategy highlights the feelings of bewilderment in the community about the possibility of Bibi’s marriage. In the end, Bibi is discovered to be pregnant: she gives birth and sets up a business in the storage room, although she remains an alien in the eyes of her community for the mysterious affair of her pregnancy and of her ultimate recovery:

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).

By using a first-person plural narrative voice (the communal “we”), Lahiri sets Bibi apart from her community: although sharing the same ethnic origin, her female subjectivity makes her an outsider. Lahiri does not unveil the enigma of the birth, leaving it up to the reader to decide whether her pregnancy is the consequence of rape, or the outcome of an agreeable sexual affair. Maternity, however, has a healing power which restores Bibi’s position in the community, a rebirth fostered also by her financial entrepreneurship.

Set in India like the two previous tales, “Interpreter of Maladies”¹¹ features an Indian-American family, the Dases, and an Indian tour guide, Mr. Kapasi. Once a student of foreign languages, dreaming of “serving as an interpreter between nations” (Lahiri, 1999: 59), Mr. Kapasi works part-time as an interpreter for Gujarati¹² patients in a doctor’s office. This revelation stirs Mrs. Das from her snobbish complaints about the journey and the place: she comes to be fascinated by the responsibility Mr. Kapasi holds, defining his job as “romantic” (53). Later, she discloses her secret, confessing to Mr. Kapasi that one of her three

¹¹ On several occasions, Jhumpa Lahiri has pointed out that the idea for the story came from a real episode she became acquainted with in her youth: a friend of hers was working as an interpreter for an American doctor tending to several Russian patients who could not speak English properly.

¹² An Indo-Aryan language which is spoken in Gujarat, a western Indian state. Therefore, Gujarati differs from Bengali, which is an Eastern Indo-Aryan language.

children was clandestinely conceived in an extra-marital affair. While Mina Das is looking for a suggestion, for a therapy for her ailments, Mr. Kapasi is looking for a friend: even if the narrative voice is omniscient, Lahiri makes Mr. Kapasi the focalization viewpoint. The tour guide and the Indian-American woman share the same language (English) and the same homeland (India), even though Mr. Kapasi remarks that the Dases “looked Indian, but dressed as foreigners did” (44-45). During the trip to the Sun Temple in Konark, Mr. Kapasi identifies with Mrs. Das, since he detects the same symptoms of unhappiness he feels about his own marriage: “the bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences” (53).

Nevertheless, Mr. Kapasi’s linguistic and medical skills fail, since socio-cultural barriers hinder communication: misunderstood and misinterpreted by the foreign-returned, he feels insulted by her behaviour, realizing the vanity of his expectations. The story, after which the entire collection is named, epitomizes the trope of communicating emotions and afflictions. Grounded in an intercultural encounter, the failed sexual fantasies of the Indian tour guide about Mrs. Das are a reminder of the gap dividing them, especially in class privilege, in spite of a common ethnicity: armed with cameras, the Dases embark on a trip to learn about their ethnic heritage, but India, for them, corresponds just to an exotic and stereotypical snapshot. Like in Forster’s *A Passage to India*, where the English are unable to familiarize with India because of their role of colonizers, the Dases feel awkward in their homeland as they represent the travellers of a globalizing modernity: they are emotionally unaffected by India and for them places are all alike. Drawing on diasporic tourism, –where consumerism promotes the idea of the physical world as commodity– Jhumpa Lahiri shows how trans-national bonds with a common descent may produce dispersal and arouse estrangement.

In the following pages, I will analyse the stories with a North American setting; the first category includes the ones in which Lahiri uses the narrative perspective of children. In “When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine”, Lilia, a ten-year-old American child of Bengal descent confronts her ethnic origin by observing Mr. Pirzada, who is a regular guest in her house for a short period. The episode is set in 1971, the time of the story being that of the Indo-Pakistani war,¹³ a second, even if not less acute, partition in the Indian subcontinent. Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani Muslim, is on study leave in the US. Every evening, he visits Lilia’s parents, who are Hindus of Indian origin. They have dinner together while watching the news on TV: Mr. Pirzada is anxious about his own family in Dhaka¹⁴ which is shattered by the terrible conflict. Food is the catalyst for solidarity and transnational belongings in this diasporic household and Lilia sees the Pakistani man as a member of her own family. The young girl cannot but notice the many similarities they all share in

¹³ After the 1947 Partition between India and Pakistan, the region of East Bengal came to be part of the newly-formed state of Pakistan. The 1971 conflict broke out on December 3rd between India and Pakistan and it was part of the war for the liberation of East Bengal (known also as East Pakistan), which had started in March 1971. The military campaign ended on December 16th with the official establishment of the republic of Bangladesh.

¹⁴ The current capital of Bangladesh.

spite of their different birthplaces: “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” (Lahiri, 1999: 25).

The line drawn between here and there, between Hindus and Muslims makes no difference to Lilia. Even when her father shows her the geographical map with different colours for India and Pakistan, she reflects about the arbitrary use of colours (and borders) to illustrate national difference. Instead, she notices that Mr. Pirzada and her parents “were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, single silence, and a single fear” (41): the anxieties about the fate of Mr. Pirzada’s family bolster fellow feelings and collective identity. For Lilia, geopolitical belonging conflicts with ethnic identity and her sense of confusion is amplified by the silence and utter disinterest shown at school with regard to the conflict in Bangladesh. Her American teacher expresses disappointment when she finds Lilia reading a book about Dhaka, seeing “no reason to consult it” (33). The narrative of the war episodes, through TV coverage, prompts a sense of guilt in Lilia for her privileged life in the new world. Every night, she enacts a ritual in order to exorcize her apprehensions about Mr. Pirzada’s seven daughters in Dhaka: Lilia eats the candy the Pakistani guest gives her every evening in order to counterbalance the starving condition of the East Pakistani refugees she learns about on TV. Finally, when the story ends with Mr. Pirzada’s happy reunion with his family in Bangladesh, Lilia gives up eating candies (which she had stocked up) for their sake.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s light touch combines a traumatic historical event with the naïf thoughts and actions of a ten-year-old child: Lilia’s daily ritual blunts the sharp fears about complex dynamics she cannot fully understand. Lahiri’s choice of using the first-person narration in the perspective of a child creates a double effect: while reducing the political and historic burden of the event with a childish viewpoint, the news from the Indian subcontinent, on the other hand, metaphorically scatter the Indian endo-diaspora in America. The episodes of sufferance broadcast through the media create confusion and conflicting emotions. Lilia is the first of Lahiri’s second-generation characters: through the child, the Indian-American writer foregrounds her own diasporic concerns, showing that the migrant condition in itself is a complex and problematic experience. It is in Lilia’s generation that Lahiri places the legacies of historical South Asian disjunctions, making it clear that for migrants like Lilia “America becomes an ambivalent charged nation-space [...] which also enables her to dream a transnational, non-nationalist South Asian American politics” (Daiya, 2008: 197). In addition, Jhumpa Lahiri implicitly criticizes the American school syllabus, a question symbolized by Lilia’s father’s preoccupation with her daughter growing up unaware of the history of his homeland, a lack of knowledge that might cause a potential widening of the generation gap.

Internal focalization occurs also with Rohin and Eliot who, in “Sexy” and “Mrs. Sen’s” respectively, posit their childlike perspectives. Unlike Lilia’s tale, these two stories have the third person omniscient narrator, and Lahiri abandons historical and official accounts, focusing on more ordinary experiences.

“Sexy” deals with the sexual clandestine affair between Dev, a married Indian migrant living in Boston, and Miranda, a white American girl. Through Miranda, Jhumpa Lahiri continues her criticizing portrayal of the American bias towards ethnic minorities, since Miranda is disoriented about the very meaning of the word Bengal: “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).

The story unfolds Miranda’s gradual approach to Bengali culture, although through clichés: she tries to learn the Bengali alphabet by reading the menu in an Indian restaurant and, only later, by consulting books in a bookstore. Her initial stereotypical notion of sexually-erotized India, embodied by Dev, is replaced by Miranda’s development of traditional subcontinental feelings, such as compassion and conservatism, while, paradoxically, Dev exploits the Western fetishist Indianness to his own advantage. Miranda’s ultimate decision to break up with the young Indian man comes when she encounters seven-year old Rohin. The child is the son of one of Miranda’s Indian friend’s cousins, and his father betrays Rohin’s mother in an extra-marital affair. When Miranda hears the boy’s interpretation of the word *sexy*, “loving somebody you don’t know” (Lahiri, 1999: 107) by referring to his father’s example, “he sat next to someone he doesn't know, someone sexy, and now he loves her instead of my mother” (108), she feels guilty: realizing that this is what she is doing as well, she brings her sexual affair with Dev to an end.

In mid-position in the collection, “Sexy” discloses a thematic difference based on the fact that the protagonist is an American girl, whose efforts to assimilate the Bengali culture and language lead to the problematic consequence of an identity crisis. In addition to the confrontation with cultural difference, which shows “the possibilities of connection across differences” (Koshy, 2011: 594), the story describes the intergenerational conflict between first and second generations, with the latter (as in the case of Dev) acquiring more westernized and liberal customs about love and marriage and, hence, symbolizing the dispersive effects of diasporic scattering.

“Mrs. Sen’s”¹⁵ is the story of a young Indian housewife who, after her arranged marriage with a compatriot, migrates to North America where her husband is a university mathematics professor. Without a patronymic to denote an identity of her own, Mrs. Sen suffers the consequences of the post-1965 brain drain and her abiding resistance to accommodate is represented by her refusal to get a driver’s license (and, consequently, of being independent) and by her incessant and scrupulous Indian cuisine. Food and kitchen equipment are metaphors for the nostalgia she feels about India, since the only mention of the name of her country “seemed to release something in her” (Lahiri, 1999: 113): she creates a small-scale India in her American house with her recipes, books, make-up and clothes.

¹⁵ As Jhumpa Lahiri has underlined in several interviews, the figure of her own mother was the inspiration for the character of Mrs. Sen (and for that of Ashima as well, in *The Namesake*).

Mrs. Sen starts babysitting Eliot, an eleven-year-old American boy with a career mother (a western and neoliberal image of womanhood which strikingly contrasts with Mrs. Sen's) and, despite their difference in age and race, they develop solidarity and mutual comradeship. They share the same kind of loss and alienation: while the Indian woman is homesick for her faraway community in Kolkata and her daily ritual of chopping vegetables symbolically connects her with India, Eliot, in his turn, is curiously attracted by Mrs. Sen's behaviour and develops a liking for the woman and for her house as a place of care and affection. In silently observing her, the American boy is able to identify his own loneliness, being an only child with a single parent, and living in a state of isolation in his neighbourhood. Mrs. Sen's final adventurous decision to drive her husband's car to buy fish comically ends with a minor accident that marks the epilogue of the affective intimacy between the woman and the boy: Eliot's mother perceives Mrs. Sen as a menace for her son, realizing that her child is "a big boy now" (135) who can do without supervision.

The farcical conclusion of the story binds together Mrs. Sen's failed naturalization with Eliot's symbolic independence and adaptation towards self-sufficiency. Lodging in an in-between space, in a "past-present" space (Bhabha, 1994: 7) which disrupts spatial and temporal coordinates, "Mrs. Sen's" illustrates a woman's grief for her unresolved assimilation and the affective costs brought forth by globalization. Both Mrs. Sen and Eliot, despite their differences, are victims of the dislocations engendered by flexibility and mobility in our modern society.

Whereas Lilia copes with political questions, Rohin and Eliot face daily and apparently bland matters. Yet, through their eyes, Lahiri juxtaposes a critical though innocent voice to troublesome situations: her young observers, despite their ethnic descent, negotiate the tensions arising between host and home culture. Like Arundhati Roy, in *The God of Small Things* (1997), who sieves the complex hierarchy of the Indian society through Estha and Rahel's innocent rationale, Jhumpa Lahiri sides with children in order to make known and comprehensible both the historical and subjective outcomes of diasporic discourse: children act as mediators, interpretative filters attempting, with their efforts, to find a fine balance between here and there, Hindus and Muslims, white and brown; they are fluid cultural translators who challenge the rigid boundaries of nation-states, enriching and broadening the borders of an ethnic dispersion between two worlds.

In this final section of the paper, I explore the remaining three stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* which present a common American setting and controversial conjugal relationships. In "This Blessed House", Sanjeev and Twinkle have been married for just four months, in a semi-arranged marriage. Both second-generation migrants settled in Connecticut, they differ from each other in their own acculturation: while Twinkle is an open-minded student (she is completing her master's degree thesis on an Irish poet), Sanjeev, in contrast, is a manager for a company where he supervises dozens of people. In spite of their same age and race, Twinkle, as her name suggests, is an emblem of vivacious brightness, representing a happy assimilation

within the American background, whereas Sanjeev, a paradigmatic representative of the brain drain of the new Indian Diaspora, sticks to the more solid and traditional feelings of conservatism and religious compliance. It is regarding religious matters that Lahiri takes the contradictions of the couple to extremes. While organizing the housewarming party for their new house, they find out various Christian paraphernalia (postcards, crosses, posters, statues), probably left by the previous owners. The absurd discovery produces opposing reactions in the two partners: Sanjeev's disappointment does not match the girl's excitement. Twinkle finds the objects spectacular, interpreting them as positive and welcoming signs; she, indeed, believes that "this house is blessed" (Lahiri, 1999: 144) as the objects are tokens of good fortune for their powerful healing power. Sanjeev, on the contrary, would rather have the items thrown away, experiencing frustration at his wife's tolerant and childish attitude. She persuades him to display the objects all around their house, regarding his bosses' possible disapproval of his religious credo unfair: "they can't fire you for being a believer. It would be discrimination" (147). The climax of the story occurs when, during the party, Twinkle starts a sort of treasure hunt culminating with the finding of a silver bust of Jesus in the attic. From the breadwinning landlord and perfect host, Sanjeev is transformed into a spectator of Twinkle's performance: her eclectic behaviour charms his colleagues and she ends the search in triumph, by placing the nearly thirty pound bust on the mantelpiece. Her husband's aversion is partially offset by the recognition of the beauty of the bust: "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).

Sanjeev, in his own house, experiences what Bhabha defines as unhomeliness, "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). The house, therefore, becomes a diasporic place, a place of translation, invasion, and transformation, in which the boundaries between public and private blur, an erosion taking place when subjects are deprived of the stability of their identity as a consequence of their transnational and transcultural roaming. Sanjeev ultimately feels unsettled and the loss of his own home(land) is "an impossible mourning which transforms mourning into melancholia" (Mishra, 2007: 9). Similar to Mohun in Naipaul's novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), the house is a metaphor for the search of selfhood and desire for home, in face of feelings of diasporic dislocation. To Sanjeev's wailing displacement, Lahiri opposes Twinkle's female resistance to her husband's patriarchal orthodoxy: her genuine curiosity promotes an optimistic idea of acculturation with her intercultural ability to read the Christian objects as sites of new meaning, far from what they traditionally mean.

The two remaining stories –"A Temporary Matter" and "The Third and Final Continent"– are, respectively, placed first and last in *Interpreter of Maladies*. They are similar in the way they portray two

couples of Indian migrants to North America. Yet, the stories, the first with a third person omniscient narrator and the second with a first person one, move in opposing directions: the open and problematic ending in “A Temporary Matter” clashes with the buoyant mood in the conclusion of “The Third and Final Continent”.

In “A Temporary Matter” we meet Shukumar and Shoba, American citizens of Bengali origin, who are facing the trauma of a stillborn child. Far from analyzing their inability to adapt to a hostile cultural environment, Lahiri rather focuses on the deteriorating relationships between a husband and a wife after the tragic incident. Instead of sticking together, they become estranged and begin avoiding each-other. In spite of their common ethnic origin, the couple find it impossible to communicate. The unspoken grief for the loss of the child changes them: once an excellent student, Shukumar lingers over his dissertation, spending his time cooking and reading a novel; Shoba, on her part, becomes lazier and stops helping her husband do housework.

The “temporary matter” in the title refers to and revolves around a cut-off of the electricity supply for one hour each evening for five days: forced to dine together by candlelight, Shukumar and Shoba begin a game of confessions. Every night they decide to tell each other some of their secrets. The revelations include minor incidents, such as cheating during an exam or secretly having a drink with a friend. The turning point is Shukumar’s significant confession: he tells his wife that the baby was a boy with “a skin more red than brown”, “black hair” and “curled fingers” resembling his mother’s ones (Lahiri, 199: 22). Shoba, hence, discovers that her husband was in the hospital during the tragic event and that the stillbirth has affected him as deeply as herself. But the moment of an allegedly happy reunion becomes the symbolic closure of both the narrative and their relation: Shoba announces her decision to move to another apartment and temporarily live on her own. Yet, the final image of the story with the two partners weeping together “for the things they now knew” (22) complicates the ending, allowing for a double interpretation: with regard to the adjective “temporary”, it is up to the reader to decide whether it is their love or their hatred that is transient and comes to a definitive end.

Although the story covers only a five day period, it actually drags past insecurities out of the characters’ lives: in disrupting the sacral and supreme value that marriage holds in Bengali culture, Jhumpa Lahiri depicts the uncertainties and the dangers of family bonds. She seems to claim that not only historical events may cause isolation: primary human relations, such as marriage, despite being spaces beyond the borders of nations and cultures, prove inadequate means to define identity in the harsh environment of the host land.

The last story in the collection, “The Third and Final Continent”, chronicles the migration of an unnamed narrator¹⁶ from India to America, in the aftermath of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act. Like an autobiographical account, the narrator recounts his migrant experience from his departure in the 1960s, on board the Italian cargo ship *SS Roma*, which sets sail from India towards England, where he shares a flat in north London with “other penniless Bengali bachelors” (Lahiri, 1999: 173), up to his ultimate settlement, in 1969, in America, the third and final continent, where he finds a full-time job in a library at MIT. On his arrival in Massachusetts, his family, in Kolkata, arranges his marriage with an Indian girl, Mala. Lahiri does not renounce her ironic touch: the narrative unfolds, describing the narrator’s six weeks before Mala’s departure to the US. He lodges as a tenant in a room of Mrs. Croft’s house, a 103-year-old lady. The news of the American flag on the moon¹⁷ impresses the elderly lady, who lives in a sort of atemporal dimension, clinging on to her Victorian conservatism: the comical effect of the astonishing achievement of the NASA astronauts is that, each day, Mrs. Croft forces the narrator to repeat “splendid” to close her comments full of amazement about the American flag fluttering on the moon.

When Mala gets to Massachusetts, they move to a flat of their own, where, gradually, the docile housewife who “could cook, knit, embroider, sketch landscapes, and recite poems by Tagore” (181) succeeds in adapting to a new environment. Symbolically, it is Mrs. Croft’s comment, “she is a perfect lady” (195),—during a visit the narrator pays to the elderly woman with his wife— that is the turning point for Mala’s American naturalization and for the step forward in the intimacy between husband and wife. The story ends with the image of the “ordinary heroism” of the Indian man and his wife. They had come to a new land as strangers, unaware of what and who they would meet. They are amazed, as Mrs. Croft used to be at the astronauts’ adventure in the space, when they think “that there was a time that we were strangers”, with the sense of estrangement here relating both to their migrant experience and to the initial lack of closeness between them.

Lahiri’s choice to conclude her collection with the optimism this story conveys is strategic: with the struggles to accommodate and the endurance to survive across Asia, Europe and finally America, the narrator, in becoming a more physically and emotionally mature man, strikes a balance with his own life, in light of his fatherhood. He acknowledges that though visiting their birthplace now and then both himself and his wife are “American citizens now” (197). His conclusive remark about the time elapsed since his departure reflects pride, but also uncertainties for the future of his “alone and unprotected” son (197), when he and Mala will be dead:

¹⁶ The narrator of this story is based on Lahiri’s father: Mr. Lahiri first moved to London and then to Rhode Island, where he worked in a MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) library.

¹⁷ The episode is the landing on the moon of the American spacecraft *Apollo 11*, on July 20, 1969.

While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new 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 travelled [*sic*], 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 my imagination (Lahiri, 1999: 198).

According to Clifford, diasporic consciousness can entail contradictory outcomes: “this constitutive suffering coexists with the skills of survival: strength in adaptive distinction, discrepant cosmopolitanism, and stubborn visions of renewal. Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension” (Clifford, 1994: 312). “The Third and Final Continent” ends the collection on a positive note: yet, the sense of achievement the narrator feels for his transcontinental scattering cannot conceal the pain caused by his past and the anxiety about his growing son’s future. The story is based on both temporal and spatial transgressions, with comparisons among continents and the moon, among a woman born in 1863 and a boy growing up on the cusp of the third millennium. In addition, Lahiri recreates a type of solidarity which goes beyond racial and age differences: Mrs. Croft, with her eccentric obsession, fills in the affective vacuum of the narrator’s initial dislocation in the host land. Her ultimate death affects him, since it represents the first tragic episode he mourns in America.

In her endeavours to interpret maladies, Jhumpa Lahiri translates the experiences of the new Indian Diaspora in her tales: ranging from displacement, endo-diasporic estrangement and exo-diasporic alienation, homeliness and acute sense of loneliness, to aspiration to belonging and desire to open to the possibilities of acculturation, the maladies her migrant subjects suffer from are metaphors for the conditions of millions of Bengalis who strive to locate themselves among multiple homes. Critics have pinpointed Lahiri’s detailed portrayal of Bengali culture and traditions: her plots are full of Bengali names, rituals, food habits, cooking, clothes, literary references, religious practices and toponyms. Her ethnic representation is never simplistic, extreme or artificial.

In my analysis I have attempted to broaden the meaning of the diasporic discourse that Lahiri’s stories imply. Her “minority cosmopolitanism”¹⁸ complicates the concept of Diaspora in a global world: the negotiations and the solutions Lahiri’s characters go through run differently, and their choices reflect the historical, social and cultural background these migrants belong to. They cannot simply abandon their old lifestyles and pick up new ones. In contrast, they select, shift and modify in order to fit in the host land, depending on the extent to which modernity bumps into their lives. Like cultural translators, Sanjeev, Shukumar, Boori Ma, Bibi, Mala, and all the other characters “live at the intersections of histories and memories, experiencing both their preliminary dispersal and their subsequent translation into new, more

¹⁸ The expression is derived from the title of Susan Koshy’s contribution.

extensive arrangements along emerging routes” (Chambers, 1994: 6). They shuttle between what Chambers labels the “historical inheritance” and the “heterogeneous present” (6). Diaspora does not only lead to crossing geopolitical borders, it also signifies traversing the less visible boundaries of space, time, culture, language and history, in order to allow diasporic subjects to relocate in a new landscape. Whereas it is true that in *Interpreter of Maladies* Lahiri mainly draws on the “fleeting events and affects in daily life” (Koshy, 2011: 597), I maintain that her stories mix historical, political and ethical issues as well. Her characters are not illegal citizens, clandestine entrants avoiding border control. Her prose has nothing of the passion and vehemence of Bharati Mukherjee’s style. Jhumpa Lahiri, however, reveals a clever ironic touch and a realistic tone which allows her to link Partition with modernity, mass media with uncanny rituals, thorny problems and sentimental upheavals with comic and unpredictable outcomes. Her diasporic storylines disrupt families and affective bonds, yet she reroutes them anew, through alternative models. Her narrative tries to bridge the abyss between her “two lives”: the unusual solidarity she creates among her characters, despite the distances in terms of ethnicity, age, gender, and religion, is symptomatic of the need to look for “new emerging roots” (Chambers, 1994: 6). They respond to the undeniable human necessity to live, in spite of the difficulties that life entails.

In conclusion, in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri foreshadows some of the major features of her most recent works, in particular in her last book, *The Lowland*. This novel, in fact, may be considered her first book. Lahiri began to work on it in 1997 (two years before the publication of her debut collection). It took her nearly seventeen years to finish *The Lowland*, because of its controversial historical scenario.¹⁹ Moreover, being a kind of *Familienroman*, where four generations are depicted between Rhode Island and West Bengal, it represents a serious effort to join together both intergenerational and historical conflicts. Seen in this light, *Interpreter of Maladies*, contains embryonic ideas of a long-awaited plan: her stories are not static representations revolving around everyday matters and subjects dwelling between two worlds. In pervading her collection with the tensions about the immigrant experience, uncanny and farcical outbursts resulting from ordinary situations, and intergenerational disputes with defamiliarizing consequences, her stories display an universal appeal because such episodes may take place everywhere. It is this mediation between universal and particular, local and global, her ability to enhance difference alongside sameness, which renders Lahiri’s writing a delicate and poised voice within Indian and world diasporic literature.



¹⁹ *The Lowland* is the story of a family, of its disruption and reconstruction. It opens in post-Partition Kolkata, proceeding between the historical background of the Maoist revolutionary movement of the Naxalites in West Bengal and the Cuban crisis in the United States, up to our contemporary globalized modernity.

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