

**TRANSNATIONAL SPACES OF IDENTITY RECOGNITION IN JHUMPA  
LAHIRI'S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES***

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**ABSTRACT.** *The object of this study is to explore the relation between identity and space in Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories Interpreter of Maladies (1999). I will gauge how subjects adjust to their environments and to which means they resort to conserve, negate meaning. It appears that through the perusal of border consciousness subjects negotiate their identities, which leads them to understand the Other and, by extension, themselves. In fact, as the sense of belonging operates on the multi-layered and deterritorialised location of home, I will thus illustrate that whilst some subjects are hindered by forces of dislocation, cultural hybridity, others reassert a sense of transnational belonging in a third space. I shall include an introductory note on the theoretical framework and a section on food adding to the more detailed literature discussion of identity negotiation at stake.*

*Keywords:* Jhumpa Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies, space, adaptation, diaspora, food.

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## ESPACIOS TRANSNACIONALES Y RECONOCIMIENTO DE LA IDENTIDAD EN *INTÉRPRETE DEL DOLOR* DE JHUMPA LAHIRI

**RESUMEN.** *El propósito de este estudio es el de explorar la relación entre identidad y espacio en la colección de relatos cortos Intérprete del dolor (1999) de Jhumpa Lahiri. Evaluaré cómo los sujetos se adaptan y a qué medios recurren para conservar, negar significado. Parece que, a través de la revisión de la conciencia fronteriza, los sujetos negocian sus identidades, lo cual los lleva a entender al Otro y, por extensión, a ellos mismos. De hecho, como la sensación de pertenencia funciona a varios niveles en la localización desterritorializada del hogar, ilustraré que mientras algunos personajes son obstaculizados por las fuerzas de la deslocalización, hibridación cultural, otros restablecen un sentido de pertenencia transnacional en un “tercer espacio”. Incluiré una nota introductoria sobre el marco teórico y una sección sobre comida que aportaría detalles sobre la negociación de la identidad al análisis literario.*

*Palabras clave:* Jhumpa Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies, espacio, adaptación, diáspora, comida.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Research on postcolonial studies has a long tradition addressing the question of diaspora, cultural identity, and the discourse of fixed origins. In this age of multiculturalism, a rethinking of the postcolonial framework has been called upon by capitalist-oriented open hypermobility, high accessibility, and proficient tools for communicating between the diasporic subject, the host and the native land. This leads us to the zest of diaspora and its double positioning straddling the East and West, the new and the old converging under the aegis of a constant identity negotiation whereby spacing and temporalizing are the *sine qua non* condition of the interplay of differences.

This paper closely follows the configuration of deterritorialized or transnational migrants as representatives of the avowed “intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location [...] where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed” (Brah 1996: 196). Tellingly, nation-states are allowing a full gamut of cultures to revamp their core values and it is owing to this backdrop that subjects inhabit a diasporic space, that is, one split by an ostensible border consciousness. Diaspora presupposes borders as the site of immanence ontologically anterior to the construction of identity since it confronts subjects to an in-between state and the underlying question “How is desire disciplined,

authority displaced?” (Bhabha 1994: 130). As the diasporic subject seesaws between two domains, doubly belonging and detaching from contested spaces, gaining, losing and transforming itself, this paper confronts 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). For this study, it was of interest to provide a conceptual contextualization of the terminology of diaspora and its modes of interaction. Following such theoretical underpinning, the major aim of this work was to illustrate Lahiri’s character development in *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) regarding the ethics of difference and, more specifically, how difference structures identity recognition as the movement, or lack thereof, directing the subject towards the “perseverance in being” or “genuine subversion” of customs, meaning, depending upon the spacing of avowed border consciousness (Badiou 2012: 46-54).

Several authors have approached Lahiri’s work in relation to the collusion of identity and space. However, only a few studies (Alfonso-Forero 2017; Caesar 2005; Farshid and Taleie 2013; Kuortti 2007; Friedman 2008) have shown an interest in the role of space addressing what transnational, hybrid, hyphen or third space means for identity negotiation and its reciprocal relationship with space, assuming an active/passive role in the conservation/subversion of meaning. To overcome this problem, this paper will attempt to build on previous knowledge and provide a more nuanced exploration of identity negotiation by documenting several key contributions made to the field (Alfonso-Forero 2007; Bahmanpour 2010; Bahri 2013; Bhatt 2009; Brada-Williams 2004; Caesar 2005; Farshid 2013; Friedman 2008; Kuortti 2007; Lewis 2001; Macwan 2014; Monaco 2015; Ridda 2011; Singh 2012).

Over time, an extensive body of literature has considered the state of in-betweenness derived from the diasporic experience. Taken as the entanglement of dispersal and deferral of meaning, diaspora shifts through an ill-posed debris of entombed meaning, which comes about, in Levinas’ *Infinity and Totality* (1969), as the irreducible trace of the Other. In this sense, the locus of difference intertwines the rendering of a subject and the devotion to the Other as the “me-myself-at-a-distance... ‘objectified’ for my consciousness” (Badiou 2012: 21). Based on such configuration we can appreciate how a physical place can have a myriad of meanings depending on the social practices avowed, which, consequently, give rise to the reboot of spaces. From an etymological perspective, diaspora strictly meant “to scatter about, disperse”, but “‘diaspora’ evolved as the preferred and catch-all expression covering sin, scattering, emigration and the possibilities of repentance and return” (Cohen 2008: 21). Notwithstanding, the global paradigm shift has unhinged diaspora from its primeval meaning and broadened its spectrum. Diaspora can “refer to a conquered land with the purpose of colonization, to

assimilate the territory into the empire” (Bhatt 2009: 37). It owes its fuzziness to a rich genealogy of meanings. We need to hark back to the early twentieth century to read “hyphenated” people, as a derogatory term and half a century later to debunk the melting pot model. Cultural Studies encourage accepting multiculturalism as the joint undertaking of diversity tolerance since the ethical binding of diaspora is no longer grounded on “terror, despair, hope” (Appadurai 1996: 6). Victim diaspora, that is, expatriates, and, withal, labour diaspora bringing slaves, cheap manpower, have branched out into other modes. More specifically, diaspora can be understood as:

1. Dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically; 2. Alternatively, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions; 3. A collective memory and myth about the homeland; 4. An idealization of the supposed ancestral home; 5. A return movement or at least a continuing connection; 6. A strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time; 7. A troubled relationship with host societies; 8. A sense of co-responsibility with co-ethnic members in other countries; and 9. The possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in tolerant host countries. (Cohen 2008: 161-162)

Out of this stranglehold, the “I” stance comes against a ghostly archetype of beliefs unknown, an unrecognizable Other that works under the auspices of a dominant culture or a lack thereof. Providing that spaces are steeped into the configuration of these meanings, we might find similarities between Hall’s “hybridity” (1990) and the ‘third space’ posited by Homi Bhabha (1994). Both demarcate a leap forward binding tenable middle grounds for blending in society. However, it would be a false dilemma then to frame ethnic consciousness exclusively as dominant-culture in opposition to a subdued one. While “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” (Bhabha 1994: 114), the third space stands as an “interstitial passage between fixed identifications” that “opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4).

Hitherto, an overhauled term for the current migrant community dimension is that of transnationalism (Kivisto 2001; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999; Vertovec 2001) because transnationalism imbibes from the third space and addresses the global paradigm of mobility. It forestalls a cloistered notion of diasporic subjects and operates on remittances and culture reproduction without compulsory acculturation. As Marc Augé (2014) recaps, the cornucopia of events, spaces and individualized references presents an accelerated account of human life and a contested cultural contact coming about as the throbbing manifestation

of the “here” with an outspoken covenant with the “outside”. This runs parallel to the juncture of global flows proposed with Appiah’s (2006) “cosmopolitanism” contributing to an unimpaired “cross contamination” of cultures or Bauman’s liquid modernity. Capitalism aligns itself with the welfare of nations and vindicates the chutnification of hegemonic cultures, a success story as that of the “Banyan tree myth, which establishes its roots in several soils” (Bhatt 2009: 1)– albeit crucially grounded on the exploitation of capital.

## 2. LOST IN THE HYPHEN BETWEEN THE SELF-OTHER. “A TEMPORARY MATTER”, “INTERPRETER OF MALADIES”, “A REAL DURWAN”, “SEXY”, “MRS. SEN’S”

Jhumpa Lahiri’s first foray into storytelling has been regarded as a “short story cycle”; because it consists of stories evoking disaffection and brimming with hope, evincing the tension between “care and neglect” towards the symbolic relationship with objects, spaces (Brada-Williams 2004). Two main cultures underpin the connection of space and identity in *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), the Indian and the American. Hence, an examination of their hyphenated Indian-American identity seems compulsory to articulate spaces as sites of hybrid or transnational belonging.

In “Interpreter of Maladies” 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 dull life and comes across a tourist family who demand his services. “The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did” (Lahiri 1999: 43), they come from New Jersey to Kanarak in Orissa, to visit some temples and know the local culture, but their pettiness 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 shirk away from helping 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. The visit to the Sun Temple opens a heterotopia from whence Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi ponder a new personal chance

to appease themselves. The temple boasts an impressive range of ornaments dealing with Indian mythology and it also foreshadows “Nagamithunas, the half-human, half-serpentine couple” (57), an ominous sexual encounter between distinct species. In an uncanny delightful stare, Mr. Kapasi observes 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), while becoming infatuated with her. “He observed her. She wore a red-and-white-checked skirt...a close-fitting blouse styled like a man’s undershirt” (46). This sight clashes with Mr. Kapasi’s regular husband life who hoped to be “serving as an interpreter between nations” (59).

Soon, Mrs. Das highlights Mr. Kapasi’s translator job saying that he is as useful as a doctor and that it is “so romantic” (50). Mr. Kapasi falls head over heels on this red herring. Their conversation seems more engaging, thus giving vent to his wishful thinking 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 eroticism, Mr. Kapasi sustains his *jouissance* with her gestures. In a way, 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 asks 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 by 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 sustain his fantasy, Mr. Kapasi shows his availability in maintaining a relationship with Mrs. Das overseas in spite of his marriage. He is waiting for an unfettered impulse of her to confess that her marriage is disastrous, or that she likes him. Shortly after, she tells him that Bobby is not from her husband Ral, but from a Punjabi friend that 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 “is it really pain you feel Mrs. Das, or is it guilt? (66). 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 was not even important enough to be properly insulted” (66). It comes clear here that the two of them have set unrealistic expectations on the other person, anchoring meaning on deceptive signs and, ultimately, leading

to a *faux pas*. Mrs. Das' awkwardness fades away 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's address in it" (69), gets lost on the run, and Mr. Kapasi feels he would much better leave the family alone to avoid any major disruption. In short, although Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das encounter hinted some romantic undertones, their mirror delight gets suspended and brings about a missed connection. Hence, ethnic resemblance and singularity were brought to notice, but these concealed an acknowledgement of a barrier. This interference becomes evident through deceptive signs of rapport and a shared ambivalent desire to communicate with the other, which results in failure to maintain their social bonding. While Mr. Kapasi steps back, Mrs. Das precludes the revelation of her secret or any jeopardizing of her marriage and so, calls forth fidelity to the conservation of her status.

The story "Sexy" renders an account of a blatant fetishization of the Other through ethnic identification. An Indian Bengali called Dev and a blonde American called Miranda maintain an adulterous relationship 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 comes across Dev, whom she observes, is not wearing a ring and, soon, they start getting laid. Although Dev mentions having a wife, they keep spending time dating. 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). 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).

However off-putting for her expectations, Dev must keep pledge an alibi to his wife "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, where it was four in the afternoon" (88). What came as an initial emphasis from Dev went on the wane in a careless string of meetings whereby he wore a tracksuit to support his alibi of going to the gym, and he spent less quality time with Miranda. Garg (2012) notes the eagerness of Miranda to get attached to Dev, first by seducing him, buying lingerie and an expensive cocktail dress; second, by buying a wide

range of food. In a moment of insight, Miranda recognizes that Dev would not 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 this case, it is the native Miranda who romanticizes her brave new affair with Dev, but the inescapable allure for the exotic falls bland, eventually, when Miranda becomes aware of Dev only thinking of her as a one-night stand. This illustrates how desire for the Other cannot be materialized if it depends on a shallow appreciation of what constitutes the object of desire. Both have conceived two opposing spheres that do not overlap in a middle ground. Symptomatic of colonial fixations, Miranda has set her sights on the East with an abridged understanding of Dev’s space. By the same token, efforts to sustain her *jouissance* are taken aback by Dev’s sluggish affection, unable to render an authentic embodiment of himself and thus contributing to a master-slave narrative.

In “A real Durwan” and “Mrs. Sen” an embodiment of uprooted individuals is presented. The main characters have jettisoned golden pasts and the new spaces they occupy reinforce their yearning. While Boori Ma lost her home as a Partition refugee deported to Calcutta, Mrs. Sen was forced to go ashore with her arranged marriage. Nameless, both try to consolidate their identities through external identification. For Boori Ma, talking about her previous bounty helps her to cope with the unusual job as a *durwan*, a gatekeeper, “under normal circumstances this was no job for a woman” (Lahiri 1999: 73), and neighbours distrust her “‘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 defends herself by harking back to her glorious past “Believe me, don’t believe me, it was a luxury you cannot dream” (79), because 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 interfaces with reality and 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, for Mrs. Sen, the material self cannot be attained, and so she violates her responsibility with Eliot in one of her long way driving quests for fish. She has a car accident with no casualties, but the symbolic violation of her duty gets her fired and arrested while helplessly muttering that, her husband, “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 the support of Mr. Dalal, a resident, the neighbours reify their fear and suspicion against Boori as the embodiment of the Other. Both stories show how people devoid of a powerful position can be cast out, discredited. Whether Mrs. Sen made an honest mistake dwelling on her yearning and, notably, fell back on her husband’s job to prove her innocence is a moot point, particularly due to her lack of responsibility and understanding of the new country. However, Boori Ma had no means to prove her former wealth and received the suspicion of her ethnic community; shaped as a stranger in her country Boori Ma is left destitute. Facing these misfortunes, both are incapable of regaining agency.

### 3. 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 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 took care of such abundance as a cook, a wife, the angel of the house. Notably, this couple reroutes their relationship 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). Later, an incidental electricity cut-off brings about a numbing yet welcoming silence. While it triggers a reversal of normative roles for Shukumar involving him in cooking, which is peculiar for an Indian male, it does nonetheless entail the converse for Shoba. After revealing some minor secrets with the makeshift candles, Shukumar’s hopes of renewal get decisively thwarted when Shoba announces that she is intent to move 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, [...] 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). Drawing from Shoba’s agency and Shukumar’s role reversal there is an affirmative value in their separation. Shukumar endorsed a revamped appreciation for her chores whereas Shoba called her marriage into doubt. Although they have fallen out in a disheartening disclosure, we notice that owing to the new hyphenated space they have been able to act different to their Indian values. In short, the electric cut-off has perchance hastened the turn of events helping them to disclose themselves and negotiate their identities.

“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” enacts a peaceful resolution to a political conflict overseas that may have driven apart a unique relationship. It 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 grounded in nostalgia “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). Aside from hearing that “Mr. Pirzada is Bengali, but he is a Muslim” (26), Lilia observes no special difference between them, but rather saw “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). However,

their meetings should have ended, for they are transgressing what their countries dictate. Lilia's awareness of the subject seems scant, uncanny, but she somehow understands Mr. Pirzada's anxiety with the clock, watching the news and giving vent to his yearning: "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" (30-31).

The shared fear that looms over their house feels so real that she "prayed that Mr. Pirzada's family was safe and sound". Her acquaintance and curiosity about the war leads her 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 [...] memorized passages from the Declaration of Independence. During recess, the boys would divide in two groups... Redcoats against the colonies" (32-33). The contrast between her home and the outside world besets her because it was not included in the syllabus. As her father criticizes, "What does she learn about the world?" (27). Mr. Pirzada departed and met his family, leaving behind Lilia's makeshift family and their gentle candy rituals. It is then that she 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). To put it bluntly, the US has opened the possibility of their own transnational space, nor Indian or Pakistani, but a peaceful domain where to select the best of their symbolic filiations. It has helped them transform their political disputes into a unique sense of co-responsibility and communion. Of paramount importance, then, seems to ennoble shared values over damaging differences, as Lilia's stance does, overlooking political strives in favour of familiarity.

In "The treatment of Bibi Haldar", a young Indian woman bears a mark of exclusion because of a congenital disease that provokes hysteria and epilepsy seizures. The story enquires about the "treatment" for 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). Bibi has been so far bred as a disabled woman, without a further reaching such as doing chores, or finding a partner, but "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 marginal position at "the storage room on the roof of our building" (159), as someone liable to be contagious. Doctors and neighbours advocate that she needs a man, but her notorious qualities have deterred all city suitors. "Bibi had never been taught to be a woman; the illness had left her naïve in most practical matters" (163), and thus, it was unthinkable that she would treat her ailments. Furthermore, there is a collective disbelief in

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 is framed as a social outcast in her homeland with a fated stigmatization. It suspends her sense of agency under and crystallizes any self-improvement. "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). Constricted by panoptic forces, the city has functionally scarred her identity and by extension, her chances for blending in until 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" (172). In the same light, she moves to a house of her own to prevent the baby from getting sick and claims that "Now I am free to discover life as I please" (170). In turn, she overcomes her excruciating pains and subverts her marginal role by being a single mother. Rebirth comes naturally, once that she cares for a baby and readjusts her ethical responsibilities. Thus, it is not love to a man but to her daughter that ails her. It is owing to defiling the hierarchies of conservative meaning that she enacts an exceptional affirmation and, in so doing, it shies away from fixed signifiers or signifieds imposed by the law of the Other and enters the world of possibility, of open global glows. Her disavowal displaces the authority of the public opinion and mimics the same goals that she had been forced to achieve but rearticulates her presence disavowing her former self.

"This Blessed House" deals with a married couple, Sanjeev and Twinkle, who have recently bought a house "discovered the first one in a cupboard" (136). Both face a mystery that fills them with wonder, since the sense of "assumed ownership" is undermined by recurrent discoveries of the previous owners. They are the only Hindus in the neighbourhood, and the presence of the "Christian paraphernalia" (Lahiri 1999: 136) has subsumed their avowed ownership under the rule of an alien 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 brings about several objects and demonstrates a fluid adaptation of identity, not restricting to her Hindu upbringing, and disregarding its Christian value. Therefore, Sanjeev seeks homeliness in a space which defiles his symbolic order, because "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).

Twinkle would rather keep these items everywhere in the house, building her third space and displacing the assumed authority. For him, "She was like that...

It made him feel stupid” (Lahiri 1999: 142). Sanjeev’s resistance to the items runs parallel to Twinkle’s flexibility and he objects that they “lack a sense of sacredness” (138). She maintains that “we’re not Christians. We’re good little Hindus” (137), but 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 is not yet wholly 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:

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. (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 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 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). On the one hand, we draw from this story that Twinkle’s inconformity to existing models leads “the founding objects of the Western world become the erratic, eccentric, accidental objects trouvés of the colonial discourse” (Bhabha 1984: 132) and, in doing so, she does not only recognize their religious nature but supersedes their solemnity by considering their aesthetic value. On the other hand, Sanjeev reconciles with her agency while casting a glimmer of hope and understanding to feelings of heresy and abnegation. Exposure to other culture has provided a distinctive, creative, enriching life in a tolerant host country whereby subjects select, in a bricolage, culture mechanisms to redefine their space, regardless of its former inhabitants.

“The Third and Final Continent” is a tale of a humble translation of cultures whereby solitude and distinct levels of agency are attributed to its characters: Mrs. Croft, a 103-year-old lady who finds comfort and detachment from society at home, 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 has 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, Mrs. Croft’s rooting to a bygone time. 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” (Lahiri 1999: 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 artifice 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 proposition 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 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 has 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 lonely routines were to contribute to their bonding, but their contractual relationship and age barrier was no deterrent.

The faux intimacy evoked with Mrs. Croft is soon to be substituted by Mala’s arrival in the US. The spaces seem 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 confesses having an accident, 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 adaptation, Mrs. Croft’s spirit emboldens the narrator’s 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 faced each plight in a self-effacing manner, not taking anything for granted, neither glorifying 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 travelled, 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. SYMBOLIC FILIATIONS OF FOOD AND SPACE

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 (Choubey 2001; Mishra 1996; Alfonso-Forero 2007; Williams 2007; Friedman 2008; Bhatt 2009; Ridda 2011; Garg 2012; Singh et al. 2012) 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 privileged terrain in setting the foundations for belonging whereby rituals can be enacted on an alien shore. Even if the ingredients were not to be the same, it is this 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 in the reification of yearning (1994: 173). Enacted by means of cooking and disposing ingredients, it leads the diasporic subject to a greater sense of rapport. 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). In these terms, Williams ponders the metaphor of food and the multifaceted implications of transnational cooking by deeming it an "act of defiance and liberation" that admittedly, according to Kessler's "Gastronomic Theory of Literature", "opens doors to double and triple meaning" (2007: 69). Having paid tribute to one's culture with "humble approximations" (Lahiri 2004: 1), cultural reproduction, simulacra, gears towards the subversion of meaning, because:

It is precisely in these banalities that the unhomey stirs, as the violence of a racialized society falls most enduringly on the details of life: where you can sit,



or not; how you can live, or not; what you can learn, or not; who you can love, or not. Between the banal act of freedom and its historic denial rises the silence” (Bhabha 1994: 15)

Notably, we see Mrs. Sen as the epitome of denial for assimilation. 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 compare 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 *bhakti* and its due preparation, finding solace in the American substitute. She added that in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, the 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: 123-124). 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.” 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 are 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 Garg (2017) elucidates, this conversion “paradoxically satiates and reinforces nostalgia. It responds to homesickness simultaneously triggering it further” (2012: 77-78). 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). Lahiri uses food as *mise en scène* to reinforce the collective imaginary of diaspora, one steeped in longing and uprootedness. 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 makes food so effective in essentialising identities and domesticating space. (251)

There are times when their characters translate their uprootedness through the discrete and revealing use of food. For example, Mrs. Sen heightens her compulsion with fish in going with Eliot far from his house, transgressing her obligation, becoming an anthropological curiosity with a “blood-lined bag between their feet” (Lahiri 1999: 132), ensnaring herself in a car accident and her dismissal.

“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 their rapport increases, especially reinforced by the candy consumption ritual between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia, in the likeness of the Christian Homily 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). It hints Shoba’s “capacity to think ahead” (Lahiri 1999: 6) and shows how Shukumar “invariably marveled at how much food they’d bought [...] it never went to waste” (7). The consumption of Shukumar and his 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”, foregrounding the exotic relation between the minority and the model dominant ethnicity, between the Self and the Other, between Miranda and Dev. In both instances, the cosmopolitan pilgrim Miranda racializes its desire for the Other. While Miranda’s confrontation is freighted with speed and was partially foreshadowed by the affair that she had been told about along with her visit to an Indian shop. There, an Indian cashier warns 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).

There is an astringency, 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). Bhatt underscores the “prominent nature of these markers of identity like food, clothes, language, religion, myths, customs, individual community, rites of passage” (2009: 6) in apprehending the familiar or *heimlich*, to put it in Freudian terms, out of the uncanny world, the *unheimlich*. 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 third space for self-assertion.

An interesting second-generation character is Twinkle. In “This Blessed House” “food symbolises disruption of normative households and becomes an alternative

mode of communication” (Garg 2012: 82). 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 what 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” (Garg 2012: 82) into a more fluid, cultural milieu, where food enriches our understanding about the increasing intermingling of countries and cultures.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to gauge the relationships between the characters of *Interpreter of Maladies* and their medium, considering their means to adapt, where applicable, to other culture. Practices can trigger mimicry, simulacra that “displaces authority, rearticulates presence in terms of its ‘otherness’, that which it disavows” (Bhabha 1984: 132). Not surprisingly, diaspora entails exposure to the Other and to self-discovery. It has been argued that awareness of border consciousness and the alleged genealogy of difference is but a constant negotiation of our ethos and the rendering of spaces, taking up, enclosing, avowing and disavowing a plethora of overlapping realities.

By using terms like hybridity and transnationalism we tested the hypothesis that subjects adapt in disparate ways, straddling the divide between loss of agency and successful adaptation. Findings suggest that those subjects who advocate for a third space understanding often end estranging the basis of the host land while those who feed on their yearning succumb to the ravages of hybridization. Thus, breakdown and accomplishment are not exclusively determined by cultural ambivalence and so, subjects might handle spaces to their interest. Further research is needed to confirm whether these assumptions addressing the question of spaces and belonging hold true in future literature. Nevertheless, we can conclude that Lahiri’s collection engenders subjectivities that account for the sweeping changes

of the diasporic interface and the mapping of identity. She suggests that there are manifold portraits of diaspora and that Indians, non-Indian residents and foreigners come across a wide range of experiences yet to be lived, felt and examined.

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