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“Hovering Between Two Places”: Exploring Hybrid Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*

줌파 라히리의 *Interpreter of Maladies*에 나타난
혼종적 정체성

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“Hovering Between Two Places”: Exploring Hybrid Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*

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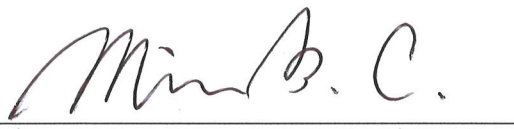

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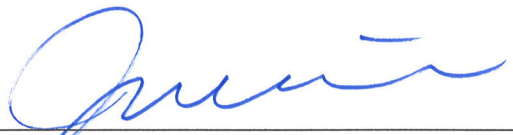

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ABSTRACT

In an era marked by globalisation and transnational migration, studies on recent populations of diaspora and immigrant groups have increased considerably. Yet, for a long time, issues of identity were considered particularly problematic in its complexities and re-doings within diasporic selves. In her debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri captures various immigrant experiences in relation to a sense of loss, isolation, and nostalgia. By conducting a detailed analysis on four selected stories, this thesis plans to discuss the formation and transfiguration of a hybrid identity in characters.

Whereas common tropes of the house have been interpreted as static sites of physical and imaginary belonging, Lahiri's stories assign to them a more dynamic role in which characters realise differences or conflicts in identity. The home becomes not only a place of belonging, but also of becoming. Moreover, the characters activate their newly formed selves through intercultural relationships. What eventually emerges is a "hybrid" identity in the characters, that allows a reformation of existing cultural knowledge. Further discussion on the concluding scenes of the stories attempts to clarify how the stories strive for a balance between arguments of hybridity in diasporic and cosmopolitan contexts.

Ultimately, this thesis explores the emergence of hybrid identity in immigrant characters in a twofold manner. First, it reflects on notions of hybridity to study how the characters depart from binary options in their processes of identity construction; this results in a “third space” that enables new ways of being. Then, the study looks into the concept of minority cosmopolitanism in order to understand the possibility of cross-cultural exchanges of sentiments between individuals. Through transnational human connections, Lahiri’s short stories reject fixed columns of identities and further suggest a hybrid identity—the coexistence of both local influences and cosmopolitan trajectories.

Keywords : Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, identity, hybridity, diaspora, minority cosmopolitanism

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri created an impactful wave on American literary fiction when *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) appeared in print. She was the first South Asian to receive the Pulitzer Prize for her debut short story collection, which earned critical acclaim for its universal storytelling despite a tight focus on the lives of Bengali immigrants and locals. Thereafter, Lahiri proudly takes part as a prominent figure of a larger group of Asian writers who broadened the scope of modern American literature. With common themes of loss and nostalgia, Lahiri's fiction appeals to the global audience—to migrants, refugees, and travellers who have experienced any form of geographical transplant.

To understand Lahiri's works in more depth, a background study on the historical factors regarding Asians in America is necessary. Even though Asians have continuously set foot on America from as early as the 18th century, they were still considered as "potent symbols of both promise and threat" (Srikanth and Song 15) to the United States. Lisa Lowe's foundational work *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996) explains that while immigrants from Asian countries definitely played an important role in the construction of America both historically and materially, they were still considered as "foreigner[s]-within" (5). For

long they were regarded as different and *alien*, which made it possible for widespread stereotypes such like the "yellow peril." Other seemingly congratulatory labels to the Asian community—such as the "model minority"—only created deep trenches between different racial groups present in America at the time (Srikanth and Song 15). So it became clear that the majority of Asian Americans had to suffer from stereotypes which seemed to further heighten walls between racial communities.

In the midst of such challenges, however, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 worked as a catalyst for the influx of Asians into America. As restrictions on immigration loosened, their numbers multiplied each following year; more and more of them became foreign-born unlike before 1965 when they were mostly native-born (Song, "Asian" 10). Such changes contributed to making the Asian American population more diverse, and hence, almost impossible to classify into one distinct group. In Min Hyoung Song's words, "they became ethnically much more diverse . . . socioeconomically more complex . . . and more distributed across all the classes" ("Asian" 11).

Creative writers of Asian descent also gained prominence in America from the late 1970s to the 90s, as recent immigrant populations began to flourish in more varied sectors of society. Unlike their previous generation, the contemporary group of authors faced deeper complexities related to "Asian" identity; for example, the entering of South Asian

American writers to a field dominated by mostly Japanese, Chinese, and Korean experiences shed light on the immense heterogeneity of Asian American subjectivities (Chuh and Shimakawa 35). Moreover, they were eager to manifest an even wider and complex spectrum of immigrant issues. Vijay Mishra's claim that "coloured diasporic communities offered a 'novel cultural configuration' . . . contrary to the logic of full assimilation" (197) in Britain also applied to the circumstances in America, where writers began to recast immigrant experiences in many ways.

Accordingly, Lahiri belongs to the "secure and confident subset of a post-1965 generation of Asian American creative writers" (Srikanth and Song 19). Her personal background as a second-generation immigrant of Indian parents fittingly gave her the title "South Asian American" author, hence the vivid portrayals of Indian American immigrants and locals in her stories. Nonetheless, Lahiri often mentioned her discomfort with her hyphenated identity as Indian-American:

> Less constant is my relationship to the term. When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. ("My Two Lives")

Many critics have readily claimed that the issue of "naming" Lahiri's authorial position is an uneasy task.[1] Like her fellow contemporary Asian writers, Lahiri explores beyond ethnic representation and seeks multiple landscapes in immigrant identity and cultures. Throughout her works, she departs from a focus on "racial identity or cultural politics . . . [or] the history of legalized racial exclusion of all Asians (including South Asians) from the United States throughout the early twentieth century until the Immigration Act of 1965 was passed" (Dhingra and Cheung, Introduction). This indeed accounts for the universal acceptance of Lahiri's fiction by readers worldwide, and also exhorts the necessity to newly interpret Asian identities.

Today in a world highly marked by globalisation, transboundary movements across nations have become a common fact of life. More and more people traverse along territories *and* their own definitions of the home and foreign, which makes it even more complex to pin down one's distinct community and history. This further depicts in the modern diasporic individual an inherent tractive force from two distinct counterpoints: a return to one's homeland and a liberating sense of "overcoming the constrictions of national boundaries" (Ang 143). Lahiri's fictional characters also go through a similar struggle between the two conditions,

[1] See Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung's "Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies" for a collection of in-depth studies devoted to the author's oeuvre.

often feeling unable to merge both dimensions. However, Lahiri shows how her characters actively translate themselves into hybrid identities in the process of "possessing and re-possessing the past and the present" (Kuortti 217). Thus, *Interpreter of Maladies* can be located as "diaspora literature"[2] which is of different and new meaning. While diaspora generally associates exile and homelessness as assumed values, it has also come to deliver more positive ideas of heterogeneous citizenry (Buchanan, "Diaspora").

So, what becomes clear from looking into studies of first and second-generation immigrants and diasporas is that there are definite generational differences or changes. Like the post-1965 generation of Asian Americans, there is also a division between "old" and "new" diasporas. In his study of diaspora literature, Park explains this phenomenon that "an earlier generation of immigrants to the United States sought inclusion and membership as important values, while a younger generation of writers . . . may view the road to America less as a one-way route than as part of a global network of mobility" (157). He emphasises the term "contemporaneity," which urges readers to understand Asia and America as placed on an equal, or contemporaneous, timeline. While past diasporas displayed trajectories toward assimilation and naturalisation, more recent

[2] Hyungji Park defines diaspora literature in its acknowledgment of "ongoing allegiances to nations beyond U.S. boundaries" (156). He claims that this group of literature departs from depicting the American nation as the sole objective for immigrants, and therefore also rejects values such as assimilation or a "teleology" (Park 157) towards an American future.

interpretations of diaspora tend to "focus[ ] less on a zip code in America" (Park 161). Furthermore, members of the diaspora today seem to mimic a motion very similar to what Lahiri once mentioned as a "hovering between two places."[3] While this motion implies being in a state where one oscillates between two destinations undecidedly, I translate it to a condition which does not find it necessary to feel a sense of belonging anywhere.

Hence, this thesis will look at *Interpreter of Maladies* as a challenge to the conventional ideas following diasporic identity in characters. First, I claim that Lahiri deals with collisions between two identities (here, American and Indian) by presenting characters who are placed "in-between," belonging to neither one nor the other. These incidents are animated by immigrant characters occupying borderzones, or the middle ground, between contested territories. Second, I believe that the characters in Lahiri's short story collection forge a new sense of hybrid identity that settles amidst diasporic and cosmopolitan standpoints. By studying the text in detail, I further suggest a reinterpretation of immigrant identity through the lenses of hybridity and "minority cosmopolitanism" (Koshy 594).

[3] The quotation "hovering between two places," which I also adopt for the title of this thesis, is taken from an interview of Jhumpa Lahiri published by the Chicago Public Library. She uses this terminology to explain her immigrant parents' influences in her works. She observes her family's inability to belong to either India or America, and thus states that "every aspect of my family's history can be described as a hovering between two places" (Chicago Public Library, "Interview").

To expand the frame of identification for immigrants in Lahiri's fiction, the above-mentioned terms need to be explored in detail. Indeed, cultural and national identities have become increasingly complex with globalisation, and therefore hegemonic visions of dominant and minority positions are highly debated. In her book-length study, Lowe underscores three terms—*heterogeneity*, *hybridity*, and *multiplicity*—to characterise Asian American culture today. Her study of these pivotal terms provides a deeper understanding of individual and cultural differences in Asian American groups. This thesis focuses especially on reconstructions of "hybridity," a term that has become rather inclusive in its meaning throughout the years. I claim to define a hybrid identity which is *not* an attempt to blur cultural politics in individuals.

In Lowe's essay, hybridity is defined as the "formation of cultural objects and practices that are produced by the histories of uneven and unsynthetic power relations" (Lowe 67). It is committed to tracing the histories that give effect to the differences—or, the "intermingling of race and language" (Mannur and Isaac 327)—in individuals. In other words, a hybrid state springs from the many nonnegligible social and historical conditions, from multiple cultural backgrounds. In immigrant subjects, this signifies a realisation of the existing hegemony of dominant and minority positions, and thus a sense of survival within unequal power relations by "living, inventing, and reproducing different cultural alternatives" (Lowe

82). The concept of hybridity, thus, must be understood as a cry to recognise disparities among cultures and create new forms of identity amidst such limits.

Bhabha's reference to a "third space" in relation to hybridity also offers important implications. He once claimed in an interview with Jonathan Rutherford that:

> [T]he importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority . . . (211)

From these lines, we learn that Bhabha moves away from a binary division between the home and the foreign nation; instead, he shifts his attention to an in-between (or "middle") ground that he calls "third space." Although Bhabha's references to hybridity may be loosely related to current notions of identity, it offers important implications in understanding diasporic identities. He claims that this third space emerges to "ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (Bhabha 55).

To be more clear, it is important to differentiate hybridisation from seemingly congruous notions of assimilation or multiculturalisation.

Although hybridity can be recognised as a construct that liberates one from fixed definitions of identity, it should not be confused with the idea that it dilutes former roots. Of course, it may be necessary to celebrate the amalgamation of various cultures if we want to make sense of globalisation in the world today. However, it is equally threatening to the identity when national histories and cultural differences are altogether ignored. I borrow Stuart Hall's words:

> The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined . . . by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (235)

As emphasised, hybridisation is not the process of creating a "melting pot" of cultures, but the re-creation of personal identity from a multiplicity of values and traditions. As an illustration, I argue that various situations in *Interpreter of Maladies* demonstrate groups of hybridised individuals who pursue multifaceted forms of identity and embrace historical factors simultaneously.

Nevertheless, I would also like to acknowledge the possibility of cosmopolitan sensibilities in this argument. It is legitimate to say that Lahiri's short stories, to some extent, direct towards a recognition of

equality among dominant and minority cultures. In his study of cosmopolitanism, Ulrich Beck explains that "every individual is rooted in one cosmos, but simultaneously in different cities, territories, ethnicities, hierarchies, nations, religions, and so on" (16). By extension, cosmopolitanism stands against the term "globalisation," by emphasising an *attitude* of accepting different cultures rather than the material way of life (Jackson 112; Werbner 2). In her study, Pnina Werbner looks at cosmopolitanism as "an ethical horizon—an aspirational outlook and mode of practice," where one can "emphasise empathy, toleration and respect for other cultures and values" (2). Surely, such cosmopolitan ideas are discussed in Lahiri's stories. But at the same time, it is difficult to overlook the ways characters struggle to trace their cultural roots and heritage, hence the importance of one's local in diasporic contexts. Knowing these limitations, Werbner further states that modern cosmopolitanism is increasingly understood as "collective . . . [and] historically located" (2). So while cosmopolitanism is taken into account in this study, I point out that it does not provide full explanation for the entire scope of identity politics in the fictional characters.

In her study of *Interpreter of Maladies*, Elizabeth Jackson also approaches cosmopolitanism as an ideal to understand postcolonial agents. Her argument that diversity in individuals cannot be "conveniently grouped into clear-cut "diasporas" because the realities of cultural dynamics are

much more complex" (Jackson 111) can be persuasive in a global context. She asserts that binary opposites between different cultures and nations have now become decrepit, and therefore Lahiri's fiction demands that one must pursue an attitude of cosmopolitanism to understand the complexities of interpersonal relationships. While this argument is valid, it also remains highly idealistic and therefore unrealistic in celebrating an attitude which ignores real cultural borders and conflicts. Hence, I take a careful approach to cosmopolitanism and eschew from rather reductionist beliefs which claim all identities as hyperconnected and the antecedent histories as insignificant.

In this thesis, I aim to explore hybrid identity in diasporic immigrant characters vis-à-vis a quasi-cosmopolitan understanding of cultures. Susan Koshy's idea of "minority cosmopolitanism" provides an explanation. In her study, she considers "new ways of thinking about the minority and the cosmopolitan by conjoining the historically divergent projects of ethnic studies and studies of cosmopolitanism" (592). Her incorporation of cosmopolitan possibilities in the lived experiences of the minority subjects calls for a wider understanding of identity in Lahiri's characters.

Although Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* gracefully envisions the above phenomena into subtle narratives of immigrant experiences, critics have managed to execute detailed studies on only a few popular stories ("A Temporary Matter," "Interpreter of Maladies," "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine"). Noelle Brada-Williams analyses the cyclic nature of the entire book

and provides a comprehensive overview of the stories. She states that reading the text as a cycle implies an intrinsic pattern of symbols and motifs within and across stories in the collection. Likewise, I analyse how the individual texts in Lahiri's collection form a subset of various cultural representations. While the stories unravel human relationships within domestic space, they centralise children ("When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "Mrs. Sen's") and unravel marital relationships ("This Blessed House" and "The Third and Final Continent"). I study a resemblance of recurring metaphors and basic plots between the texts, which I will be discussing in more detail throughout the chapters to come.

In this thesis, I first investigate the deployment of a metaphorical, alternative "third space" in the domestic homes of selected texts. In the hybrid dwelling, the diasporic condition of feeling placeless is transformed into a possibility of reassembling one's identity and community. Next, I will examine how, in this new location, characters experience a unique identification of themselves which is unlike past definitions of identity by looking at rare forms of human relationships. The primary goal, hence, is to read Lahiri's selected fiction as an attempt to discuss the possibility of a novel identity in her characters. A careful perusal of the stories points out to the conclusion that immigrant characters all embody a potential for hybridity. My thesis thus follows the emergence of a hybrid identity that embodies minority cosmopolitan ideas in the texts.

Chapter II begins by discussing the household as a symbolic space which manifests complex and multifarious identities. In each story, the immigrant home is a mixed representation of one's homeland and current locale; this reflects the characters' potential, or lack thereof, to think of identity anew. Then, Chapter III continues an investigation into human relationships—especially within families and with outsiders. Lahiri involves protagonists who undergo a strange experience of slipping in and out of one's borders during personal encounters with another. I argue that this moment of affinity serves as the momentum for the development of a hybrid identity. Finally, Chapter IV speaks about the conclusions in each selected story, which surprisingly share common features. The endings are significant, as they open discussion about cosmopolitan trajectories embedded in the various human affiliations. I conclude with the argument of minority cosmopolitanism that infiltrates into immigrant identities, which enables a more active and future-oriented portrayal of the diaspora.

CHAPTER II

Home for the Hybrid

Many of Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories continually address the house as an important motif. The home, where all domestic activities take place, works as a spatial symbol of hybrid identity. It takes the form of an alternative location, or "third space," which Bhabha argues that "enables other positions [of identity] to emerge" (Rutherford 211). This chapter explores various transnational encounters presented within the physical barriers of home, and studies in detail how one's private space gives freedom to the protagonists in exploring newly created identities.

The term "diaspora" which referred to the historical exile and scattering of the Jewish people in the pre-Christian era, now commonly represents any migration or dispersal of population around the world (Ang 142). For many immigrants who have shifted from their original spaces, the newly established home becomes a site where they find comfort or protection from the unaccustomed. On one hand, Lahiri's fictional works represent the domestic space to first-generation immigrants as an enlivening of one's sustained cultural or ethnic identity, like an "island into which the host culture is only partially allowed to intrude" (Ridda 4). On the other hand, and here specifically in *Interpreter of Maladies*, the house is

presented as a site for upholding partial—or complex—identities. Like how an entirely new identity can emerge from the in-between of two different cultures or nations, the house is a unique space where different cultures meet and converge to create hybrid beings. Lahiri captures the home as a place for negotiating one's identity, where immigrant characters discover a complicated relationship between contested domains.

In "Mrs. Sen's," the house stands as a prominent symbol which embodies the eponymous character's struggles in making sense of her life as an immigrant. The story looks into the psychology of a woman uprooted from her homeland and transplanted to a foreign location through the framework of home. There is a powerful connection between Mrs. Sen's mental processes and her physical place of residence; her incapacity to drive—and therefore, leave home freely—shows her sense of isolation, as she largely stays at home delving into her acts of cooking. Clearly, her physical immobility resembles her psychological impasse. Mrs. Sen remains spiritually tied to her hometown in India, as every wall and corner of her apartment reminds her of her hometown that she "notice[s] in the lampshades, in the teapot, in the shadows frozen on the carpet, something the rest of them could not" (113). Her ceaseless cookery and preoccupation with fresh fish also show her strong connection to her hometown in India. The preparation of food in her apartment is an accurate displacement of her everyday routine in India:

> He especially enjoyed watching Mrs. Sen as she chopped things, seated on newspapers on the living room floor. Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas. . . . At times she sat cross-legged, at times with legs splayed, surrounded by an array of colanders and shallow bowls of water in which she immersed her chopped ingredients. (114)

The ease and spontaneity with which she does her cooking is noteworthy. Food, together with the cultures and traditions attached to it, transfers Mrs. Sen to her hometown in her imagination and brings up memories of her past. The mail that flies from India to her American home continuously attaches Mrs. Sen to her past, just like the scarlet powder which permanently stains her scalp "like a wedding ring" (117).

Nevertheless, Mrs. Sen's apartment becomes an important site where the meeting of two individuals (and therefore, two cultures) takes place. To the diasporic citizen, home carries a dual meaning: as a "current" place of residence *and* a "past" which claims historical and cultural meaning. Lahiri effectively narrates these contrasting notions through the eyes of a child: Eliot eventually understands that home to Mrs. Sen refers to a certain nation (India) and "not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables" (116). While she naturally associates the term with her country of origin, Eliot can only picture his house located five miles away. This discrepancy in the

identification of home evokes a cultural chasm which seems too deep to bridge. Because Eliot is American, he does not understand Mrs. Sen's deep psychological connection to her homeland and therefore puts alongside his own homeward memories in an attempt to better comprehend his babysitter's issues.

Interestingly, Lahiri manipulates the descriptions of the two homes so that she gives colour and vibrancy to Mrs. Sen's house while Eliot's house is portrayed dull. Mrs. Sen's house is warm and heated, but Eliot's beach house is too cold that he has to "bring a portable heater along whenever they moved from one room to another" (113). This is how Lahiri uses the symbol of home to questions dominant notions of successful assimilation which exhort that the host country is where immigrants should eventually feel "at home." In "Mrs. Sen's," the lonely immigrant's house is more warm-hearted and welcoming (which we will see in more detail in Chapter III). Contrastingly, the cold and barrenness of Eliot's house seem to reflect the unfriendly and "unhomely"[4] atmosphere endemic to his neighbourhood.

[4] In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha's concept of "unhomeliness" refers to a "relocation of the home and the world" (13). He describes the moment where the existing borders between home (local) and the world (global) become confused, which is also the "condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (13). I draw on this idea to explore how an unhomely feeling within Lahiri's fictional characters brings about the opportunity to cross beyond boundaries of one's home or roots.

Thus, the above phenomenon dismantles the common belief that home is a symbol of seclusion for diasporic citizens, and instead strengthens the argument that it becomes a new space for cross-cultural affiliations. The spatial metaphor is purposefully used to represent the hybridisation process that occurs when different characters come into contact in a shared environment. Judith Caesar claims that:

> Lahiri uses the architecture . . . as an emblem of the emotional spaces between the people who live in the houses, of the interior walls within the mind, of the stairs that connect the levels of experience, of the doors that shut others in or out, of the exterior walls that would normally delineate public from private space but which, again and again, do not. ("American" 52)

It makes sense that Mrs. Sen's house, in the beginning, resembles her own realm where she hides from the "foreign" world. However, as the narrative proceeds, this is not likely anymore. The walls of her residence building are not barriers to Mrs. Sen's outside world anymore; rather, the house newly facilitates the merge or "slipping in and out" of different cultures and identities (Caspari 250). Eliot slips into Mrs. Sen's home, to discover for his first time the lived experiences of an immigrant, while Mrs. Sen also finds the courage to step out of her borders and explore American society. This

eventually opens up a physical and psychological meeting point for an uneasy—yet necessary—convergence of two isolated beings.

The short story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" begins as Lilia's parents invite Mr. Pirzada to their house for dinners. From the beginning, Lahiri implements different definitions of "home" in the characters. For example, Mr. Pirzada has a "three-story home, a lectureship in botany at the university" (23) back in Dacca, but stays in a "room in a graduate dormitory, and [does] not own a proper stove or a television set of his own" (24) in America. This contrast in the size and furnishings between his original home and the temporary settlement suggests that America is no more than a stopover or a short cessation in the man's life journey, and his "real" home is a nation many miles away. To the second-generation protagonist, Lilia, America is her "home" country while her parents attempt to uphold Indian traditions in their new home. As shown, all three parties have incompatible views about home—nevertheless, they gather at the dining table and eventually develop a mutual understanding of the domestic space as to decentre dominant and minor cultures.

Lilia's parents invite Mr. Pirzada for dinners at their house as they strongly believe that the sharing of food is an important practice of solidarity and tradition to immigrant households. Through this act of hospitality, Lilia's house becomes a site of community and fellowship. The family—especially the parents—is focused on recreating home on foreign

land. By continuing and extending traditions through Indian cuisine, they maintain their cultural heritage: “they ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands” (25). Thus, the characters settle to create a new, hybrid space which neither represents their original homeland nor embodies a completely American lifestyle.

Lahiri sets the plot of “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” in the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 to acquaint readers with an understanding of inherent hybrid qualities in members of the diaspora. A country which used to stand as one suddenly undergoes a division of the land and its people; this demarcation of territory results in two differently named countries—Pakistan and Bangladesh[5]. The peoples of both nations are technically unchanged, but due to political factors, are permanently divided into two distinct countries. Mr. Pirzada himself is also from “Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, but then a part of Pakistan” (23); his stay in America resembles a formation of a new space where he is able to remain free from the conflict between dichotomous notions of home. Indeed, Lilia’s parents invite Mr. Pirzada only because of the similarities in their ethnic make-up—the apparent difference in nationality is not a problem in their “third space.” Therefore, Lilia’s house becomes a meeting point for the immigrant

[5] The Indo-Pakistan War of 1971 is an important backdrop for the story “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine.” Although the war only lasted 13 days, it had significant outcomes for its combatants. As India won the war against Pakistan, this resulted in the birth of Bangladesh—which was then East Pakistan (Jillani, “Scars”).

characters: they are able to explore the different "soils" where they are rooted. The emergence of a hybrid identity does not only refer to the identification of the global, but also a constant reminder of one's local history.

As the larger scope of national division embodies hybridity, more personal and private events at "home" also provide a gateway to realise a complex identity. It indicates that the characters understand one's own identity in reference to another's "otherness." Lahiri mainly explores the changes in Lilia as she builds an uncanny friendship with a guest, and identifies another world—which is Mr. Pirzada's homeland. The home manifests a mixture of different cultural experiences, thus becomes a locale for "exchanges, crossings, and mutual entanglements" (Ang 147) between characters. Lilia's home (and the dining table) gains importance as it becomes a place where hybridisation occurs. It works as a compartment which entangles power relations, cultures, and beliefs; a middle-aged man becomes the friend of a young girl, Lilia's mother serves Indian food while Lilia savours Western confections, and war inversely acts as a chance for bonding and unity. The family's "beautifully hybrid utopia is nurturing a child who is spiritually alive" (Caesar, "Beyond" 86).

Anita Mannur mentions that the concept of "home" to a migrant carries complex meaning because one wishes to simultaneously bring memories with it *and* rebuild entirely new homes (61). This is also

demonstrated in Lilia's household; while Lilia's father complains about how her daughter is unaware of the conflict on "their part of the world" (Lahiri 24), her mother asserts that this unawareness is normal for a girl growing up in America. The family cooks and eats traditional Indian food but also celebrates Halloween, which is a Western tradition. In this way, the home symbolically entails an ambivalence in the bounds of one's identity and therefore suggests that an "in-betweenness" exists in immigrant identities. However, Lahiri depicts a graceful balance between the binary to avoid a dichotomous understanding of oneself, and complicates any possible stereotypes or conventions that are applied to diasporic characters. She departs from traditional depictions of diasporic identity, and instead opens up a "third space" where partial demonstrations of culture are disabled. Therefore, the story argues that one's diasporic home can never be a complete representation of the past nor an original product; rather, it occupies a space in-between, which sustains qualities of both worlds to create a hybrid identity.

Finally, Lahiri documents Lilia's visit to her friend Dora's house in detail. She notices that the television is switched off at Dora's house, unlike that which continuously plays the news of the situation in Dhaka at her own house—saxophone music plays on the stereo at Dora's place instead. The peaceful and laid-back atmosphere in Dora's house is juxtaposed with the tension formed in the scene that follows: Lilia's shattered pumpkin on the

porch mirrors the adults' devastated minds from the news of imminent war. Unlike the peace in Dora's living room, the sinister quiet from a turned off television in Lilia's living room increases anxiety. The underlying tension in Lilia's home during the twelve days of the Indo-Pakistani war brings a halt to all of the everyday activities that used to take place within the house. Ultimately, this contrast between the interiors of the two homes once again helps Lilia realise that her own cultures (and surroundings) are inevitably different from that of other "ordinary" Americans. She indeed feels to be somewhere in-between two cultures that she is unable to bridge harmoniously. So the self-realisation process is painful; Lahiri never aims to romanticise the notion of hybridity. She manages to draw out problematic and uncomfortable experiences in different characters who undergo this realisation of their identities. By illustrating events that take place within the framework of residence, Lahiri explores the most private and emotional "maladies" that occur to an immigrant. Therefore, the author conveys that hybridity is not a concept that represents an equally divided or beautifully sutured identity: the hybrid self implies a constant separation and reconnection of incomplete states or contexts.

In a more obvious manner, Lahiri depicts a married couple's house as a hybrid space in "This Blessed House." Yet another story about an Indian American couple living in the United States, it introduces a bizarre situation where the newlyweds continuously find Christian paraphernalia on

exploring their house. Sanjeev, the husband, feels increasingly irritated about the discoveries while his wife finds it amusing and exciting to hunt down new items. The couple demonstrates different attitudes toward cultures and heritage; while Sanjeev is loyal to his religion and careful about other cultures, Twinkle is extremely carefree and open-minded about everything. What is interesting, however, is that the above traits do not fully define each character. Although Sanjeev is rather conventional at home, he is an ambitious and successful nominee for vice-presidency at work. While Twinkle is whimsical and independent, she has yet agreed to an arranged marriage. The complex characterisation of both protagonists, therefore, purposefully attempts to dismiss stereotypes on the diaspora.

Lahiri then manipulates domestic space within the immigrants' home to discuss the notion of hybridity. She cleverly uses the Christian miscellanea as "souvenirs" of the couple's negotiation processes in constructing their immigrant lifestyle. Through Twinkle's creative actions, the young couple's house transforms into a hybrid space. When she discovers a bottle of vinegar and a statue of Christ, Sanjeev reacts by telling her to throw them away. Instead, Twinkle displays the statue on top of the fireplace mantel and later cooks a fish stew using the vinegar. Lahiri narrates the couple's conversation as Sanjeev admits that the unidentified stew tastes delicious:

> . . . it was Sanjeev who, on weekends, seasoned mustard oil with cinnamon sticks and cloves in order to produce a proper curry.
>
> He had to admit, though, that whatever it was she had cooked today, it was unusually tasty, attractive even . . .
>
> "How did you make it?"
>
> "I made it up." (144)

As Christian paraphernalia quickly collect and get out of hand, the house is eventually rearranged into a "menagerie" (139) of different cultures. The story places emphasis on this mixture, or hybridity, that Twinkle—and Sanjeev, a little more reluctantly—pursue throughout their marriage. In the housewarming party, people are served samosas and Twinkle wears a *salwar-kameez*, while jazz music plays in the background. But most importantly, Lahiri depicts a sense of defiance in the overall atmosphere of their home. In this newly invented "third space," none of Sanjeev's past habits and conventions seem to operate as he wishes. From applying his own rules and routine to having traditional "proper curry" (144), nothing is under his control. Indeed, everything fails to be arranged and in order—apart from the couple's "arranged" marriage. Sanjeev constantly feels irritated, but all Twinkle would do is simply tell him: "Face it. This house is blessed" (144).

Indubitably, the home is "blessed" to embody a freedom from others' opinions and stereotypes of what the house of an Indian immigrant should resemble. Twinkle nonchalantly ignores such comments, and creatively reworks her own definitions of diasporic identity. Within this "third space" which looks like an amalgam of disparate cultures, Sanjeev and Twinkle are able to execute a hybrid world of their own that roots from personal backgrounds. While Sanjeev is still concerned that the Christian icons may ultimately signal a fadeout of ethnic identity, Twinkle proudly displays the "silver bust of Christ" (156) on the mantel to admire its "dignity, solemnity, [and] beauty" (157). The story presents the house as a space where characters can confront their boundaries and come into contact with the "new." As the housewarming party metaphorically indicates, Sanjeev's invisible borderline between his local space and the Christian furnishings will gradually lower down. Lahiri playfully reverses the "tiresome and unimaginative" (Lahiri, "Interview") notions of exotic stock images of India (by introducing Christian imagery), and so boldly signals a gentle invasion of one another's cultural borders.

Lahiri thereby reveals that an important aspect of her characters' hybrid identities is flexibility. This feature indicates that definitions of identity are in no way rigid or unchanging, but must be considered malleable and adaptive to diverse situations. Mrs. Sen offers to take care of Eliot in her house, while Lilia's family welcomes Mr. Pirzada to their home

and Twinkle reconfigures her interpretation of identity at home. Through various household events, the characters tear down borders between them and learn that it is through these contact points or conflicts of cultural borders that they learn to understand multiple identities while withholding to their individual (or local) selves. Bhabha argues that “this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (5). It is this gap between the two (or more) definitions of ethnicity and identity which enables a levelling of dominant and minority cultures.

CHAPTER III

Human Relationships and Hybridity

Jhumpa Lahiri once mentioned in an interview that she is drawn to characters who face some sort of "barrier of communication" (Patel, "The Maladies"). She acknowledged the limitations in communication caused by a partial understanding of different cultures and ways of life. Indeed, she focused on deploying such conditions in her fictional characters and thus, *Interpreter of Maladies* unravels a close study on fragmented human relationships. While the previous chapter investigated the symbol of households marked by hybrid qualities, Chapter III explores how human relationships come to solve and bridge insoluble identities. Many of Lahiri's short stories present how characters form special bonds with one another and realise a hybrid identity in themselves. Consequently, the frame of human relationships is an indispensable feature in Lahiri's short story collection.

"Mrs. Sen's" and "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" are two concrete examples in which children play a major role. Lahiri aims to bring two effects from entering children into the main plot of her texts. For one thing, the younger generation demonstrates an innocence or responsiveness to the surroundings which differs from adults. Because they are relatively

free of judgment and do not have stereotypes, the children provide deeper insight into the cultural differences evident in the stories than their adult counterparts (Cox 120). Hence, by conducting a close representation of children, Lahiri aims to actively disregard any sort of assumptions or exoticisms about the immigrant population. Moreover, Lahiri captures the fact that children are situated in a state of "liminality": because they are not yet fully mature or grown-up, there is a sense of vulnerability in children which associates with a similar anxiety in the minds of immigrant subjects.

In "Mrs. Sen's," the story begins as eleven-year-old Eliot recalls on visits to his new caretaker's house. Mrs. Sen—the wife of an Indian mathematics professor—shows signs of terrible homesickness for her family and neighbours back in her hometown. Unlike the young boy who seems rather quiet and thoughtful for his age, Mrs. Sen appears mostly tense and agitated throughout the story. Lahiri juxtaposes the child and grown-up to examine the formation of an unlikely rapport between two very different individuals. Just like how a close look into Mrs. Sen's home revealed the invention of a "third space" departing from dualistic notions of culture, the dynamics between characters also reveal Lahiri's willingness to overthrow fixed notions of kinship and community.

The isolation and lack of independence of Mrs. Sen is what Lahiri utilises to form a parallel with the young boy. In the story, Mr. Sen and Eliot's mother are fully capable of exercising independence in the labour

market while Mrs. Sen is deprived of such opportunities and remains alone at home. Similarly, the young boy also feels alienated, coping with babysitters who failed to sincerely care for him—a university student who only read books and refused to cook meat, and a woman who drank whiskey while she left Eliot to play on his own. As a child, Eliot's primary wishes are far from working ability or being independent. So, he feels a strange sense of affinity to his caretaker who is also overwhelmingly lonesome and struggling to assimilate to an American lifestyle. This is how Lahiri, by linking two characters whose isolation produces a connection with each other, forms a secure bond of transnational, transcultural and transgenerational affinity between the caretaker and child.

Eliot, after forming an empathic connection to Mrs. Sen, experiences a strange juxtaposition between his familiar "old" world and the newly discovered domain. Eventually and very suddenly, Eliot notices how a "new" world supersedes his familiar world. His visits to Mrs. Sen's house highlight little scenes where Eliot feels an inexplicable unfamiliarity towards his mother as he sees differences in their appearance and behaviour. At times, the contrast is much stronger when the two women are together. For example, he feels "a little *shock* to see his mother all of a sudden, in the transparent stockings and shoulder-padded suits she wore to her job" (emphasis added, 118) when his mother comes to pick him up. On other occasions, Mrs. Sen's actions directly trigger personal memories of his past.

The warmth of her house, the food she cooks, and the car she drives all remind Eliot about his own surroundings, which then seem a little stranger and unnatural to him. Normally, the Indian caretaker—whom he had only known for a few weeks—would be the distant and awkward subject. However, this is where Lahiri executes a sense of "defamiliarization"[6] in Eliot's mind: an overturn in his awareness of usual surroundings. A sense of novelty or strangeness is implanted into Eliot by Mrs. Sen, and Eliot becomes so absorbed in the new surroundings, that he finds what was once familiar very strange. This experience epitomises the hybridisation of identity: a disruption in one's familiar territory creates space for different cultures to merge together. Michael W. Cox duly mentions that such a defamiliarization of worlds encourages to see cultural connections afresh, and further compels readers to deny any "simple allegiances, conclusions, or ... interpretations" (121) of the story.

I further read this defamiliarization of characters as a call for a reexamination of inherent cultural hierarchies. For instance, she purposefully places Eliot (the white boy) as the character who undergoes change and not Mrs. Sen, to acknowledge and challenge the existing

[6] In literature and other forms of artistic production, this effect or technique refers to the disruption of a reader's/audience's habitual perception of the world. By making familiar elements in a text feel strange and new, this term also stands for the more general or simple process of rendering something unfamiliar (Oxford English Dictionary, "defamiliarization").

division between dominant and minority forces in society. Another motif that Lahiri also introduces to emphasise this defamiliarization is the act of driving a car. While Eliot's mother drives "as if without thinking," Mrs. Sen is "continuously distracted" (120) by her tendency to stop at even the smallest obstacles in front of her. Once again, this contrast reflects the idea that what is easy and natural to the "native" can be extremely problematic to the migrant:

> It seemed so simple when he sat beside his mother, gliding in the evenings back to the beach house. Then the road was just a road, the other cars merely part of the scenery. But when he sat with Mrs. Sen, . . . he saw how that same stream of cars made her knuckles pale, her wrists tremble, and her English falter. (121)

Why would Lahiri choose driving as Mrs. Sen's ultimate impediment? Driving, which commonly stands for a "quintessentially American form of independence and a recurring trope for the promises of the New World" (Koshy 606), is represented as a serious fear and object of distress to the Indian immigrant. Likewise, Lahiri's metaphors and symbols are frequently associated with American values or emblems—but she always assigns it a double meaning. This ambivalence in meaning resembles the very quality of fluctuating hybrid identity in diasporic characters.

Despite the various obstacles, Mrs. Sen still manages to demonstrate qualities of care and responsibility to the surrounding characters. She not only fulfils her role as wife and caretaker, but also expresses kindness to Eliot's mother by insisting that she "sit on the sofa, where she was served something to eat" (118) before taking Eliot home. She prepares snacks for Eliot, and goes out for brief excursions with him on other occasions. If Eliot's feelings of overturned familiarity are what makes him notice a sense of kinship with the immigrant caregiver, Mrs. Sen's demonstration of care allows both characters to experience growth like that of a coming-of-age.

It follows, then, that hospitality and care are recurring concepts which bind Eliot and Mrs. Sen in *Interpreter of Maladies*. While both characters do not have any related heritage or national identity in common, they share a friendship where one crosses his or her familiar boundary to understand one another. By examining such a relationship genuinely shared between "othered" characters, Lahiri enables the reader to rethink all forms of borders, visible or not. Yet one must also acknowledge that these borders enable a new possibility and transformation in the character(s), since "hybridity … is a concept that confronts and problematises boundaries, although it does not erase them" (Ang 149).

Lilia, the narrator of "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," reflects on her past encounters with a guest—Mr. Pirzada—who regularly joins her family for dinner. A sense of community shared by both characters also

echoes that of Eliot and Mrs. Sen. Their unique friendship, although temporary, is also strong enough to bring changes into Lilia's everyday life. In the beginning, Lilia is largely indifferent to Mr. Pirzada's visits as she simply considers him as one of the beneficiaries of her family's act of hospitality, an accompaniment from a successful "search of compatriots" (24) through the university's telephone directory. Being born and raised in the United States, she blindly assumes that the guest is Indian because he has a "surname familiar to their part of the world" (24). Consequently, as her father informs her that Mr. Pirzada is not Indian, she fails to make sense of what is meant by the Partition and can only relate to the two countries as a combination of two American states:

> "As you see, Lilia, it is a different country, a different color," my father said. Pakistan was yellow, not orange. I noticed that there were two distinct parts to it, one much larger than the other, separated by an expanse of Indian territory; it was as if California and Connecticut constituted a nation apart from the U.S. (26)

Nevertheless, Lilia soon develops a fondness for Mr. Pirzada. Every gift from him she would keep in a box which was the "only memento of a grandmother [she] had never known" (30), and this implies that she treasures the relationship. The story demonstrates how such ties of friendship can connect two people from very different cultural and

traditional backgrounds, to make bloom a revelation of translocal affinities. Moreover, Lilia's rapport with Mr. Pirzada also serves as the vital momentum of a coming-of-age to the young protagonist. While the adults are engrossed in reports of the situation in Dhaka, Lilia's focus is on Mr. Pirzada as she tries to figure out what differentiates him from her family. She feels a strange sense of uneasiness as she learns of his family back in his home country. As Jungha Kim notes, Lilia's unsettled sentiments are a reaction to the revelation that life for Mr. Pirzada is fixated on his hometown, and hence a starting point for her to perceive another world that she had never been aware of, but had always existed (70). Therefore, Mr. Pirzada's visits for dinner initiate a rediscovery of cultural exchange and "hybrid" identity within Lilia. When she recalls that Mr. Pirzada looked "as if someone were giving him directions to an unknown destination" (31), it also seems to reflect her own reactions as she herself is directed to a completely different space and a new realisation.

Initially, the acquaintance could have been short-lasting and insignificant to both Lilia and Mr. Pirzada. The man cares for the young girl—perhaps because she reminds him of his own daughters back home—and Lilia also treats him with mere politeness. But Mr. Pirzada's presence eventually grows significant in Lilia, as it shakes off her pre-existing knowledge of the world around her. Being a second-generation immigrant, Lilia had felt more or less detached from her parents' homeland most of the

time. Her knowledge of India was largely limited to what her parents had informed her, and therefore she had disregarded or paid little attention to anything about the country. Even when she hears from her parents that "[she] would never have to eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from [her] rooftop, or hide neighbors in water tanks to prevent them from being shot" (26), it places little impact on her current ways of life.

However, these reports—which were once too distant—suddenly hit home when she learns of the situation in Pakistan from Mr. Pirzada and then loses her appetite:

> They discussed intrigues I did not know, a catastrophe I could not comprehend. "See, children your age, what they do to survive," my father said as he served me another piece of fish. But I could no longer eat. I could only steal glances at Mr. Pirzada, . . . He was not my notion of a man burdened by such grave concerns. (31)

There is a realisation of Bhabha's metaphorical "third space," where "negotiations, interface, and exchange across cultural boundaries" (Smith 8) happen. Lilia is unable to ignore the disturbing fact that the lives of children of her age are at risk on the other side of the world, even though she is too young to understand the details of the war. As a result, she creates a ritual of her own: she prays with a piece of candy in her mouth, wishing for Mr. Pirzada's family to be safe.

However, Lilia realises her helplessness and expresses quiet frustration at the fact that she cannot do anything except pray for the safety of Mr. Pirzada's family. She eventually perceives that she is, in fact, neither fully American nor Indian. Lowe documents such an experience: "the boundaries and definitions of Asian American culture are continually shifting and being contested from pressures both 'inside' and 'outside' the Asian-origin community" (66). Her Indian parents continue their traditions by inviting compatriots and serving Indian food at their dining table, but her other circle of friends and teachers at school expects her to master American history just like how anyone else would. She is unable to shake off concerns about the world opposite to her, but also remains confused and detached at the same time. There is an ambivalence immanent in Lilia's mind: being aware of the situation, she is stuck amid a disturbing, uncanny feeling of attachment and a sense of distance at the same time. Indeed, Ien Ang notes that this ambivalence engenders the hybrid condition of "in-betweenness":

> I wish to hold onto this hybrid in-betweenness not because it is a comfortable position to be in, but because its very ambivalence is a source of cultural permeability and vulnerability that is a necessary condition for living together-in-difference. (150)

The story reaches a climax as Halloween arrives. Lilia dresses up as a witch and people comment that "they have never seen an Indian witch

before" (39). This brief comment can be symbolic, as it can also be seen as a representation of the young girl's newly shaped identity. Although her neighbours will always see her as an "Indian" witch, Lilia presents a combination of Western culture and Indian heritage and makes it her own individuality. The juxtaposition of basmati rice sacks and carved jack-o'-lanterns symbolises Lilia's hybrid identity; her acquaintance with Mr. Pirzada has successfully built a unique identity which she defines more personally, without adhering to conventional definitions of immigrant identity. Lilia's hybrid self, however, should not be understood in terms of political or national barriers; a suture of two nationalities is not what the story is trying to convey. Instead, Lahiri asserts readers to look at issues of immigrant identity in deeper, affective terms that directly influence individuals.

In the beginning, Lilia's cultural position between the invisible borderlines of America and India seems unstable: being unable to locate herself as host of any culture, and being pushed out to the border of both identities makes her look as if she has failed to collect her own position between the binary. This sense of a fragmentary self makes it seem as though Lilia's identity is incomplete or deficient. And so much of diasporic or ethnic literature drives characters to a search for roots, lost traditions, or a clinging to the past. However, Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* goes beyond this idea and rather traverses along the various aspects of different

immigrant individuals. Many of the characters in Lahiri's stories go through a chance to challenge or expand their definitions of identity, and Lilia also does likewise.

In "The Third and Final Continent," Lahiri once again discusses the hybridisation process of an immigrant that is ignited by a special relationship with a foreign stranger. The unnamed narrator recollects his journey to settle down in America, where he develops an acquaintance with Mrs. Croft as tenant and landlady of his temporary home. What marks his first impressions of the old lady is that she is a bold and sturdy woman, who "almost resembled a man" (178). With her booming voice, she also commands the narrator to comment on the moon landing:

> The woman bellowed, "A flag on the moon, boy! I heard it on the radio! Isn't that splendid?"
>
> "Yes, madame."
>
> But she was not satisfied with my reply. Instead, she commanded, "Say 'splendid'!" (179)

This odd conversation soon becomes a shared ritual between the narrator and Mrs. Croft, which eventually inspires his respect and affection for her. Although the old woman is authoritative and inflexible in her thoughts and behaviour, the narrator only sees her as a vulnerable person who needs to be cared for. Therefore, he approaches her with sincere politeness and manners throughout the story.

Conversations between the landlady and tenant are very brief, but the relationship forms a very important part of the story. Since Lahiri portrays both characters as isolated and lonely individuals, the brief acquaintance is even more poignant. Just as the aged Mrs. Croft lives alone in her big house, the narrator diligently adapts to the foreign neighbourhood. As Caesar mentions, connection occurs because "despite all their differences, [the narrator] and Mrs. Croft are equally distant from the societies in which they grew up, he from modern-day India, she from nineteenth-century America" ("American" 54). Their evening routine, as they sit down to share a few sentences, soon turns into a kind of solace for both. The narrator is also "mortified" (187) when he learns of Mrs. Croft's age—for a couple of reasons, but especially her widowhood—as he recalls his own mother's illness which troubled her after the loss of her husband. Drawing on such parallels between the old American lady and the Indian immigrant, the story breaks an assumed hierarchy that dominates the host-and-guest relationship; the narrator displays more care and politeness to the landlady, despite himself being a newcomer to the country. Moreover, Lahiri asserts that it is not the macroscopic collision of national identities which evokes hybridisation in her characters; rather, it is the gentle human gestures shared between individuals that make possible a cosmopolitan ethics in understanding different cultures.

Funnily enough, the narrator's relationship with his wife seems more awkward and unnatural than his connection to Mrs. Croft. Although the couple is just married, their relationship remains distant until the final pages of the story. The narrator even plainly states his indifferent feelings toward his wife, who is about to join him in America: "I regarded her arrival as I would the arrival of a coming month, or season—something inevitable, but meaningless at the same time" (189). The fact that forming a relationship with one's kindred is much more difficult than with a complete stranger is paradoxical; Lahiri employs such a shift in conventional notions of human relationships from the minority's viewpoint to "offer alternative visions of cross-cultural exchange and transnational affiliation" (Koshy 594).

Surprisingly, the foreign houseowner becomes the catalyst for the reconciliation between the narrator and his wife. The three-party encounter between Mrs. Croft, Mala, and the narrator lays groundwork for the beginning of their marriage. Only when the couple stands in front of Mrs. Croft, the narrator is able to genuinely sympathise with his wife who "had travelled far from home, not knowing where she was going, or what she would find" (195) just like he did several years ago. Through Mrs. Croft's eyes, he sees their relationship anew; he finally finds common ground with his wife. Mrs. Croft's declaration that she is a "perfect lady" sounds assuring to the narrator, as it confirms that Mala will also—perhaps slowly, but surely—be able to adjust to the new lifestyle in America. Lahiri wishes

to break down divisions between the native and the immigrant, as Jackson also notes that both women's ability to look beyond cultural differences marks "the beginning of genuine warmth between the protagonist and his bride" (119). Thus, the story demonstrates a mutual connection between the three characters, where national and cultural borders are boldly disregarded. Such gentle crossings between individual territories not only disrupts the "native-stranger binary" (Koshy 599), but also secures the idea that "as people cross arbitrary institutionalized categories of identity, a synthesis occurs and a hybrid identity emerges" (Smith 10).

CHAPTER IV

Cosmopolitan Sensibilities

So far in the previous chapters, I have studied the emergence of a complex identity, which was relayed via geographical metaphors of home to the immigrant characters. The discovery of unique human relationships has also strengthened grounds to imagine this complex identity as hybrid. As aforementioned in the Introduction, Lahiri's generation of creative writers marks a distinct difference from their earlier group of immigrants in that they are "comfortable negotiating the cultural landscapes of the United States, ancestral homelands, and dispersed diasporic destinations" (Srikanth and Song 19). Thus, the concluding scenes of the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* are significant as they present characters' display of "multiple allegiances" (19) to different cultures and communities. Because Lahiri characteristically tends to make indefinite closures in her stories (Brada-Williams 462), it is important to see how the endings manipulate diverse representations of Asian American immigrants' hybrid conditions.

The ending in "Mrs. Sen's" is unexpectedly abrupt. Although Mrs. Sen shows expertise in her culinary practices, she finds it extremely challenging to drive a car. She dislikes the idea of driving, but eventually figures that the skill is essential to living in a foreign city. As her husband

becomes unavailable to aid her in buying the fish she wants, she decides to drive by herself. However, readers deem this particular scene sinister; it has been clear throughout the story that Mrs. Sen does not own a driving license and is not allowed to drive on her own. Cox terms such a sudden hastiness in Mrs. Sen as a "moment of inadvisable self-interest" (125), which even puts the young boy at risk. Why she would suddenly choose to show such behaviour is not entirely clear, but in the end, this marks an end to her babysitting endeavours: "the [car] accident occurred quickly" and the "damage was slight" (134), but the effect is a permanent severing of their relationship. While Mrs. Sen shuts herself in her room, Eliot is handed a house key and expected to take care of himself in the beach house. It is certain that Eliot never sees Mrs. Sen again, as Lahiri adds that "it was the last afternoon Eliot spent with Mrs. Sen, or with any baby-sitter" (135).

The ending scene is indeed a painful, emotional schism between the two characters. Given the development of a bond between Mrs. Sen and Eliot (discussed in Chapter III), the sudden break may seem to undercut my previous explorations. As the characters are forced to return to their former places of belonging, they appear unable to maintain their experiences of traversing between cultural spaces. Especially Mrs. Sen, unlike other female immigrants in the short story collection (for example, Twinkle in "This Blessed House" and Mala in "The Third and Final Continent"), is left to adjust to new circumstances again. The brief gleams of relaxation and

courage—which showed on her with Eliot's company—may be removed. Likewise, Eliot also returns to his barren beach house, as a latchkey child with further responsibilities of being a "big boy now" (135). To Eliot's mother, the friendship that connects Mrs. Sen and Eliot is nothing more than a relationship between child and employed babysitter. It is regarded as mere business and a job to fulfil, and therefore easy to take away.

Lahiri uses this deliberate rupture in relationship to present a "melancholy … that haunts a relationship that has brought the [characters] comfort. It is the pain of unrecognized connection" (Caesar, "American" 55). Amidst such pessimism, however, I read the conclusion as inevitable and natural. The pain from a disrupted relationship engenders a connection to the actualities of life; the end of this relationship plants a more mature cross-cultural understanding in both Eliot and Mrs. Sen. The sudden curtail of their friendship invokes a growth within, and an independence must eventually take place in both characters.

What the story is trying to convey is the perpetual experience of hybridity. The gain of a hybrid identity does not simply end with the knowledge of one's partial state or a new world; it is more of a personal connection to the otherwise distant global. To the American boy, this connection is the thought-provoking acquaintance with an immigrant lady whose home is much farther than "his own home . . . five miles away" (Lahiri 116). Mrs. Sen, on the other hand, will also attempt to properly set

foot on foreign land at her own, slow pace. Caspari states this experience on a similar note:

> They have (criss)crossed the intercultural bridge while mourning the warm and colorful relationship they were able to have for a while. Eliot has been definitely and indelibly changed by his encounter with another culture, and Mrs. Sen has been able to adapt and assimilate, even if ever so slightly. (255)

Thus, I would argue that such a conclusion calls for the understanding that two places can (metaphorically) exist within a single individual. Without losing connection to the homeland, the hybrid subject can still reach and identify with another's world. In Lahiri's short stories, this is achieved by the necessary process of deliberate detachment. Through a painful yet necessary procedure, the characters are finally able to perceive beyond the boundaries of self and nation—and realise that the feelings of instability from a disconnected relationship is, indeed, what transforms into an opportunity to enter an unfamiliar world (Kim 74).

Similarly, the short story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" also suggests a sudden halt to the relationship between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia. Its final scene shares many resemblant features with the previously discussed "Mrs. Sen's." First of all, the companionship between the two characters is also very brief. After the story's climax where the two countries India and

Pakistan wage war, Mr. Pirzada flies "back to his three-story home in Dacca, to discover what was left of it" (Lahiri 41) and Lilia never meets him again. Lahiri cleverly addresses how Lilia's family soon adjusts to their usual ways of life, while Lilia seems to rediscover Mr. Pirzada's absence at home:

> The only difference was that Mr. Pirzada and his extra watch were not there to accompany us. . . . Every now and then I studied the map above my father's desk and pictured Mr. Pirzada on that small patch of yellow, perspiring heavily, I imagined, in one of his suits, searching for his family. (41)

The story effectively draws on the poignant voice of a ten-year old girl to emphasise the impact of the sudden break in her bond with Mr. Pirzada, who was also her only connection to the "outside" world which she was not properly aware of before.

Finally the family hears from Mr. Pirzada, and in his letter is a "thank you" to express his gratitude for the kindness and hospitality he had received. While her parents decide to celebrate the good news, Lilia is not in the mood to do so. Instead, she decides to throw away the sweets she had collected from Mr. Pirzada. Discarding what she had previously treasured could mean that Lilia—despite her young age—knows too well that this relationship would sooner or later be forgotten. She knows that Mr. Pirzada will not return to America now, as she dismally states "he had no reason to

return to us, and my parents predicted, correctly, that we would never see him again" (42). Following his reunion with family, Lilia thinks that the sweets—which were a kind of amulet for his daughters' safety—are now not necessary. It is also her way of expressing her sense of loneliness and grief. She concedes that she now understands the meaning of "miss[ing] someone who was so many miles and hours away" (42), and from mixed feelings of relief, grief and envy, the ten-year-old may have decided to throw them away.

In any case, Lilia does not need the sweets to remind her of Mr. Pirzada's memories anymore because his presence has made such a permanent impact on her life. Lilia's collection of sweets will eventually go stale, but her memories of Mr. Pirzada will remain and reside within her as a forlorn memory. Furthermore, her realisation of a nation and a history—which she never properly identified with in the past—will also be permanent. Her personal feelings of loss indeed reflect the traumatic experience of conflict and separation that had once already occurred in Pakistan. Through shared affinity with an outsider, Lilia ultimately learns "the meaning of being an American and a person outside America at the same time, of the multiple mental and physical places coexisting at the same instant" (Caesar, "Beyond" 84).

Moreover, Lahiri interweaves the use of domestic space and minor characters (children, immigrant housewives, and temporary residents) into

the discovery of a complex/hybrid identity. The short stories, in effect, assert that the process of identifying different cultures is not something too large-scale or nationally achieved; instead, it is more like an everyday endeavour and resolution to "welcome multiplicity and to embrace even the conflicting aspects of the blended culture" (Bahmanpour 47). Lahiri thereby secures multifarious meanings of identity for different individuals. Mr. Pirzada and his homeland live and remain not only in Lilia's memory but also her future reconstruction of identity. Her memories of traversing along cultural boundaries are then re-formed in the mind as a permanently new, hybrid status. So, Lahiri does a good job in finding the most mundane and ordinary events in an immigrant's life to deliver the possibly rarefied concept of hybridity and relate it to the larger segment of readers. As Gita Rajan mentions, Lahiri is able to draw a "global" message by employing "local" images and circumstances that are also stored in her personal memory (139).

Then, in final analysis, how does Lahiri present a diasporic yet universal approach to hybrid identities? How does she acknowledge the coexistence of different national identities, without simply deleting or diffusing one's distinct territories? From my analysis above, it shows that the characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* do achieve an openness to the world, embracing the "othered," but also uphold their roots and histories of belonging. Hybridity in diasporic citizens, thus, resembles an amalgam of

one's ethnic origin and acceptance of multiplicity. In this respect, Lahiri's characters all represent, or at least strive for, a sense of hybridity. The stories analysed in this thesis depict immigrants' efforts to maintain cultural roots—mostly through domestic practices—and to accommodate to foreign space at the same time. The protagonists clearly develop an acceptance of cultural mobility and living "together-in-difference" (Ang 141). The conclusions in each story step further to introduce notions of "the self as simultaneously belonging here and there" (Mishra 185), as the characters are geographically separated but share a mutual connectedness.

Hence, Jhumpa Lahiri's stories gesture towards a point of agreement where the interconnectivity between individuals and extending of human gestures is emphasised throughout, while the realisation of one's roots and histories is also necessarily acknowledged. I would like to develop my understanding of hybridity upon Susan Koshy's concept of "minority cosmopolitanism." The term is a redefined version of cosmopolitanism, which looks at the minority and the cosmopolitan anew by focusing on "translocal affiliations that are grounded in the experience of minority subjects" (Koshy 594). This concept provides a strong basis for my argument that identities today cannot be fully understood without ignoring the globe's hyper-connectedness, yet should not neglect a demand for recognition of cultural roots and origins in the immigrant population.

Consequently, the concluding scenes of Lahiri's short stories support my recognition of hybridity in diasporic subjects as they adopt a partially cosmopolitan approach. Ulrich Beck claims that "cosmopolitanism generates a logic of non-exclusive oppositions, making 'patriots' of two worlds that are simultaneously equal and different" (17). This is a strange experience in which the different cultures physically divide the characters, yet bind them together with shared sentiments. For example, Mr. Pirzada expresses his gratitude towards Lilia's family with a sincere "thank you"—an expression he didn't completely approve of during his stay in America. Only after he reunites with his own family in Bangladesh, he realises the immensity of their care and affection. Lilia, on the other hand, experiences a tear in a relationship but also crosses the subcontinent in her imagination. This act of cultural exchange, therefore, becomes a metaphor for a connection between two distant worlds, which demonstrates a definite exchange of emotions (gratitude and hospitality) that surpasses social, geographical and historical borders. Therefore, it is fitting to say that "the diasporic citizen becomes a vehicle for minority cosmopolitanism by reconfiguring "imperfect" or plural national attachments as a mode of inhabiting the earth" (Koshy 597). The characters, even though they are physically pulled away from each other, learn that kindness and affinities transcend borders.

More permanent human relationships in “This Blessed House” and “The Third and Final Continent” also represent how the characters decide to balance and negotiate different cultural identities throughout their cosmopolitan lives. In the married couples’ relationships, the marital bond compels more frequent interchanges of physical space and emotion between characters. In “This Blessed House,” readers learn that the newlywed couple faces a communication problem. Sanjeev, too keen on others’ opinions and reactions, tries to hold back Twinkle from collecting her ridiculous collection of Christian items. To his dismay, he only finds her disregarding any of his suggestions. Soon, their disrupt in communication makes him wonder if he really loves her; readers ominously recall a similar problem that led to Shoba and Shukumar’s estrangement in “A Temporary Matter.”

As the narrative proceeds towards the end, it appears that Sanjeev and Twinkle will eventually suffer a breakdown in their relationship. While Sanjeev is left deserted in his housewarming party, he imagines “all the things he could do, undisturbed” (155) if he could lock everyone up in the attic and let them out only at his will. As such tensions build up, the estrangement between Sanjeev and Twinkle becomes evident. However, a twist is introduced instead:

> He thought of her . . . But instead of feeling irritated, as he had ever since they’d moved into the house together, he felt a pang of *anticipation* at the thought of her rushing unsteadily

> down the winding staircase . . . It was the same pang he used to feel before they were married . . . (emphasis added, 155-56)

Sanjeev's unexpected affection for Twinkle signs a reconciliation of the couple's relationship, and also "his recognition of the messy entanglements of attachment" (Koshy 601) between the two. I claim that hybridisation involves an understanding of *and* association with the uneven dynamics of such social relations. The use of marital relationships is one of Lahiri's ways to suggest that hybridity is not something to be achieved at once, but is rather fluid and gains different layers: identity is indeed multiply reproduced in different individuals.

Bhabha's claim that "in any particular political struggle, new sites are always being opened up" (Rutherford 216) reflects the situation at the young couple's house. Sanjeev and Twinkle have gone through a trifling power struggle, where Sanjeev desperately tries to keep traditions in his house and his position as head of house while Twinkle lightheartedly dismisses his orders. However, what results from this endeavour is a "negotiation" (Rutherford 216) of different cultures and personalities between the couple. Hence, Lahiri ends the story with Sanjeev's decision: "Sanjeev pressed the massive silver face to his ribs, careful not to let the feather hat slip, and followed her." (157) The last line denotes that despite his lingering hesitance, Sanjeev chooses to give way in a negotiation with

his wife to follow her path in understanding their immigrant lives anew. Their "blessed" house, therefore, will depict a household rooted to their diasporic identity but at the same time aspire for an "'ethical glocalism': that is, to be engaged in the local and the global at the same time" (Beck 27). A "unique cultural bricolage" (Field 174), therefore, continues to endure in Sanjeev and Twinkle's house.

The final paragraphs of the "The Third and Final Continent" illustrate the typical process of the narrator's successful migration to America: he is an American citizen now, has a decent job, and owns a house for his family. Lahiri provides an auspicious closure to her short story collection by enumerating the "classic milestones of immigrant *bildung*" (Koshy 605). Indeed, this final story is one of the very few narratives that have a positive ending; without losing focus on minority characters (here, Indian immigrants and the elderly), Lahiri encourages a cosmopolitan vision of hybrid identity that stretches beyond hurdles of race, age, and culture.

Interestingly, Lahiri juxtaposes the first human landing on the moon with the narrator's immigration to the U.S. The two very dissimilar events form a strange parallel: as much as man's first adventure to untrodden ground is monumental to America and the global community, the narrator's settlement on foreign land is an equally courageous act to the individual. Despite the amazing achievements of science and technological progress,

the narrator strongly believes that his adventure many years ago deserves to be equally commended:

> 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, 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. (198)

The narrator's concluding words also echo Lahiri's characteristic in her portrayal of diasporic, "hybrid" individuals throughout *Interpreter of Maladies*: she shows how her characters successfully build a unique identity through the everyday acts of survival.

Finally, it becomes clear that Lahiri exhorts a common message throughout her short story collection: the coexistence of "diasporic" (directing towards one's local point of departure) and "cosmopolitan" (aspiring the global) sensibilities within the hybrid identity. Loretta Mijares explains this influence of sociocultural attachments in her reading of Salman Rushdie's work:

> We can develop a more "*rooted*" cosmopolitanism, which acknowledges that while identity is indeed multiply determined, the uneven and enduring weight of factors such as race and class . . . continues to irrevocably shape the degree to which identities can be fluid and self-invented. (emphasis added, 141)

Thus, the existence of historical, political, and cultural remnants in the diasporic citizen—however vague or distant it may be—is what reversely evokes a strong possibility of "transnational affiliations" (Koshy 608) and cultural reciprocity towards the other. The essence of hybridity in today's "cosmopolis" is, indeed, the understanding of heterogeneous attitudes toward national and cultural borderlines. To some the borders may be fuzzy or extremely porous, while to some others it may remain distinctive in their lives: as Rushdie once stated, "our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" (15).

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

"For much of my life, I wanted to belong to a place," Jhumpa Lahiri once said in an interview, "either the one my parents came from or to America" ("Trading Stories"). Immigrant identity stretches out from a search for belonging, and *Interpreter of Maladies* explores the complex intersections of identity with notions of nation, culture and society. However, the current era of globalisation underpins the sheer difficulty in mapping one's ideological or cultural linkages. Common understandings of identity on a double-edged plane have become increasingly tangential to modern society, and thus Lahiri's short story collection shows characters who place themselves on a "new" plane that confounds a binary option from native and foreign. In this thesis, I have studied four stories in detail: "Mrs. Sen's," "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," "This Blessed House" and "The Third and Final Continent." These stories, as I read them, explore a hybrid identity in which traditional notions of immigrant identity are problematised and redefined.

Lahiri's workings of hybridity in her characters are first relayed via a study of borderlines between exterior and interior space, by examining the repeated motif of home. The homes of immigrant families operate as a field

for the interaction of dissimilar identities. Despite the existing power relationships that construct societies, the immigrant household is metaphorically impervious to traditional subdivisions of dominant and minority cultures. The domestic space resembles a "third space" where characters exhibit a hybrid identity that deviates from such confined views of culture and individuals. Moreover, Lahiri studies various forms of relationships in her characters—an American boy with his immigrant caretaker, a second-generation Indian girl with a visitor from Pakistan/Bangladesh, a tenant with his landlord, and a newlywed couple—to topple hackneyed forms of identity development. As discussed in Chapter III, odd juxtapositions of the host-guest, familiar-unfamiliar double ask for a "[re-]formation of cultural objects and practices that are produced by the histories of uneven and unsynthetic power relations" (Lowe 67). The characters altogether undergo a process of maturation, in which they challenge themselves with familiar and unfamiliar relationships. By placing themselves in uncomfortable and awkward situations, they eventually learn of previously obscure communities and rethink habitual understandings of dominant and minority cultures.

Are Jhumpa Lahiri's selected stories, then, doing justice to represent a hybrid identity evoked within diasporic subjects? As suggested in Chapter IV, Lahiri interprets a distinct sense of hybridity with a mixture of diasporic and cosmopolitan sensibilities. In "Mrs. Sen's" and "When Mr. Pirzada

Came to Dine," the severance of a temporary relationship serves to extend the scope of hybridisation to a permanent, global context. In the same way, the strong bonds between characters in "This Blessed House" and "The Third and Final Continent" portray a widespread presence of the new diaspora who actively incorporate hybrid qualities. The construct of minority cosmopolitanism further explicates the possibility of weaving cosmopolitan experiences with hybridity in diasporic subjects. Therefore, Lahiri' attempts to solve the geographical instability in diasporic characters with a quasi-cosmopolitan perspective—the possibility for global trajectories within the local.

In conclusion, Lahiri's short stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* resemble a colourful tapestry of various interpersonal relationships and encounters with local and global contexts. With a keen eye on immigrant characters of the Indian subcontinent, Lahiri creates characters who ultimately embrace a hybrid state, which is the existence in a new space between the two ends of the "hyphen" in minority identities. So the "hovering" motion is not a passive act anymore, but instead, becomes one's volitional gesture to resort to neither one place of belonging or the other. As Lahiri subtly challenges fixed notions of identity, her stories openly claim relevant discussions of diasporic and cosmopolitan views in suggesting a more realistic and persuasive view on hybrid identities. Her recent autobiographical novel hints at a desired "hybrid" state of immigrant

identity which reaches for the global, while grounded on the local: “Yet it will have specific, localized roots, although it remains hybrid, slightly outside the frame, like me” (Lahiri, “In Other Words”).

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국 문 초 록

세계화와 이주로 대표되는 현 사회에 이민과 디아스포라 연구는 계속해서 증가해 왔으나 개인의 정체성에 관한 문제는 특히 다루기 까다로운 주제가 되었다. 줌파 라히리(Jhumpa Lahiri)의 첫 단편 소설집 『질병 통역가』(*Interpreter of Maladies*)는 이민자가 겪는 다양한 현상을 조명하며 특히 상실, 외로움, 향수와 같은 감정을 섬세하게 다루고 있다. 이 글에서는 단편집에 소개된 네 개의 작품 「센 아주머니의 집」(“Mrs. Sen’s”),「피르자다 씨가 식사하러 왔을 때」(“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”),「축복받은 집」(“This Blessed House”) 그리고「세 번째이자 마지막 대륙」(“The Third and Final Continent”)을 중심으로 분석해보며 등장인물들의 정체성 형성과 변화를 살펴보려 한다.

본래 ‘집’이라는 개인적 영역은 물리적 혹은 가상적 소속감을 나타내는 공간으로 그려지는 경우가 많지만, 라히리의 작품 속에서는 한 발 더 나아가 등장인물이 정체성의 분열이나 차이점을 깨닫는 역동적인 공간으로 묘사된다. 즉, ‘집’은 소속감(belonging) 뿐만 아니라 발견(becoming)의 공간이 된다. 또한 등장인물들은 다른 문화 간의 관계를 통해 새로운 정체성을 취하고 활성화시키는 경험을 하는데, 이는 기존의 개인적/문화적 지식을 재정의하게 되는 “혼종적” (hybrid) 정체성으로 나타난다. 어른과 아이, 손님과 주인 등 인간 관계의 다양한 면모를 그리다가 뒤집는 행위를 통해 등장인물들의 세계가 충돌하게 된다. 두 작품의 결말까지 면밀히 살펴보면, 등장인물들은 세계시민주의(cosmopolitanism)적 요소를 수용하는 새로운 형태의 정체성에 다다르고 있음을 알 수 있다.

따라서 이 글은 『질병 통역가』의 등장인물들에 발현하는 혼종적 정체성(hybrid identity)을 두 가지 부분으로 나누어 다루고 있다. 먼저, 이민자의 정체성 확립 과정의 다양한 양상을 살펴보려고 한다. 등장인물들은 작품의 다양한 요소를 통해 정체성에 대한 이원적인 접근에서 벗어나, 새로운 존재 방식을 취하는 "제 3 의 공간"(third space)을 차지하게 된다. 다음으로 "소수적 세계시민주의"(minority cosmopolitanism)의 관점에서 문화 간 감정 교류의 가능성을 제시한다. 라히리는 이제껏 변두리나 주변부로 취급받아 온 소수민족을 재조명하면서 국경을 뛰어넘는 정서적 접촉을 시도한다. 결론적으로 네 개의 작품을 통해 혼종적 정체성의 발현을 논하고자 한다. 더 나아가 등장인물 개인의 지역적 영향과 세계시민적 삶의 방식을 동시에 아우르는 공존의 가능성을 제시한다.

주요어 : Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, identity, hybridity, diaspora, minority cosmopolitanism

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