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THE CREATION OF THE INTERCULTURAL SPACE IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S SHORT STORIES

Summary

The paper studies the position of the South Asian community in the U.S. society by providing a detailed analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories from her two collections – The Interpreter of Maladies *and* Unaccustomed Earth*. The focus is first placed on the two concepts – that of immigration and that of diaspora. These concepts are then used to further illustrate the South Asian diasporic identity and observe how this state of never fully belonging affects their process of (self-)identification and assimilation. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's notion on the* third/hybrid space*, it is claimed that South Asian immigrants strive to create a new kind of space – the intercultural space – which would be a progressive space that would bear the potential for cultural negotiation, communication and understanding. Since Jhumpa Lahiri's two short-story collections focus on the first, the second and the third generation of South Asian Americans, depicting their experience in great detail, these stories are then used to analyse how the processes of South Asian (self-)identification, their (un)successful attempts at assimilation and the creation of the intercultural space manifest themselves in different ways through each of these three generations.*

Key words: diaspora, immigration, intercultural space, Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Interpreter of Maladies, Unaccustomed Earth*

INTRODUCTION

Being a second-generation Bengali-American, Jhumpa Lahiri attempts to portray the quotidian lives of the members of the South Asian community within the context of the U.S. society. Her fiction problematizes the diasporic backdrop – that is, how the sense of both belonging to and being alienated from the American context affects the process of diasporic (self-)identification. She also places a great emphasis on the notions of *home* and *nation*, questioning the possibility of their redefinition. However, this paper argues that Lahiri, by addressing both the perks and the pitfalls of the complex migrant experience within the scope of predominately white U.S. environment, also observes the possibility of intertwining these opposing cultural experiences and creating a new kind of space – the intercultural space that would bear a great possibility of

transcending these differences. This is exemplified with the stories from her two short-story collections, *The Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*.

SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA WITHIN THE U.S. CONTEXT

As I-Chun Wang and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek suggest, "[m]igration and diaspora are results of social, political, and economic circumstances which, in turn, result in social, economic, and cultural marginalization" (2010: 2). Therefore, in order to better understand the diasporic backdrop and the question of their (marginalized) position within the society of residence, it is first necessary to distinguish between these two concepts – that of *immigration* and that of *diaspora*. Eithne Luibhéid defines *immigration* as "a permanent move […] across a political boundary" (2007: 127). In this sense, Luibhéid suggests the voluntary nature of such a movement. Consequently, Brent Hayes Edwards defines *diaspora* as a "state of dispersal resulting from voluntary migration" (2007: 82). In other words, the process of *immigration* precedes the status of belonging to a *diaspora*. Upon the arrival into the foreign country in which one is to settle, through the process of documentation "the 'immigrant' [is] defined as a person who crosses a nation-state boundary and takes on a legal status of 'alien', with associated regimes of identification, surveillance, rights and constraints" (Luibhéid 2007: 128). Following this legal process, the immigrant is then immediately associated with other immigrants of similar cultural, racial or ethnic background, who have all undertaken a similar journey across political boundaries and who mostly share similar experiences. Through these processes, the immigrant's identity, albeit legally homogenous on paper, in fact, becomes doubled and hyphenated. In this sense, as Vijay Mishra suggests, diaspora can be viewed as a group of people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities on their passports and who want to explore the meaning of the hyphen (2008: 1). In other words, these people strive to affirm their doubled identities. Consequently, this sense of alienation that they feel, as well as the process of exploration of their hyphenated identities, has a great effect on the process of (self-)identification. For that reason, Anju Rastogi claims that diaspora "can be a positive sight for the affirmation of the identity or conversely, a negative sight of fears of losing the identity" (2015: 1). The immigrant subject, therefore, struggles on both sides – on the one hand, to undergo the process of assimilation or integration into the new surroundings, and on the other hand, to preserve the language, religion and tradition of his/her homeland and preserve the ties s/he has with his/her culture of origin.

The diasporic experience is also characterised by yet another process – that of acculturation. Donnetrice Allison defines acculturation as an occurrence in which "an individual becomes immersed in a different culture and, as a result, begins to take on cultural characteristics of that group" (2010: 4). She also states that as "one is

acculturated into one group, one is deculturated from another" (2010: 5). Therefore, the diasporic subject struggles to balance the two sides of this process – to become more acculturated into his/her new surroundings, while also preserving the traits of his/her origin culture. In a similar manner, Débora B. Maehler, Martin Weinmann, and Katja Hank define acculturation as "a broad process of psychological and sociological adaptation following intercultural contact" (2019: 2). To put it differently, once the diasporic subject has settled into the new territory, s/he is confronted with culture(s), rituals, practices, languages, religions, etc., completely different from his/her own and s/he undergoes the psychological, or inner, and sociological, or outer, process of balancing these cultural differences within himself/herself and in contact with his/her new surroundings. The question remains if the diasporic subject will be able to balance these two opposing cultures and to what extent. According to John Berry, there are four acculturation profiles that result out of this intercultural contact: (1) *assimilation*, marked by a mild orientation towards the culture of origin and a strong focus on the culture of the residence country; (2) *separation*, marked by a strong orientation towards the culture of origin and a weak orientation towards the culture of current residence; (3) *integration,* marked by a strong orientation towards both of these cultures; (4) *marginalization*, marked by weak orientation towards both cultures (qtd. in Maehler, Weinmann, and Hank 2019:2).

Acculturation is, then, a long, and often complicated process which results in various degrees of attachment and different kinds of orientation towards these two opposing cultures. Any of this four acculturation profiles greatly affects and shapes the immigrant's future. Moreover, the acculturation process is further amplified by the fact that the diasporic subject may also undergo the process of naturalization – that is, the legal process in which the non-citizens become citizens or nationals of a given country. The process of naturalization, in this sense, may come up as an outcome of the entire acculturation process, but it can also function vice versa – that the diasporic subject, through the process of naturalization, is enabled to acculturate more easily into the new surroundings. Therefore, the naturalization process, according to Priscilla Wald, signals "the possibility of adaptation and the promise of transformation" (2007: 171), which "implies an environment that can accommodate the introduction of a foreign element" (2007: 171). That is, the process of naturalization the diasporic subject undergoes implies not only his/her own willingness to assimilate or integrate and become a member of a given nation, but also the willingness and legal preconditions of his/her surroundings to legally accept the foreign subject into their community.

Nevertheless, even though the predominant society tends to view and categorize diasporas in a very simplistic manner, neglecting complex divisions that exist between these different groups of people, it is important to notice that there can never be clear divisions between diasporas. As Rastogi suggests,

> migrants cannot be conveniently grouped into clear-cut 'diasporas' because the realities of cultural dynamics are much more complex than those envisioned in simplistic models of 'multiculturalism', which wrongly attribute homogeneity and cultural stasis to groups of people from particular parts of the world (2015: 2).

That is particularly the case with the South Asian diaspora. South Asians are often grouped within the same category, which is highly problematic. As Rajan and Sharma claim, South Asia consists of numerous countries, such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka (2006: 4). All of these countries are marked by great religious, national, traditional and ethnic differences, and they have also often been torn apart by tensions of different kinds (Rajan and Sharma 2006: 11). The birth of these nations, as Susan Koshy claims, has coincided with the formation of the two kinds of diaspora – "'endo-diasporas' resulting from the scattering groups to neighbouring countries in South Asia and 'exo-diasporas' resulting from the scattering of populations to distant countries outside the region" (2011: 596). Albeit South Asian endo-diasporas have been marked by even greater sense of violence and conflict, among the South Asian exo-diaspora within the U.S. context, these differences have seemingly melted away. Nevertheless, there are great nuances and even greater differences between the members of this community. As Rajan and Sharma suggest, "it is a deeply divided population, split along cultural […] lines, [but] while within mainstream US culture, they are constructed as a homogenous group, […] within [which…] the schims are deep indeed" (2006: 18). The history of these inner tensions often continues to permeate through the lives of South Asians in the States. Albeit probably not the cause of direct conflict, it is often the source of minor tensions and greater misunderstandings within their community.

However, within the American context, despite the fact that diasporas are no longer, as Appadurai claims "small, marginal, or exceptional" (2005: 10), the South Asian community, along with other ethnic communities, is generalised and positioned as the foreign element struggling to become more integrated into the society. In her short stories, Lahiri attempts to depict this kind of *othering* experience. The term *othering* was coined by Gayatri Spivak to describe "the process by which imperial discourse creates its 'others'" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2007: 156). In other words, through the process of *othering*, the colonial subjects – the colonizers – shape the image of the others by assigning various negative or inferior attributes to the people they are colonizing, and in this way they also construct the image of themselves as superior. This process inevitably affects both their own sense of self, as well as the identity of the colonized. In this sense, within the diasporic context, the *othering* experience connotes the process in which the diasporic subjects are automatically positioned as the others by the predominant population, which then greatly affects the process of their (self-)identification.

By focusing on this *othering* experience, Lahiri depicts the experience of the first, the second, and sometimes even the third generation immigrants. Lahiri's first generation is mostly defined by the need to assimilate as much as possible, but also stigmatised by a great incapability of entirely escaping its alien status. The members of this generation are either enchanted with the prospects of the "New World", or are constantly longing for home, but they never manage to assimilate entirely, due to the strong influence of their origins. On the other hand, the second generation encounters themselves in "a particularly vexed position in regard to identity" (Field 2004: 165). They are in contact with their cultural heritage, due to the proximity of their parents and relatives, but they are also further distanced from it. And since they have been brought up in the States, their identities are "inextricably tied to their national affiliation as Americans" (Field 2004: 166). They are, therefore, in a constant struggle to balance their double identities and come to terms with the fact that they are "irretrievably heterogeneous" (Spivak 1988: 284). According to Field, diasporic subjects are also confronted with the fact of having "two homelands" (2004: 166). As Lahiri herself has claimed, as a member of the second generation of South Asian immigrants, she has often felt illegitimate in both cultures (qtd. in Bahri 2013: 40). The majority of Lahiri's second-generation characters, however, never manage to go past that point of constant negotiation between their two identities and a different kind of alienation emerges out of that. Nevertheless, it is in the third generation that Lahiri places all hopes of creating something new out of that cultural negotiation, as it will be observed further.

Consequently, by blending different cultural traits into a new cultural compound, the second and third generation of immigrants might, in fact, be attempting to create a new cultural space. Such a space would rely greatly on Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the *third* or *hybrid* space. Bhabha's term stems from the postcolonial context and he describes that such a space "though unrepresentable in itself, […] constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity" (1994: 37). In other words, if the postcolonial identity is hybrid – a compound which emerged out of the contact between the colonizer and the colonized – it challenges the essentialist view on identity as fixed and invariable, and, in consequence, creates a kind of dynamic, variable space of no fixity in which two opposing cultures meet, translate, intertwine, and are negotiated. This new kind of cultural space is productive and looming with new possibilities – it does acknowledge its cultural predecessors, but no longer relies on them and *continues* down its own path. This space also represents hope for the future, representing the possibility of the space free from cultural misunderstandings, misinterpretations, tensions, and conflicts. Nevertheless, bearing in mind that Bhabha's concept is strongly tied to the postcolonial context, and the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, this paper opts for the notion of the *intercultural space*. This *intercultural space* would then be created by the hybrid migrants through their process of self-identification and negotiation of their double identities. It would be a progressive space that would bear the potential

for cultural negotiation, communication and understanding. Such a space would then greatly resemble Edward Soja's notion of Thirdspace, which Soja describes as:

> a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange where the geographical imagination can be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives that have heretofore been considered by the epistemological referees to be incompatible, uncombinable. It is a space where issues of race, class, and gender can be addressed simultaneously without privileging one over the other. […] In this critical thirding, the original binary choice is not dismissed entirely but is subjected to creative process of *restructuring* that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives (1996: 5).

In other words, within this space of constant negotiation, opening and critique, binaries would not be overlooked nor overcome, but combined and restructured in such a way that new alternative cultural combinations would be made possible. However, such a space would also imply an environment ready to accept such cultural negotiations. In a contemporary world brimming with various cultural encounters, as well as in the context of the U.S. heterogeneous society, the creation of such a hybrid progressive intercultural space seems almost necessary.

JHUMPA LAHIRI'S DEPICTION OF SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA

In her short-story collections, *The Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri contemplates the possibility of creating such a progressive intercultural space. She observes various kinds of South Asian migrant experience and juxtaposes it against the predominately white American backdrop in order to observe whether cultural translation and negotiation is possible on both sides. According to Noelle Brada-Williams, what unifies all of the stories from Lahiri's collection is "[a] sense of exile and the potential for – and frequent denial of – human communication" (2004: 454). This potential for human communication that arises out of the contact between the two opposing cultures disguises the hopes of creating a space of intercultural communication and acceptance. The three stories chosen from *The Interpreter of Maladies,* "The Third and Final Continent", "Sexy", and "Mrs. Sen's", focus mostly on the experience of the first generation South Asians and depict different kinds of relationships between them and white Americans, only to observe whether it is possible to create such an environment that would welcome their attempts of assimilating into the American context. The two stories chosen from *Unaccustomed Earth*, "Unaccustomed Earth" and "A Choice of Accommodation", deal with the complex experience of second- and third-generation South Asians and their process of self-identification. The emphasis is placed on the observation of whether these generations are able to make use of the potential of the intercultural space.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies*

The Third and Final Continent

The Third and Final Continent follows the unnamed first-generation Indian protagonist who moves from Calcutta to Boston. He has recently entered an arranged marriage and, in consequence, he moves to the States to secure better living conditions for himself and his new wife. His arrival to the States happens to occur simultaneously with the man's landing on the Moon. According to Deepika Bahri, such a coincidence "recalls these various connotations of the word alien, effectively conflating journey of galactic scale, splendid isolation, and […] [the] achievement of surviving in the 'New World'" (2013: 37). In this sense, Bahri connects the notion of alienation to the state of utter separation (2013: 37). America is, therefore, depicted as the final frontier (Bahri, 2013: 45). He moves in with a 103-year-old Mrs. Croft – a very traditional, patriarchal old lady, whose company serves him as a surrogate family for the following six weeks after his arrival to the States, while he waits for his wife to arrive. As Bahri suggests, Mrs. Croft's old age, her traditionality, as well as the fact that she is completely infatuated with the fact that the Americans have planted their flag on the Moon, present her as the "true American" (2013: 46). However, the fact that Mrs. Croft lives alone, locked within the safe boundaries of her home, points to the idea that the Indian protagonist is not the only character who is alienated. She, herself, remains utterly lonely, isolated and not at all assimilated into what has become of the U.S.

Nevertheless, the protagonist begins his life in the States and starts to slowly assimilate. As he recounts, "[he] bought a larger carton of milk, and learned to leave it on the shaded part of the windowsill, as [he] had seen another resident at the YMCA do" (Lahiri 1999: 192). Therefore, by observing habitual everyday actions of his surroundings, he steadily begins to adapt to the U.S. society. Even through his cohabitation with Mrs. Croft, which is marked by the repetitive routine of the two of them sitting together on a bench, talking about the fact that the Americans planted their flag on the Moon, he grows fond of the old lady and, in a strange way, begins to feel more at home. He claims that repeating this same conversation every evening "reminded [him] of [his] wedding, when [he] had repeated endless Sanskrit verses after the priest, verses [he] barely understood" (Lahiri, 1999: 196). Therefore, if rituals are based on repetition, and tradition is based on rituals, it may be claimed that through his short rituals with Mrs. Croft, the protagonist begins to create a new sort of tradition for himself – the one that would represent his life in the States.

Once Mala, his wife, is about to arrive, he claims that, unlike her, he is already used to living in the States. Nevertheless, her arrival presents yet another challenge – he is required to integrate her – his brand new wife which he barely knows and perceives as an alien in her own right – into his newly-invented American tradition. In the beginning, they both struggle. However, once Mala is introduced to Mrs. Croft, the two of them

immediately get on well. Consequently, it is Mrs. Croft who brings Mala and her husband closer together. Symbolically, she serves as the American backdrop – the context against which Mala and her husband position themselves as the Others and notice their mutual resemblances, all of which strengthens their bond. This very process is reminiscent of the positioning of the South Asian minority against the American backdrop – although there are numerous differences between the members of the community, once they juxtapose themselves against the white, middle-class American population, they suddenly begin to note all of their mutual similarities.

At the end of the story, the protagonist recounts how he and Mala have managed to assimilate to some extent into the American way of living. However, they still struggle to relive part of their tradition through their son. As he claims, "[they] drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things [they] sometimes worry he will never do after [they] die" (Lahiri 1999: 215). As Rajan and Sharma claim, "South Asians have prioritized the value of their homeland cultures, […] [which] means a classical culture: language, attire, dance, music, etc." (2006: 20). Therefore, by speaking Bengali to their son and by making him eat Indian food in a manner in which it is eaten in India, they make him value and relive his homeland culture. In this sense, they, as the members of the first generation, have managed to reach one the four previously-mentioned acculturation profiles by Berry – that of *separation*. They strongly gravitate around their culture of origin, with a weak orientation towards the U.S. culture. However, it is their son – the member of the second generation – who bears the possibility of combining the two worlds and creating a new cultural space. It is he who is able to at least reach the level of *assimilation*, if not even the level of *integration,* which would enable him to strongly orient himself towards both of the cultures that have shaped him.

Sexy

In *Sexy,* Lahiri goes even further in her exploration of the relationship between the diasporic and the white American subject. The story depicts the illicit relationship between a young, 22-year-old American woman, Miranda, and a married Indian man, Devajit Mitra. The free indirect style of the story presents the reader with Miranda's perspective. As suggested by Keith Wilhite, "we read the story's cosmopolitan, global spaces alongside and against her provincial perspective" (2016: 85). Therefore, it may be claimed that, by using Miranda as a focaliser, Lahiri plays with the reader's prejudices. In other words, it would be expected to suggest that Dev, as a first-generation Indian, is to take the inferior position of a diasporic subject struggling to integrate into the U.S. society. However, as Wilhite asserts, "[while] Miranda's white privilege alleviates the notions of settlement and citizenship, her gendered and (regionally) dislocated identity limits her mobility" (2016: 78). In other words, being of

provincial origin, as well as being a young seduced woman, Miranda is the one to occupy the inferior position. It is Dev who, according to Friedman, appears as one of the "confident cosmopolites, members of a shifting network of global travellers whose national loyalties are flexible" (qtd. in Wilhite, 2016: 88).

Moreover, it is Miranda's lack of geographical knowledge that makes her even more inferior. Keith Wilhite stresses the importance of maps in Lahiri's fiction, claiming that they serve as the site of cultural translation and "a screen for multiple identifications" (2016: 77). That is, by using maps, Lahiri writes "displaced subjects in place" (Wilhite 2016: 77). Maps also "call attention to travel and migration, suggesting the vast distances covered by a pioneering first generation" (Maxey, 2012: 45) and cartography "offers proof of permanent residential settlement through the post-imperial claiming of space" (Maxey, 2012: 46). Mapping is, as Maxey suggests, a polysemic metaphor, providing a rich geographical and historical context for the notions of home and nation (2012: 47). The importance of maps can be observed in the scene in the Mapparium, in which Miranda and Dev stand at the opposite sides of the bridge, which, symbolically, stretches from the States to India. According to Christopher Apap, the "bridge, then, represents their connections to one another at the same time that it is emblematic of their stark cultural differences" (2016: 55). The bridge is, in this sense, the symbol of their affair, which attempts to make up the cultural differences between their countries of origin. However, the fact that their relationship is secret and illicit seems to point to the fact that such an attempt is, in some sense, impossible to achieve.

There is yet another important thing Lahiri explores through their relationship – namely, Edward Said's notion of Orientalism. He defines Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (1977: 14). In this sense, the vision of the Orient is a Western invention, and it immediately places the Orient in the inferior position – that of the Other (Said, 1977: 12). Therefore, what Lahiri suggests in "Sexy" is that the relationship between Dev and Miranda is based on the fetishization of the Other. However, the process of fetishization does not only befall Miranda but Dev as well. At their first encounter, Dev is described as "tanned, with black hair that was visible on his knuckles" (Lahiri, 1999: 95), whereas Miranda is portrayed as having "silver eyes and skin as pale as paper, and the contrast with her hair, as dark and glossy as an espresso bean, caused people to describe her as striking, if not pretty" (Lahiri, 1999: 96). Therefore, they both find each other exotic and mysterious, and, as Wilhite notes, it is exactly this element of exotic fascination that attracts them to one another (2016: 86). Consequently, Miranda's interest in Dev also awakens her interest in his culture and she starts to formulate her own vision of the Orient. As Apap suggests, her "desire to comprehend Dev's difference might thus be understood as her desire to understand her relation to Others and otherness" (2016: 58). Miranda starts to inquire about Dev's childhood and learn about Bengal. She tries to learn his language and alphabet. She starts going to Indian shops and restaurants and consuming Indian food.

However, these poor attempts at mimicking Indian culture do not get her far. She is still confined within the limits of her knowledge and experience. However, what she does succeed in is the fact that she is able "to imagine the Other as human rather than subhuman" (Apap, 2016: 71). In this sense, Miranda, to an extent, overcomes the intercultural barrier between her and Dev. Her attempt at understanding the Other makes room for the possibility of creating the environment that would accommodate Dev's assimilation, yet this possibility is never fully realised.

Mrs. Sen's

Lastly, the story *Mrs. Sen's* depicts the biggest possibility of creating the intercultural space within the first short-story collection. The story depicts a young American boy, Eliot, who begins to spend time in the house of an Indian family, the Sens. As Martina Caspari suggests, "the text actually opens up a subversive space, a space in which *both* cultures […] undergo a quiet, barely perceptible change, but still a change that eventually does make a difference" (2014: 246). Mrs. Sen is a first-generation Indian, who has moved from Calcutta to the States with her husband. Mrs. Sen struggles with accommodating into the U.S. context, constantly stressing how much she misses her family, expressing the fear that they might forget her. "The homogeneity of US suburbia induces a profound sense of loneliness" (Maxey, 2012: 36). Mrs. Sen complains that the suburban life is just too quiet and that she cannot sleep in such silence. According to Angelo Monaco, the suburban home operates as a prison for Mrs. Sen – "the lack of transportation available and the inability to drive generate a sense of alienation" (2018: 163). Eliot, however, immediately begins to notice differences between his own and Indian culture, but he does not find them odd. On the contrary, he is slowly being brought up greatly influenced by both cultures and he begins to take in Indian culture as his own. He "[learns] to remove his sneakers first thing in Mrs. Sen's doorway, and to place them on the bookcase next to a row of Mrs. Sen's slippers" (Lahiri, 1999: 126). He begins to watch Mrs. Sen as she is chopping food on the floor and preparing meals. His incorporation of Indian culture goes to such an extent that it completely changes the perspective of his own culture – his mother now seems strange and different, distant and cold, and the way back to his house looks entirely different when he is driving with the Sens. In other words, Eliot plays the role of the translator of cultures and ends up creating a space in which the two cultures can not only co-exist, but also intermingle. If the notion of naturalization implies not only the process of the assimilation of the diasporic backdrop, but also the environment which allows for such an assimilation and welcomes difference, Eliot is a character which approaches this idea the most.

Moreover, as Caspari suggests, Eliot "talks very rarely but consumes all these new experiences through his senses" (2014: 250). Both he and Mrs. Sen "refrain from using the English language and actually use very little spoken language" (Caspari, 2014: 250).

In this sense, their use of silences helps them "explore 'each other' without the limitations of a language that is created around binaries and borders" (Caspari 2014: 250). By freeing themselves from the constraints of the Western language, they enable themselves to create the empty space of cultural freedom, into which they can inscribe their own process of mutual understanding.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

"A Choice of Accommodations"

Unaccustomed Earth mostly deals with the complex process of identity formation for the second- and third-generation migrants. "A Choice of Accommodations" follows an Indian-American Amit and his American wife Megan. Although having been born and grown up in the States, Amit is deeply haunted by the sense of alienation and loneliness, still holding a grudge against his parents who moved to India without him when he was in the ninth grade, and constantly aiming to feel more at home in the U.S. He is detached both from his Indian background, because he barely lost all sense of attachment to his family and continues to betray his parents' expectations, as well as his American background, for he was never entirely accepted in his surroundings. For example, his fellow peers would always "[compliment] him on his accent, always telling him how good his English [is]" (Lahiri, 2009: 97), neglecting the fact that English is, in fact, his first language. Moreover, his two daughters, Maya and Monika, "[look] nothing like him, nothing like his family" (Lahiri, 2009: 94). He begins to forget Bengali and misses the opportunity to teach his children Bengali. All of that serves as "a metaphor for the loss of his origins, a template for his search of cultural and physical accommodation" (Monaco 2018: 173). In this sense, Lahiri problematizes the sense of failure the second generations feel due to their inability to come to terms with the sense of displacement and their doubled identity. These migrants do inhabit the *third* space, but fail to recognize the potential of interculturality and make the best out of it.

"Unaccustomed Earth"

In a similar manner, the story bearing the same name as the whole collection, "Unaccustomed Earth", follows the story of Ruma, a pregnant Bengali-American who has recently moved to Seattle with her white American husband, Adam, and their son Akash, following her mother's death. She is visited by her father – an unusual first-generation migrant who spends the majority of his time as a widower travelling the world. Her father is emblematic the first-generation migrants deeply affected by "the enchantments of the First World" (Sidhwa qtd. in Maxey, 2012, 34) and thoroughly amazed at the prospects of what the U.S. has to offer. Ruma, however, does not share

his excitement. Her process of self-formation is torn between the two opposing identities clashing within her – the Bengali, influenced by her ancestry and her mother's strong patriarchal and traditional worldviews and the insistence on the preservation of the Bengali culture within her family which only augments after her mother's death, and the American, influenced by her place of origin, her surroundings, and her marriage, as well as her unconventional father. On the one hand, Ruma is a well-educated, successful Western woman, who used to work as a lawyer in New York. On the other hand, following her mother's death, Ruma begins to feel her Bengali side go stronger. She quits her job, decides to prioritize the domestic sphere of her life, becomes a housewife in order to spend more time with Akash, and by doing this, she becomes entirely dependent on her husband. However, as Iwona Filipczak notices, nothing seems to make Ruma happy because she is "able to identify neither with her homeland India, nor with America, thus she suffers from 'double displacement'" (2012: 5).

The title of both the story and the collection stems from Nathaniel Hawthorne's concept of the *unaccustomed earth* as the prosperous ground for growing new things and new, different generations. The motif of the *unaccustomed earth* also signals a very important motif in the story – Ruma's uncultivated garden – her *unaccustomed earth* – which she is incapable of taking care of and completely neglects it. The "unaccustomed garden signifies Ruma's dislocation and lack of belonging, […] the sense of strangeness, lack of roots and the need to grow them" (Filipczak, 2012: 6). However, it is precisely in this unaccustomed garden that the prospect of the intercultural space happens. Although Ruma struggles to transgress the limitations of her dual identity, it is her son, Akash, the third-generation Bengali American who manages to prosper in this space. He spends most of his time working and playing in the garden with his grandfather. In one scene Ruma even watches them planting the soil with both the seed as well as Akash's toys:

> "What are you up to?" she asked him.
> "Growing things."
> "Oh? What are you planting?"

"All this stuff," he said, his arms full, walking out of the room. She followed him outside, where she saw that her father had created a small plot for Akash, hardly larger than a spread-open newspaper, with shallow holes dug out at intervals. She watched as Akash buried things into the soil, crouching over the ground just as her father was. Into the soil went a pink rubber ball, a few pieces of Lego stuck together, a wooden block etched with a star (Lahiri, 1999: 44).

Therefore, by making use of both the skills and the knowledge of his Bengali grandfather, as well as his Western toys, Adam creates his own kind of seeds and plants them into the unaccustomed earth in order to prepare the ground for the plantation of

a new kind of space – a space of negotiation and acceptance, in which the diversity of his cultural background is thoroughly embraced.

In this sense, it may be claimed that Lahiri places all hopes of creating a hybrid, intercultural space in her naïve and child characters. Through her two short-story collections, she studies all the different potential ways of creating this space. Firstly, she demonstrates how the first generation can never escape their origin and background and assimilate entirely. In such scenarios, the only likelihood of creating the environment welcoming of the intercultural space of mutual understanding and hybridity is placed on a white American boy, Eliot, who, due to his young age, naivety and open-mindedness is able to accept both the South Asian as well as the American influence as his own. Secondly, Lahiri delineates the second-generation experience and problematizes their incapability of transgressing the limitations of their complex hybrid identity. Nevertheless, the hopes are, this time, placed on the third-generation – a Bengali-American boy, Akash, who is the only character able to come to terms with his double identity and create a new kind of intercultural space. Therefore, these young, innocent characters seem to be the only characters that Lahiri presents as uncontaminated by the ethnic, racial and migratory history and politics. In such a way, they are the only characters apt for bearing the weight of the creation of the third space – they are able to make use of their doubled ancestry, as in Akash's case, or are able to accept the culture of the other as their own, as in Eliot's case, and create something entirely new out of that intercultural compound.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, the purpose of this paper has been to prove that Jhumpa Lahiri's short fiction is not solely focused on the diasporic experience of the South Asian community in the U.S., but that it also attempts to observe the potential of creating an intercultural space in which the opposing cultures, the American and the South Asian, would meet, translate, negotiate, and intertwine. By observing the stories from her two short-story collections, *The Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, it has been shown that Lahiri observes all the various ways in which the first and the second generation struggle to come to terms with their doubled identities and position themselves within the society of residence. It has been demonstrated that Lahiri also explores whether the predominant population is capable of creating such societal surroundings that would be ready to accommodate and accept the incorporation of these foreign subjects. It has been concluded that Lahiri, in fact, places all hopes of creating a possible intercultural space in her child characters – in Eliot, as the representative of a predominant white U.S. population, ready to create a welcoming environment ready to assimilate foreign elements into his own culture to such an extent that his perspective on both cultures changes, and in Akash, the third-generation Bengali-American, who is the only

character able to come to terms with his doubled identity and create an intercultural space of full potential.

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