

THE DYNAMICS OF TRANSCULTURAL INSIGHT IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S LITERARY UNIVERSE

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Abstract. Blending literary and cultural studies, the essay discusses the manners in which Jhumpa Lahiri's literary universe constructs a gradual unfolding of a layered transcultural vision.

The paper argues that in the shift from fictions of migration to autobiographical narratives of self-redefinition, the Bengali-American author advances cultural scenarios of transformation that enable the reshaping of cultural identities through the transcendence of fixed cultural loyalties. Invoking perceived lacks in their native cultural traditions and intuiting the incompleteness of cultures, her characters are haunted by the urge to cross cultural boundaries in order to gain a sense of personal fulfilment. Ultimately, Lahiri herself replicates this pattern as she relocates to Italy and writes in a new language (Italian).

The last stage in Lahiri's transcultural scenario is represented by an attempt to dissociate cultural specificity from the notion of identity, as she takes refuge in the realm of abstraction through minimalist aesthetics. Relying on a close reading of her texts, the essay will scrutinise the author's peculiar outlook on transculturality, which appears to embrace various cultural spaces while seemingly avoiding specific attachments. The analysis aims to establish whether Lahiri succeeds in transgressing the very idea of cultural belonging in her quest for a freeing path.

Key words: belonging, Hinduism, incompleteness, minimalism, transcendent, transcultural

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this essay is to provide a comprehensive account of Jhumpa Lahiri's transcultural vision by focusing on the author's recent drive to abstraction and minimalism that surfaces in her works. The present discussion blends cultural studies with literary studies so as to interpret concrete examples of transcultural messages encoded in the author's fictional and autobiographical texts. Therefore, the methodology involves close readings of the primary texts, filtered through various cultural theories. Theoretical perspectives on transculturalism aim

to define it as an alternative to the separatist implications of multiculturalism, advancing the idea that one should explore potential networks between cultures (Epstein, 1999; Papastergiadis, 2000; Hannerz, 2001; Schultersmandl and Toplu, 2010; Gilsenan Nordin, Hansen and Llena, 2013). An important premise of the transcultural discourse is the awareness of cultures as incomplete structures (Epstein, 1995) that triggers the impulse to explore alternative cultural meanings. Epstein's (1999: 24) notion of 'transculture', a dimension situated beyond all cultures, perfectly renders the transcendent core of a transcultural vision.

The transcultural goal of moving beyond cultural difference valorizes a focus on 'transboundary interconnections' and 'cultural flows' (Dagnino, 2013: 143), facilitated by the transnational regime of 'neo-nomadic trajectories' (ibid.: 131). Not surprisingly, then, a plethora of cultural theorists argue for the relevance of cultural commonalities in dialogues with cultural others (Papastergiadis, 2000; Neumann, 2003; Appiah, 2007; Pieterse, 2009; Berg, 2011). One way of designating the successful outcomes of transcultural interactions is the notion of 'creative pluralism' (Epstein, 1995: 303) as a fusion of cultural differences. Other voices conceive the effects of transculturality as 'the formation of multifaceted, fluid identities resulting from diverse cultural encounters' (Gilsenan Nordin et al., 2013: ix) or 'both a product and a contact zone of flows and entanglements that underpin cultural dynamics' (Brosius and Wenzlhuemer, 2011: 9).

Considering the processes of cultural flows, interactions and blending inherent in transcultural literature, it is important to note the association of transcultural sensibility with contemporary patterns of transnational mobility (Dagnino, 2013). This aspect is especially relevant in Lahiri's case, since both her personal history and her oeuvre include transnational border crossings, nomadic relocation, 'multiple identifications, de-centred attachments and simultaneous being here and there' (Vertovec, 2009: 5-6). Having presented the theoretical pillars of the present analysis, the essay continues with a gradual unfolding of Lahiri's facets of transculturality.

LAHIRI'S TRANSCULTURAL REPERTOIRE: ABSENCES, COMMONALITIES, CREATIVE PLURALISM

In the first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri introduces the first stage of her transcultural understanding, namely the intuition of a lack within both the Bengali and the American cultural spheres. The mechanism by which she hints at this incompleteness is the foregrounding of a character's apparent neutral assessment of both cultural worlds, which indirectly reveals missing values in each system. An example of this kind is provided by an American child's (Eliot's) perception of Mrs. Sen, the Indian wife of a Bengali immigrant who chooses to babysit the boy at her place. As Eliot compares the Bengali housewife with his single, working mother, he appreciates Mrs. Sen's care, warmth, and daily cooking practices that are missing from his mother's profile. At the same time, however,

Mrs. Sen's car accident is contrasted with his mother's confident driving, which suggests that independence and self-reliance are perceived as desirable features that are missing from Mrs. Sen's profile. Eliot's innocent comprehension of these different models of womanhood creates the impression of a puzzle, in the sense that both of them are configured as incomplete: while the Bengali version appears to lack the values of female assertion and independence, the American counterpart does not include the cultivation of community and family bonds. While Eliot does not formulate a conclusion of this kind, the implicit message is that both cultural systems are likely to benefit from a process of self-transcendence. More precisely, the cultural values perceived as missing from each system may indicate the necessity to move into the space of transculture, where each side of the encounter may become enriched by the other.

This prerequisite for transcultural insight seems vital in Lahiri's overall identity framework, as suggested by its role at an autobiographical level, as illustrated by *In Other Words* (2016). While attempting to describe the complicated dynamics of her linguistic triangle (Bengali-Italian-English), the author keeps referring to a perceived void, an unsettling absence in her cultural profile: 'Because of my divided identity, or perhaps by disposition, I consider myself *an incomplete* person, in some way *deficient*' (Lahiri, 2016: 113, emphasis added). On the one hand, this gap appears to be a source of permanent concern, while on the other hand, the sensation of an unfinished cultural self is also a trigger for a strong creative drive that stimulates cultural transformation through contact with alterity.

Another path to transculturality is the acknowledgement of cultural commonalities, best depicted in the short story *The Third and Final Continent*. Here, the American and Bengali cultural models find unexpected common ground in the intersections between Hindu and Puritan gender assumptions. The present argument continues with the claim that the transcultural facets discussed so far—the intuition of cultural incompleteness, the transcendent urge and the identification of cultural commonalities—make room for the possibility of transcultural dialogues by means of creative pluralism.

Irrespective of generation, the cultural transformation experienced by Lahiri's characters illustrates Epstein's take on transcultural changes as identity renewal through recognition and internalisation of cultural otherness: 'I would name such a project "creative pluralism," because it does not limit itself to the simple recognition of other cultures' integrity, but goes so far as to consider them all necessary for each other's further development' (Epstein, 1995: 303). The most fascinating twist is provided by Lahiri's personal continuation of her fictional heroes' transcultural strategies and transnational itineraries. As illustrated by *In Other Words*, the author's relocation to Rome represents a path to free reinvention, beyond familiar expectations. Besides the novelty of the autobiographical element, *In Other Words* adds a new angle to Lahiri's transcultural vision, namely the 'drive to abstraction' (Lahiri, 2016: 221). On the one hand, one may assume that this is an exercise in stylistic innovation, an illustration of Lahiri's versatile approach as a writer. On the other hand, this urge for abstraction can also be discussed

in relation to Lahiri's quest for transcultural redefinition. If *In Other Words* may be considered a kind of debut in abstract art, Lahiri's novel *Whereabouts* (2021) illustrates her strong attachment to this artistic choice. This book, written in Italian and translated into English by the author, is an abstract, minimalist creation whose main character is a solitary, anonymous woman, placed in an unidentified location. The next section will consider the main implications of minimalism in literature in order to decipher Lahiri's immersion into a realm of no particularities.

MINIMALIST AESTHETICS: A TRANSCULTURAL IDEAL?

A first connotation of minimalist art that overlaps with transcultural premises is the idea of going beyond or against something familiar. The innovative perspectives introduced by minimalism contested the values and prestige associated with art through the rejection of 'stylistic flourish, but also, to an important degree, the very idea of "art", as it is traditionally conceived' (Motte, 1999: 12). By focusing on the notion of smallness and simplicity, the minimalist outlook rests on 'understatement' (Botha, 2017: 51) and advances the idea of 'reduction in relation to some more or less explicit norm' (Motte, 1999: 1). The radical, transgressive nature of the minimalist enterprise intersects with the equally innovative outlook of transcultural creations, as both approaches aim to contest a commonly accepted state of things.

The minimalist concern with the small is also correlated with an interest in simplicity; hence, this discourse has often been criticized for its 'ordinariness', 'banality' (Houamdi, 2019: 56) and 'artistic vacuity' (Motte, 1999: 4) that supposedly turn it into 'anti-art' (Strickland, 2000: 13). However, supporters of minimalism claim that the apparent nihility of minimalist creations is the result of removing excessive ornament/rhetoric in order to grasp a sense of truth: 'Vacuity is the surface effect of a deliberate process of eschewal and restriction intended to clear away conventional rhetoric in an attempt to approximate the essential' (Motte, 1999: 4). This creative potential of the void can certainly be correlated with Lahiri's sense of hollow identity, which prompts her to enrich her cultural frame. In an attempt to comprehend Lahiri's stylistic shift to minimalism, the next section will discuss the paradoxes of minimalist aesthetics and their peculiarities.

The minimalist undertaking invites one to explore a complex universe of contradictory strategies and creative goals. As they aim to uncover profound meanings by removing superfluous elements of form, minimalists rely on a clear paradox, rendered through the famous aphorism 'less is more' (Barth, 1986, cited in Motte, 1999: 4). This reductive approach to form defines the minimalist philosophy as a radical proposition surfacing through 'aesthetic radicalism' (Botha, 2017: 39), as 'a critique of traditional norms [...] that pushed the frontier of the new aesthetic' (Motte, 1999: 8-9). More specifically, this urge to lessen formal expression is justified by the belief that there is a sense of 'essence' (Motte, 1999: 9) and 'immanence' (Botha, 2017: 172) that can be brought to light 'through the instantiation of the radical, nonreferential work' (ibid.: 74).

Therefore, the radical contours of the movement involve a deconstructive stance meant to transcend formal appearances and grasp meaning beyond material expression. It follows that minimalist art relies on an inherent contradiction that blends avant-garde radicalism with a transcendent, essentialist stance. If this is the case, it is reasonable to ask whether this discrepant aesthetics is to be found in *Whereabouts*. Is the main character haunted by the same transcendent impulse as the rest of Lahiri's characters? What framework of cultural identity can be constructed in the absence of a precise indication of cultural boundaries? Is Lahiri's literary minimalism another facet of her transcultural message, and if it is, how does it work?

LITERARY MINIMALISM IN *WHEREABOUTS*

Minimalist fictions are discussed in terms of 'bare-bone narratives' (Strickland, 2000: 14) as 'open, simple, clear' stories (Krasniqi, 2018: 56). Another feature of this genre is its inherent incompleteness that results from the minimalist writers' adoption of the '*via negativa* (negation path)' (Houamdi, 2019: 56, italics in the original), which involves the urge to reduce matters of form, subject and language. A related outcome of this drive to lessen all effects is the impression of anonymity that permeates minimalist art whose simplified vision is associated with a less marked authorial imprint: 'For what has been renounced—flourish, embellishment and affect—are what we normally take to be the more obvious effects of personal style' (Motte, 1999: 7). One may argue that minimalism's 'aesthetic impulse towards omissions and absences' (Houamdi, 2019: 67) creates a sense of a fundamental deficit imbricated in their texture. This paper argues that the conceptual lack of minimalist fiction strangely resonates with Lahiri's and her characters' awareness of an inherent gap within their identity scaffolding. The present analysis aims to establish whether one can identify ways in which minimalist aesthetics may serve to encode Lahiri's transcultural vision.

Whereabouts is a first-person narration of a woman's daily life, placed in various contexts, which make up a total of forty-six facets of her quotidian experiences, e.g., at the office, on the street, in spring, in the pool, at the hotel, nowhere, etc. The setting is vague, the linear plot unfolds mainly in an unknown city, and the narrator refuses to name any spatial coordinates. Naturally, characters in minimalist writings seem to lack complexity; they are portrayed as detached, passive observers. Although they are usually placed in difficult situations, crossing painful life events, these characters are usually silent, unresponsive and unwilling to directly account for their inner lives. Therefore, all the stylistic elements in *Whereabouts* point to a minimalist enterprise that configures an enigmatic female character. At the same time, the novel indicates Lahiri's continuous preoccupation with familiar themes, although identity processes are no longer conceived in terms of concrete cultural references.

More specifically, *Whereabouts* actually reiterates one of Lahiri's previous thematic concerns (the cultural tension between individualism and collectivism),

as it presents a single woman who attempts to reconcile the choice of enjoying independence with the necessity, and sometimes need, to establish connections imposed by her life in a non-specific cultural community. Thus, whether at work, in the street or at home, this mysterious character is configured as a detached observer, albeit curious about the lives of others. For example, in the section entitled *On the Street*, the nameless woman is captured in a sudden change of her quotidian trajectory as she follows a couple who are in the middle of an argument:

I spot them on the street, in the middle of a crowd of pedestrians waiting for the light to change: the couple who live around the corner, my friend and the kind man I cross paths with now and again on the bridge. I quicken my pace to catch up to them, I think of saying hello, but then I realize that they're having an argument [...] I start to follow them. I don't go into the store I was heading to, it's not urgent. (Lahiri, 202: 35, emphasis added)

This kind of attitude illustrates the paradoxical blend of the protagonist's need for privacy and seclusion (she keeps at bay) and the impulse to get involved, however marginally, in other people's lives.

A similar ambivalence is rendered in the chapter entitled *In the Hotel*, which describes the heroine's travels to a conference. Although she appears to engage in communication with no one, the narrator is intrigued by a male scholar who has a room next to hers and rides the same elevator. Their brief interaction can be considered a minimalist encounter since it lacks verbal communication; however, despite the woman's withdrawnness, she cannot help formulating hypotheses about the stranger's life. Given that he lives in an adjacent room, she can infer certain things about his activities:

It's only at this time of night that he reveals another aspect of himself: he has long talks on the telephone, speaking rapidly and heatedly in another language. With whom? His wife? A friend? His publisher? His company reassures me though he doesn't interest me sexually, it's not about that. I think of the melancholy in his eyes, that wanting look. Eyes, bright but distant, that are about to close for six or seven hours. (Lahiri, 2021: 39, emphasis added)

How can one account for the lead character's simultaneous desire to know more about a stranger's life and her unwillingness to engage in communication? This inconsistent attitude may illustrate the simultaneity of the need for solitude/privacy and the impulse to reach out to others. In other words, the hyper-individualist model, centered exclusively on self-preservation and detachment, briefly intersects with the frail but equally valid disposition to form a sense of bonding.

Along similar lines, an even more illustrative episode is depicted in the section entitled *At the Beautician*, which apparently presents a banal visit to the cosmetologist. As the main character goes to the beautician, she is taken aback

by the beauty of a new employee. While she patiently waits for the nail treatment to be finished, the nameless customer experiences intense feelings of connection with the beautiful foreigner:

She proceeds to work on my nails [...] I don't look at myself in the mirror while she perfects this one part of my body. I don't want to spoil the moment, or this contact between us. I'd like to appreciate her attention and nothing else, so I try to focus exclusively on her, *acknowledging that though we're united we're two separate people.* (Lahiri, 2021: 38, emphasis added)

This instance suggests the need for meaningful bonds that cuts across individualism and one's need for isolation. Although the two women are perfect strangers and distinct individuals, the intense feelings of connection experienced by the anonymous observer imply that hyper-individualism and solitude cannot provide a complete model of survival.

Another way of suggesting the contrast between individual versus group-oriented versions of female identity is rendered in the chapter entitled *On the Balcony*. This fragment depicts the meeting between the main character and a friend of hers, a woman who, unlike the narrator, is also a mother and a wife. This friend without a name feels overwhelmed by the necessity of dealing with the challenges of family life and her professional nomadism. Her visit to the leading character's tidy apartment is pictured as a refuge from family responsibility, an interlude dedicated to the self:

I think in the end all I need is a little *corner to myself*. I'd love a tiny apartment like yours [...] One day she confessed that, in spite of her fear of planes, she loves the nook she occupies in flight, the seat that becomes her bed, the lamp behind her shoulder, everything she needs at arm's reach. (Lahiri, 2021: 30, emphasis added)

Although the friend appears to feel guilty for her frequent travels that prevent her from acting as a perfect mother, at the same time, readers get the feeling that she secretly loves the freedom afforded by her professional journeys.

The examples analysed suggest that *Whereabouts* deals with the female predicament of having to balance the need for self-preservation with the roles that imply dedication to others. While listening to her friend's complaints, the narrator cleverly observes that the former immerses in professional nomadism precisely to get away from family obligations:

But then she starts talking about her husband's family, and the vacation she has to take with them in August to celebrate an important anniversary of her in-laws. 'I wish I didn't have to go, after three days with them I start to lose it.' I almost ask: *Isn't that the case with your house? Isn't that why you're always traveling, every other week?* (Lahiri, 2021: 31, emphasis added)

Despite the effect of cultural dissolution intensified by minimalism, the underlying theme of *Whereabouts* is that belonging and non-belonging, solitude versus community life, and individualism versus group relations represent different facets of human interaction. Moreover, the transcendent urge typical of Lahiri's fictional characters and of her personal history is present even in a setting where there seem to be no obvious cultural pressures. Although the heroine leads the life she desires, free of family obligations and devoid of traditional female roles (obedient daughter, wife, mother), she eventually needs to leave this accustomed space:

But something's telling me to push past the barrier of my life, just like the dog that pulled me along the paths of the villa. And so I heed my call, having come to know the guts and soul of this place a little too well. (Lahiri, 2021: 92-93)

Once again, one can state that *Whereabouts* continues Lahiri's thematic outline, albeit in a simplified form. As she makes it clear from the very motto of *Unaccustomed Earth*, the author cherishes human mobility as a necessary condition for renewal, a rejection of ossified structures and flattening habits (see Note 1). In renouncing familiar coordinates, the anonymous character seems to favour nomadic trajectories as remedies against becoming eroded by habitual patterns:

Because when all is said and done *the setting doesn't matter*: [...] I've never stayed still, I've always been moving, that's all I've ever been doing. Always waiting either to get somewhere or to come back. Or to *escape*. I keep packing and unpacking the small suitcase at my feet. I hold my purse in my lap, it's got some money and a book to read. Is there any place we're not moving through? *Disoriented, lost, at sea, at odds, astray, adrift, bewildered, confused, uprooted, turned around*. I'm related to these related terms. These words are my abode, my only foothold. (Lahiri, 2021: 106, emphasis added)

What this passage suggests is that culture-specific contexts are less important than the individuals' impulse to transcend them. Why is transgression so important for Lahiri, even in a neutral setting that does not seem to constrain her female character? Is the transcendent urge a mere celebration of mobility/nomadism as a deconstructivist impulse to contest established norms and rigid values? On the one hand, the answer is yes, since the author has clearly embraced a radical stance, starting with *The Lowland*, a novel that celebrates transgression (see Note 2), and then continuing with her personal metamorphosis in Italy. On the other hand, names point to the idea of specificity as they 'participate in a hierarchy of value and are invested with specific cultural capital' (Botha, 2017: 63). In this context, the author's choice of discarding names reinforces the hypothesis that she aims to reject the very notion of cultural authority. However, this strategy may not be entirely feasible, considering that Lahiri's intense transgressive insight and the need to sink in cultural anonymity also echo the Indian transcendent doctrine

of 'spiritual non-dualism' (Sharma, 2007: 1). The next section of the essay further discusses the connections that can be established between minimalist principles and the transcendent implications of the non-dualistic system of the Hindu philosophical tradition known as Advaita Vedanta.

MINIMALIST ANONYMITY, NAMING AND INDIAN REFLECTIONS

Minimalist writers consider that naming implies a dissolution of purity, which contradicts their purpose of rendering an effect of neutrality, if not immaculateness: 'To speak is to act; anything which one names is already no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence' (Sartre, 1965: 36).

This tension between naming and the refusal to accept a given name is also important to Lahiri, as suggested by her character's (Gogol's) struggles for self-redefinition (see Note 3). Considering the minimalist focus on anonymity, it is interesting to establish whether Lahiri resorts to this trope in order to reflect on matters related to her struggles with cultural identity and multiplicity. Moreover, what is very provocative in *Whereabouts* is a potential intersection between Western minimalist conventions and absolutism, 'the most celebrated tradition in Indian philosophy' (Sharma, 2007: 1).

A central preoccupation of this system of thought is the relationship between the ultimate (non-dual) reality of the 'absolute and limitless brahman' (Rambachan, 2006: 16) and the multiplicity of its manifestations in 'the empirical world of individual subjects and objects' (Sharma, 2007: 5). According to Advaita Vedanta (Sharma, 2007: 169), the plurality of the experienced world is rendered through the concept of *māyā*, a projection of duality, which may conceal the oneness of the ultimate truth under the veil of various names and forms. In this context, the concept of *nāmarūpa* [name and form] (Rambachan, 2006: 76) designates the manifest realm of diversity that has to be transcended in order to unravel the reality of its actual cause, *brahman*. As Rambachan (ibid.: 80) rightfully asserts, there are many interpretations in the Advaita tradition that have wrongly associated *māyā* with the material fabric of the world as different from the absolute brahman, indirectly creating a duality of the type brahman/*māyā* that is not supported by Shankara, the great exponent of the Advaita tradition.

Considering the manifested world as an expression (and therefore continuation) of brahman, it follows that the plurality of the lived experience and material forms should not be perceived as a barrier to genuine knowledge but as a challenge, a boundary to be crossed in order to achieve enlightenment, i.e., the awareness that brahman and the world are the same. In other words, if one goes beyond the multifaceted canvas of perceived reality, one understands the illusory nature of all pluralities and oppositions. At this point, one can find an alluring intersection between Lahiri's minimalist stance and this non-dual comprehension of the nature of the universe. Can one assume that Lahiri's transcendent disposition, through

her attempt to eschew roots, is, ironically, part of a Hindu transcendent scenario? If this is the case, one may state that Lahiri cleverly blends Western and Eastern traditions in order to foreground a highly valued Indian truth: naming and the consequential individuation create a sense of variety that may obstruct the path to absolute knowledge, the one devoid of labels and attachments of any kind. In analogous fashion, one may assume that Lahiri's implied minimalist message is that the different values assigned to different cultures conceal the transcendent common dimension, the equivalent of Epstein's transculture, situated beyond cultural differences. Still, the question remains: despite the contemporary global condition with all its nomadic implications, can we conceive identity in the absence of cultural references? The (negative) answer is obvious, and it cuts across the author's minimalist outlook; if one accepts the connection between her minimalist message and the Advaita Vedantic path, one can state that cultural belonging remains a valid coordinate despite one's (presumed and also privileged) ability to move freely across national and cultural borders. Even Lahiri's shift to the Italian language and her (temporary) resettlement to Rome suggest that utter transcendence of cultural specificity is not possible, even if the transcendent urge is manifest. Maybe we should understand her transgressive disposition more in the line of a critical discourse that aims to advise against rigidity and ossified attachments, rather than rejection of cultural references of any kind. Living without any cultural allegiances may be possible in a speculative realm, but it seems difficult to completely renounce cultural belonging at the level of lived experience.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Considering the gradual unfolding of Lahiri's transcultural vision, one can state that her work illustrates the emergence of a segmented outlook, a synergetic effect of the different stages of her comprehension. First, her intuition of missing cultural coordinates makes room for a second step in Lahiri's transcultural frame, namely the actual crossing of borders (physical and cultural) with the purpose of fashioning a fuller identity. Once engaged in the process of navigating different cultural spaces, Lahiri's characters become aware of the importance of cultural commonalities as facilitators of communication between otherwise dissimilar cultural perspectives. This third step often results in the embrace of creative pluralism, a process of enriching one's cultural identity by taking over values from multiple cultural traditions. Last but not least, Lahiri's transcultural discourse culminates with her plunge into an abstract, minimalist style with the potential for multiple interpretations. On the one hand, the author's search for anonymity and lack of cultural specificity may represent a eulogy to the very principle of transcendence, as a vital transition from the familiar into the unknown. At the same time, the idea of cultural dissolution stands for an attempt to reject a conception of identity conditioned by fixed origins. What seems to unsettle Lahiri's apparent

desire for uprootedness and anonymity is the potential to identify the seeds of her minimalism in Hindu traditions of thought. This would imply that the impulse to shun one's loyalty to specific cultural references cannot function as a productive mechanism of identity negotiation. Notwithstanding the endless possibilities of mobilities afforded by the regime of globalisation, our identities cannot be totally detached from cultural contexts. However, what Lahiri may wish to communicate is that the transcendence of familiar boundaries is the ideal mechanism that enables an enriched self-understanding.

NOTES

- Note 1. The motto chosen by Lahiri for *Unaccustomed Earth* is the following quote by Nathaniel Hawthorne that celebrates identity renewal through mobility: 'Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth' (Hawthorne, 2006: 19).
- Note 2. An extreme version of radical transgression is provided by Gauri, the main female character of Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013). This novel is permeated by a strong disruptive stance, as it presents a young Bengali widow who has willingly relocated to America through a marriage with her brother-in-law. After giving birth to a daughter conceived during her previous marriage, Gauri deliberately transgresses the conditions of wife, mother and heterosexual person through the decision to abandon her family, seek refuge in an academic career, and have sporadic affairs with women. Therefore, *The Lowland* presents Gauri in a process of rebellion against all traditional Hindu roles assigned to a woman (wifeness, motherhood, and the housewife condition). Her adherence to individualist values is enabled by her relocation to America, which is perceived as a freeing context of reinvention.
- Note 3. Gogol is a second-generation South-Asian American character in Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*, torn between the idea of accepting a given name associated with an imposed identity and the possibility of choosing a name and freely adopting a transcultural path.

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TEXTS ANALYSED

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