Transcultural Encounters in South-Asian American Women's Fiction

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Anita Desai, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri

By

Adriana Elena Stoican

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In memory of my grandmother, Aurica Isbăşoiu

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FOREWORD

This book sets out to analyse transcultural interactions in a new field of American literature that has been relatively little examined by American critics; prose writings by authors from South Asia and specifically India. The author has considered gender as a criterion for the selection of the primary corpus, which is made up of works by female writers from the aforementioned locations. She has deliberately narrowed down the area of investigation and chosen to focus on works by three authors. Her in-depth analysis is based on extended knowledge of South Asian literature in the USA, as well as the migration process and formation of distinct communities within this population. The authors are a good representation of South Asian American fiction written by women. All three authors have also received or been nominated for prestigious awards.

The approach adopted by Adriana Elena Stoican deserves special consideration. One is impressed by the multi-disciplinary nature of her analysis, which begins from the layered nature of the cultural interactions under scrutiny. The author's interpretation covers a large area, from the sociology and anthropology of migration, to socio-cultural and philosophical theories about contemporary hybrid and cosmopolitan identity, to the postcolonial discourse, the history of recent migrations to the USA and migrations in the UK from the beginning of the century until the 1960s. The author applies the theoretical concepts and discourses in a highly interesting way: she sets out to investigate the actions and identity positions of the characters from these writings by using the grids provided by different theoretical discourses. She successively reinterprets these actions and dilemmas, defined differently depending on the concepts within which the author operates.

On the other hand, the analysis offers a highly elaborate interpretation of cultural interaction, relying on a close reading perspective. The author regards these interactions as elements of a dense, multivalent, multi-layered cultural text that continuously generates different cultural meanings, depending on the chosen interpretative position. As a result of these explorations of the cultural hermeneutics type, the three texts are recomposed as a cultural universe with a firm contour, values and rules, well-defined continuities and coherence. The book's critical approach generates the shaping of a transcultural universe, populated by characters

whose complexity and identity pluralism is only gradually revealed. Within the author's interpretative endeavours, the process of critical exploration and definition of cultural meaning is doubled by the progressive and minute projection of a fascinating world.

In my opinion, it is precisely the rigorous corpus selection and the limited number of texts that has facilitated the success of this double endeavour. Characters from one text are juxtaposed and compared to characters from another, establishing continuity and creating the impression of the analysed texts as a whole entity—a unique transcultural novel of the South Asian presence in America. It is interesting to consider the status granted to literary texts, predominantly understood as representations of socio-cultural phenomena to be explored. Their status of mediating the concrete reality, of interpreting it from a specific, even idiosyncratic position, is not of a particular relevance to this book's specifics and the author classifies it as a cultural studies approach. However, the analysis provided does intersect with cultural studies. The theoretical approaches are well defined and clarified at the beginning of each chapter—they function as tools that generate significance and are perfectly integrated into the close reading interpretation of the texts.

This book's junction of literary, hermeneutic and socio-anthropological approaches, in which each serves the other fully, is in itself an important theoretical contribution. It provides a good example of the merging and unification of the multidisciplinary approach, demonstrating how the analysis of literary texts offers substance and can nuance analysis provided by positivistic-sociological approaches.

Another original aspect of this book is that, although its topic is post-modern par excellence—in the sense that it explores identity dislocations and relocations, fractures and traumas provoked by migration—the ambivalence and contradictions of the social and psychological positions adopted—along with the profound values with which the book operates and aims to identify—are of a modernist nature. There is continuity despite discontinuity, an aspiration for harmony and the mutual completion of cultural values despite the cultural dissonance experienced by the characters. Multiculturalism, with its ghettoising emphasis on particular and ethnic elements, creates space for a transcultural tendency that configures a transcendent domain of common semantic valences and suggests the operation of cultural universals. The book's organisation tends to follow a Hegelian itinerary: the first section focuses on cultural clashes caused by super-evaluation of particular identities and cultural difference. The following section investigates superficial and deep cultural hybridities, the latter being significantly designated as "organic" and

referring to a slower, but more complex process of incorporating and interpreting alterity. The book continues with another section suggestively entitled "Transcultural Negotiations" that indicates the possibility and desirability of cultural syntheses, and even of a transcultural fusion, based on dialogue and interaction. The author aims to identify the distinctive features of a post postmodernist modernism in the analysis of the contemporary globalised reality, starting from the philosophical premises within which one recognises the position of Habermas and his followers, including Ulrich Beck and David Held.

The central point of the book's analysis is the transcultural approach to intercultural contact and interaction. Beginning from the fictional works included in the corpus, the book aims to approach a larger debate, one that transcends the literary space and demands the revision of the critical discourses generally employed for analysing the cultural mechanisms involved in migration. The book raises the issue of a new normative interpretation of cultural hybridity that exceeds the framework of multiculturalism and postcolonial discourses, foregrounding the transcultural dimension of socio-cultural phenomena. The limits of these established interpretative paradigms (multiculturalism, postcolonialism and cosmopolitanism) are analysed in the second chapter, which is dedicated to theoretical debate on which the analysis of the corpus is based. The theoretical discussion will be nuanced and amplified in the introduction of each sub-chapter, explaining and commenting using the tools and concepts employed for the respective part of the analysis. This organised dissemination of the theoretical component confers continuity and coherence to the analysis and diversifies the theoretical, normative debate that this book accomplishes.

In chapter three, the author focuses on the failures that occur in intercultural communication and interaction, identifying barriers in the strategies adopted by immigrants when encountering cultural differences. The analysis explores how the absence of the permeability and fluidity of cultural borders leads to ghettoisation. The book links this absence with a reduced motivation to open oneself up to the culture of the Other (in the case of non-voluntary migration). Consequently, the clash is not essentialised and it is not treated as a given feature of cultures in a relation of incompatibility, due to irreconcilable differences. The emphasis is placed on the possibility of—as well as the need for—intercultural dialogue and cultural transfers.

The chapter entitled "Valences of Cultural Hybridity" indicates the existence of cultural hybridity prior to the action of migration and

adaptation to a new cultural context. Hybridity thus becomes a component of cultural dynamics that amplifies as a consequence of dislocation.

The fifth chapter of the book discusses transcultural perceptions as manners of overcoming intercultural conflict. Cultural dis- and relocation is thus understood as a way to surpass the limits imposed by a mono-cultural, mono-national regime. A fascinating point is offered by the analysis of the transcultural vision shaped within the context where individuals do not migrate to other space (therefore in the absence of actual relocation).

The theoretical and critical bibliography of the book is extremely extensive and updated, enabling the further discussion of highly relevant contemporary issues.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The present book is the product of five years of doctoral research that resulted in a PhD thesis entitled "Transcultural Encounters in South Asian American Women's Fiction: Anita Desai, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri". This academic focus reflects my interest in the dynamics of cultural interactions, particularly those between the Anglo-Saxon and Indian worlds. As a student of foreign language and literature, I was fascinated by the specifics of English and Indian cultures and civilisations. During my MA years I continued my research into cultural intersections, focusing on postcolonial Indian fiction of migration in English. My persistent attraction to cross-cultural relations was deeply influenced by the eight months that I spent in India as a foreign student of Hindi. This interval of temporary migration helped me to understand the vital importance of unmediated contact with a foreign culture. By living in a context that I initially perceived as entirely different from my Eastern-European background, I could understand the impact of cultural otherness that I had only previously approached from a theoretical perspective. At the same time, my easy transition to India—despite the obvious cultural differences I perceived—showed me that there is something that connects people from various cultures across their specific differences. This exposure to cultural otherness helped me to compare and contrast theoretical notions on cultural contacts with a real-life experience and to perceive intercultural relations from a more comprehensive angle.

This book seeks to blend my specialist interest in migrant identities and my personal experience of migration with the specialist knowledge that I accumulated as a researcher of English and Hindi language and literature. This book intends to account for the multiple results of cultural interactions in the context of migration, as illustrated by the works of three South Asian American female authors: Anita Desai, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri. Considering the peculiar status of the South Asian Americans within the category of Asian American studies, as well as the young tradition of South Asian American literature, the present study underscores the need for further interpretation of these literary creations.

In order to foreground the multiple factors that influence the results of cultural encounters (material context, social status, gender, politics and legislation), this approach compares several discourses of cultural contact, suggesting new directions for the study of dialogue across culture. The present argument starts from the assumption that the theoretical discourses customarily employed for analysing the literature of migration (multiculturalism, postcolonialism, hybridity and cosmopolitanism) intersect at certain points but differ in their orientation, a fact that signals the need for further clarification. This book also considers the extensive use of the notion of cultural hybridity as a theoretical tool for the interpretation of diasporic/migrant literature, establishing the extent to which it accurately renders the process of cultural transformation. Relying on recent theories of hybridity, this book aims to establish whether the works analysed promote a normative reading of hybridity as an enlarged cultural perspective generated by migrancy. The debate also weighs up the relevance of a cosmopolitan approach to cultural interaction against an alternative-transcultural-approach.

Starting from a comparative discussion of these established theoretical paradigms, the present project relies on a transcultural approach to cultural contacts. By doing so, the argument demonstrates how this new direction of research completes the above-mentioned paradigms, correcting some of their limitations. The transcultural outlook on cultural contacts highlights the intrinsic transcendence of all cultures and the permeability of cultural borders. This theoretical discourse also takes into account the dynamic nature of cultural intersections, dismantling a separatist definition of cultures as territorial and homogeneous entities. The transcultural approach to cultural encounters is juxtaposed with the mechanism of cultural translation, which designates the transfer of cultural meanings across borders.

Another layer of the analysis is the relationship between gender and migration, which refers to the particular ways in which dislocation is experienced by male and female characters. Do the authors present migration as a condition for women's emancipation or is it defined as a successful male enterprise? Is migration a challenge for both women and men or is it an exclusive male advantage? By comparing perceptions of relocation in relation to gender, the discussion underscores the importance of the female role as a mediator between cultural worlds. At the same time, by analysing the male characters in works written by women, this study avoids an essentialist approach to women's literature that associates this type of fiction exclusively with women's issues. An important part of the analysis offers a comparative perspective on male and female

migration, revealing the ways in which different cultures conceive the relation between gender and mobility.

The book begins with a theoretical presentation and continues with the analysis of the primary corpus focused on the following themes: cultural clashes, transcultural exchanges and discourses of hybridity.

The second chapter of the book presents a brief account of the theories that serve as a framework for the corpus analysis. This section introduces a conceptual debate that emphasises the importance of the transcultural approach when enlarging the reduced body of critical interpretations of South Asian American literature.

The third chapter of the book, which represents the first section of the corpus analysis, discusses the dynamics of cultural clashes, emphasising the elements that erect boundaries between individuals from different cultures. While most interpretations of migration literature are concerned with ideas of fluidity and cultural plurality, this chapter investigates a less celebrated aspect; the migrants' incapacity to transgress cultural borders in a global context that presumably facilitates communication. By foregrounding the non-voluntary nature of migration, the analysis highlights the effects of the characters' pre-emigration background on their subsequent interaction with the norms of a foreign culture. This discussion aims to answer several questions relevant to the understanding of migrant identities today. Which elements obstruct communication between individuals from different cultures? Which source values are perceived as incompatible with the American norms? To what extent are female and male experiences similar? Is there a causal relation between imposed departure and the ability to construct meaningful conversations with those in a different culture? The second layer of this chapter establishes the conceptions of cultural difference that obstruct dialogue across cultures.

The fourth chapter, entitled "Valences of cultural hybridity" closely analyses different dimensions of cultural hybridity present in the chosen fiction. By outlining the existence of cultural hybridity as a state prior to migration—as well as a cultural condition intensified by displacement— the discussion attempts to establish how and when the notion of cultural hybridity can prove useful in the discussion of cultural interaction. If both migrant and non-migrant characters can be characterised as hybrid, how can one differentiate between these types of hybridity? Can one claim that hybridity denotes a state of cultural transformation? Or is it more accurate to say that it represents an inherent feature of all cultures further altered by migration? Since all of us are culturally complex beings, how are our identities modified if global forces of relocation shape our lives?

The fifth chapter discusses transcultural perceptions of culture that illustrate the possibility of overcoming cultural collision. This section demonstrates that individuals can opt for immersion into different cultural worlds in order to overcome a sense of cultural boundedness. The discussion considers examples of characters that can build agreement despite belonging to different cultures. The experience of transculturality is a fascinating one and I am fortunate enough to have experienced it; when I lived in India, I formed beautiful friendships with Korean, Chinese, Indian, Polish, and Kazakh students despite our different backgrounds.

My analysis of transculturality in South Asian American literature aims to answer a series of questions about the explanatory potential of the transcultural paradigm. What are the elements that make the transcultural paradigm a good instrument for promoting understanding between cultures? Does this discourse account exclusively for achieved cultural fusions or does it also designate a certain state of mind that favours cultural openness? Which characters are more inclined to display a transcultural understanding: Indians, Americans, male or female, first-generation or second-generation individuals? Is the transcultural outlook a characteristic of the immigrant characters or does it also emerge in the absence of relocation?

The novels and collections of short stories that make up my primary corpus are: *Clear Light of Day, Fasting, Feasting* (Anita Desai), *The Inheritance of Loss* (Kiran Desai), *Interpreter of Maladies, The Namesake, Unaccustomed Earth* (Jhumpa Lahiri). These authors have been selected on account of their common Bengali-Hindu background and a thematic concern with segmental patterns of South Asian mobility between India, Europe and the USA. The present study relies on a thematic approach that focuses on South Asian and American characters engaged in cultural interaction. The discussion considers South Asian characters that experience migration as well as those who only establish contact with immigrant relatives. By doing so, the study seeks to establish whether cultural exchanges are exclusively conditioned by mobility or whether they can also occur in the absence of physical relocation.

The selection of these particular writings responds to a series of critical suggestions regarding the future orientation of research into South Asian American works. First, critical voices support an enlargement of Asian American studies from its initial West Coast focus that privileged California at the expense of other American areas (Shankar and Srikanth 1998, 6). The authors selected for analysis respond to this need, since their works present experiences of South Asian immigrants settled on the East Coast. Second, Sucheta Mazumdar considers that Asian American studies

should also examine Asian immigrants whose arrival in America is conditioned by a discontinuous process of displacement (e.g., British African Asians, Korean Argentinians, Latino Asian Americans):

> "Shall we claim only those who come directly from Asia as Asian Americans, following some notion of 'purity' and 'pollution'…. or do we anoint the immigrants Asian American and ask that they submerge their Caribbean/Fijian/Cuban/etc. histories? Is it not ironic that Asian American Studies, should become the vehicle for homogenization of immigrants which strips away multiple layers of ethnic identity in favour of a single census category?" (1992, 67).

The authors discussed in the following chapters all address this issue, with their depiction of South Asian characters who arrive in America through a double relocation (from India via England to the USA—Jhumpa Lahiri) and those who display mixed loyalties to Europe and the United States or whose migration itineraries are conditioned by colonial and neocolonial forces (Kiran Desai, Anita Desai).

Anita Desai was born in India in 1937 to a German mother and a Bengali father. She grew up in a multilingual tradition, speaking German, Bengali, Hindi, Urdu and English. She published her first short story at the age of nine (A. Desai to Costa 2001). Desai was educated in Delhi at Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School and Miranda House, Delhi University, where she received a BA in English Literature in 1957. The following year she married Ashvin Desai, a businessman with whom she had four children. In 1971, Anita Desai moved to England where she spent one year with her daughter, Kiran Desai. Today, Anita Desai lives in the United States, where she is the John E. Burchard Professor of Writing at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and of Girton College, Cambridge. In addition, she writes for the New York Review of Books. Anita Desai acknowledges her ambivalent relation to India, stating that she sees it as an outsider but she still has the feelings of someone born there (A. Desai to De Neefe 2006). The author harbours a sense of nostalgia for her birthplace, confessing that her status of visitor has created a "weird disconnection" from India (A. Desai to Elmhirst 2011). Her annual visits to India emphasise her estrangement, making her feel like an observer rather than a participant (A. Desai to Denes 2004). She confesses that she misses India intensely, especially when she writes, since India remains "the material of all of my work" (A. Desai to Elmhirst 2011). Still, she insists that she has not

rendered her longing as a sense of nostalgia in her works, preferring a realistic approach to literature:

> "It's something I wish to avoid, because I think nostalgia is a falsification. If you are nostalgic you tend to sentimentalise, or to fantasise, and you are no longer facing reality. So it's something I try very hard to avoid [. . .] to gloss over Indian life out of sentimentality, not out of fear of losing that. I would prefer to think that the books face the truth and don't create illusions" (A. Desai to Costa 2001).

The author's wish to discard a homesick stance can be linked with her definition of home as a state of spirit, rather than a particular location:

> "Home for the time being is wherever she can find the solitude she needs to work—Mexico, New York state, Cornwall, Cambridge, wherever. After all these years, she is leading the life she wanted for her characters, and which for years she thought could only be a man's—a life of adventure, chance and risk" (A. Desai to Denes 2004).

Her personal history of intense mobility has led to the formation of a cultural outlook that refuses a unilateral correspondence between her native background and her perspective as a writer:

> "Once you're boxed into a category, you run the danger of becoming a spokesman for that particular box. But my writing just isn't polemical in that sense, it's an absolutely personal response to life" (A. Desai to Elmhirst 2011).

In this sense, the transcultural framework of the present analysis aims to grasp the manner in which Anita Desai's fiction illustrates this complicated configuration of cultural allegiance. She published her first book, *Cry, the Peacock*, in 1963; since then, she has written sixteen novels and a collection of short stories. She was nominated for the Booker Prize three times for *Clear Light of Day* (2001), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). Her early works explore middle class South Asian women's confinement to the home, relying on Virginia Woolf's model of psychological novel which Anita Desai was introduced to in India (Ostberg 2000). Anita Desai was also considered a pioneer, with regards to her writing on feminist issues. However, the author needed to depart from the early trend of her work as she found it too narrowing. Being criticised for writing about "this confined and limited world" (A. Desai to K. Desai 2011), she felt resentful and decided to enlarge her thematic horizon:

> "I felt I was limiting the territory to such an extent that it created a kind of suffocation even for me. So I very deliberately opened the doors, to widen the canvas, and started writing more about male characters and their lives, because I felt they had a wider experience of the world, and I could address a greater variety of experiences" (A. Desai to Costa 2001)

or "Men led lives of adventure, chance and risk. It just wasn't possible to write that from an Indian female perspective." (A. Desai to Denes 2004).

The present book considers Anita Desai's shift away from addressing the issues surrounding female confinement and towards a new perspective that focused on Indian male and female mobility. This thematic criterion accounts for the limited number of her works analysed in this book (*Clear Light of Day, Fasting Feasting*) since they are the only ones that present South Asian male and female characters who move from India to the United States. Anita Desai confesses that her sources of inspiration are varied, ranging from British authors (D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf), to Russian writers (Dostoevsky, Chekhov) and French scripts (Proust), to modern Japanese, Chinese and Russian poetry (A. Desai to Pandit, 1995). The critical approaches to her work have varied from analyses of her modernist-lyrical style (Aftal-Khan 1993, Budholia 2001, Kanwar 1997, Samarth 1987, Sivanna 1994), gender perspectives (Jackson 2010, Ketu 2006, Neb 2009, Peacock 1996, Rege 1996, Sengupta 2006, Wickramagamage 1994, Volna 2005, Ahmad 1998), postcolonial approaches (Boyers 2005, Bishnupriya 1994, Lacom 2002, Ravichandran 2005) and even a food studies approach (Burcham-Whitt 2011) and existential interpretation (Singh 2009). The interdisciplinary nature of this present research involves a dialogue with all of these critical interpretations. However, the present study transgresses these outlooks, underscoring the transcultural dimensions of cultural interaction in the context of migration. By comparing Anita Desai's perspective with the younger authors Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri, the present book compares their vision of migration and gender as conditioned by different temporal axes. At the same time, a transcultural approach to Anita Desai's vision highlights her own impulse to detach herself from a particular tradition; "I have never belonged to any tradition. I have always been outside the orthodoxy, the conventional" (A. Desai to Pandit 1995).

The second author on the corpus list is Kiran Desai, Anita's daughter, who shares her mother's double relocation (from India to England at the age of fourteen; from England to the USA at the age of fifteen). Kiran Desai wrote two novels: *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* in 1988 and *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006. The first is a satirical approach to the life of an Indian man who tries to avoid adult responsibilities by seeking

refuge in a guava tree. *The Inheritance of Loss* is a multilayered novel whose plot lines intersect India, England and the United States. In 2006 it won both the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award. The novel presents two parallel scenarios of emigration in colonial and post-independence times: Jemubhai Patel undergoes temporary migration to England while Biju becomes an illegal worker in the restaurants of New York. Given the scope of the present analysis, I have selected *The Inheritance of Loss*, in order to examine patterns of Indian male migration in two different epochs. As the holder of an Indian citizenship, Kiran Desai acknowledges the importance of her Indian perspective in her work: "I see everything through the lens of being Indian. It's not something that has gone away, it's something that has become stronger as I've got older" (K. Desai to Barton 2006). The author regards *The Inheritance of Loss* as a return journey to the fact of being Indian; an acknowledgement that her Indian voice completes the American half of the narrative with emotional and historical depth (Kiran Desai to Rochester 2007). Like her mother, Kiran Desai pays regular visits to India and maintains connections with her family: "I have immediate family in Delhi and return every year to the family home, so the connection was never broken" (K. Desai in The Rediff Interview 2006). However, her attachment to her Indian background is paralleled by an adherence to a nomadic life style: "I feel as comfortable anywhere as I feel uncomfortable anywhere" (K. Desai to Barton 2006). A similar sense of cultural transcendent identity is noted in the Jabberwock interview, 2007: "In person [. . .] she [Kiran Desai] comes across as someone who's never really felt out of place no matter where she's been". Kiran Desai confesses that her personal history of dislocation is reflected in *The Inheritance of Loss*, where the idea of intensified mobility plays an important part:

> "The characters of my story are entirely fictional, but these journeys as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is this I wanted to capture [. . .] Ever since I left India to lead this life of going back and forth, certain patterns have revealed themselves, emotional as well as historical. I began to consider the complexity of growing up in India, the changing world of my parents and grandparents, the subsequent direction of my life that is a continuation of those days and the upheavals of that time" (K. Desai in The Rediff Interview 2006).

Defining herself as a member of the Indian diaspora in the United States, Kiran Desai considers that her fiction disseminates ideals of fluid identity and location that enable a multiple definition of belonging:

"I don't care about passports. Literature is located beyond flags and anthems, simple ideas of loyalty. The vocabulary of immigration, of exile, of translation, inevitably overlaps with a realization of the multiple options for reinvention, of myriad perspectives, shifting truths, telling of lies—the great big wobbliness of it all. In a world obsessed with national boundaries and belonging, as a novelist working with a form also traditionally obsessed with place, it was a journey to come to this thought, that the less structured, the multiple, may be a possible location for fiction, perhaps a more valid ethical location in general." (K. Desai to Rochester 2007).

Kiran Desai confesses that she was influenced by Salman Rushdie, in writing with confidence and humour, fusing myth with history and politics. She is also indebted to VS Naipaul for a sense of brutal honesty and a relational perspective on history that shows how "big wars pervert the smallest places" (K. Desai to Rochester 2007). Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* has been approached from psychoanalytical outlooks (Spielman 2010, Krige 2009) and postcolonial perspectives (Masterson 2010, Allesyo 2010, Ferguson 2009, Elif 2010, Sastry 2011). My analysis of this novel seeks to go beyond a postcolonial perspective, emphasising how a stress on ethnic difference overlooks ways in which cultural dialogues can occur.

The third author discussed, Jhumpa Lahiri, was born to Bengali immigrant parents in London in 1967. When she was three years old, her family moved to New England and she grew up in the USA. As with most of her second-generation characters, she experienced temporary relocation (to Calcutta) during her youth. At present, Jhumpa Lahiri lives in Brooklyn, New York. Her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and was translated into 29 languages. Seven out of the nine short stories present interactions between Indian and American characters placed in either Indian or American settings. Her novel *The Namesake*, published in 2003, presents the evolution of a Bengali immigrant family with a focus on the different strategies of the first and second-generation in navigating multiple traditions. Her last collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) foregrounds the second-generation characters and their effort to make sense of their cultural inheritance in an increasingly connected world.

Jhumpa Lahiri experienced a great deal of confusion in her adolescence with respect to her cultural identity. As an adult, she regards America as a home (Lahiri to Dottino 2006) in which she also feels like a "bit of an outsider" (Lahiri to R. Shankar 1999). The author considers that she has inherited a sense of longing and loss from her parents, whose generation seems indefinitely trapped in an emotional exile (Lahiri to

Farnsworth 2000; Lahiri to R. Shankar 1999). She considers that both generations are confronted with equally distressing challenges as the immigrant parents experience cultural displacement, while the second-generation grows in two worlds simultaneously. A biographical dilemma also illustrated in her fiction is the first and second-generations' inability to feel at home in either America or India (Lahiri to Patel 1999). Despite her thematic focus on immigrant experiences, Lahiri found it overwhelming to think of herself as belonging to a tradition of American writers dealing with the immigrant experience (Lahiri to Farnsworth 2000). As well as Anita Desai, Lahiri's literary preferences involve a wide range of authors from different cultural backgrounds: Tolstoy, Chekhov, Virginia Woolf, William Trevor-Ireland, Mavis Gallant-Canadian (Lahiri to Dottino 2006). Jhumpa Lahiri's work has been analysed as ethnic American literature (Brada-Williams 2004, Madhurpana 2006, Song 2007, Iyer 2009), American literature (Caesar 2005/ 2007, Chetty 2006), diasporic literature (Banerjee 2010, Bhalla 2008, Brians 2003, Saha 2009, Kemper 2011, Munos 2010), postcolonial literature (Bahmanpour 2010, Bandyopadhyay 2009) and from a gender studies perspective (Anh Williams 2007). However, most of these analyses deal with sections of Lahiri's work, which suggests the need for a complete study of her fictional world. This enlargement of perspective is offered in the present book.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL DIRECTIONS

The analysis of contemporary South Asian American authors begins from the premise that the transcultural paradigm has the potential to promote an account of ethnicity beyond melting pot, multicultural/mosaic and postcolonial ideologies. By examining literary works of South Asian American authors, the present book considers the potential of ethnic literature to illustrate how newcomers achieve Americanness and how the American identity is modified through interaction with different backgrounds. Several theoreticians have signalled the need for a more fluid approach to ethnicity; their ideas may serve as a prelude to a transcultural approach. For example, Werner Sollors (1986) considers that American ethnic configurations rely on a conflict between a hereditary approach to national identity (principles of descent) and a constructivist notion of identity (ideas of consent). The author presents arguments for a terminological shift from the concept of ethnicity to a vocabulary of cultural construction of the codes of consent and descent, in order to analyse phenomena of group formation, boundary construction and cultural fusion. Along similar lines, Néstor Garcia Canclini promotes a non-essentialist view of ethnicity as a process rather than a fixed ensemble of cultural essentials, emphasising a group's ability to interact and incorporate outside influences (2005, xiv). This idea of ethnicity as a process of construction rather than a frozen entity can be related to the transcultural paradigm, given their common focus on transformation and border transgression. The next subsection discusses the main coordinates of the transcultural framework, underscoring its relationship with other discourses of cultural contact: multiculturalism, postcolonialism, cosmopolitanism.

Transcultural directions: theories of transgression

"Transculturality" has long been considered a key theoretical notion for the study of migrant writing, thanks to its relationship with contemporary phenomena of migration and globalisation. The transcultural approach offers an adequate understanding of the individual

need to negotiate a plurality of cultural models, in a context of changing boundaries and rapid developments in technology, transportation and communication. Transculturality involves the transgression of spatial and temporal boundaries and a questioning of the clear binaries connoted by them (Alexander 2006, 141). Since the border crossing processes entail one's contact with different identities and cultures, the prefix "-*trans*" invokes phenomena of transport, transfer, translation. Given the changes associated with border-transgressions, boundaries are no longer conceptualized as immutable, but as sites of flexibility, insight, and innovation (Alexander 2006, 141). Rozga's suggestions for a new direction within the study of American literature share the transcultural impulse to dismantle separatist conceptions of culture. On the one hand, the melting pot approach to American literature dissolves all authors into an Anglo-defined, one-dimensional literary tradition (Rozga 2005, 66-67). On the other hand, the mosaic approach to literature foregrounds culture and ethnicity, seeking to correct the exclusions of the melting pot paradigm (Rozga 2005, 67). The separatist implications of this approach, "the metal that separates [. . .] the pieces of glass, one from another" (Rozga 2005, 68), render it inadequate for the interpretation of texts where the protagonist has more than one ethnicity (Rozga 2005, 68). By redefining the mainstream as the trajectory of the Mississippi River, Rozga fashions an interpretative framework that avoids the homogenizing claims of the melting pot ideology and the separatist implications of the mosaic approaches: "The literature of the Mississippi River is intrinsically diverse. It is multi-genre and multiethnic and foregrounds the ethnicity of its writers" (Rozga 2005, 73).

    In a similar fashion, the transcultural approach to South Asian American writers proposed by this book transgresses the assumptions of assimilationism, multiculturalism and postcolonialism. The postcolonial condition in America is associated with the expatriate status, illustrated by G. Spivak who considers herself an expatriate, an outsider, a Bengali intellectual (Shankar 1998, 57). While unmasking the effects of Western imperialist epistemologies, the postcolonial discourse cannot account for a specific literature since it covers "too many groups of various histories, geographies, and national origins" (Grewal 1996, 93). Bharati Mukherjee, an American immigrant, illustrates one possible reaction to the postcolonial status in America, when she defines herself as:

> "an American writer [. . .] I am the first among Asian immigrants to be making this distinction between immigrant writing and expatriate writing. Most Indians prior to this, have still thought of themselves as Indians, and their literary inspiration, has come from India. India has been the source,

the home. Whereas, I am saying… my roots are here and my emotions here in North America" (Mukherjee to Meer 1989, 27).

While Mukherjee seeks to downplay her differences in order to become assimilated into America, Spivak foregrounds her foreign condition. Sastry considers that South Asian American literature has largely been interpreted from a postcolonial perspective that tends to emphasise its difference, "translating into an almost obsessive orientation towards South Asia in reading these works" (2011, 22). The consequence of this concern with ethnic difference is the marginalization of this type of literature as American literature and even its exclusion (Sastry 2011, 21). South Asian American literature is not defined in an antagonistic relationship with English as a colonial language and therefore does not seek to promote South Asian American English:

> "Perhaps because the groundwork for the literary 'domestication' of English has been laid prior to immigration, South Asian American literature takes for granted (American) English as its starting point" (Sastry 2011, 24).

Anita Desai supports this detachment from postcolonial concern, as she remarks on the confidence with which Indian writers use English:

> "But I think by the 80s everyone accepted the fact that English had become an Indian language, it was not going to disappear, it had taken roots and had started growing not in any artificial manner but in a very natural manner. Indians have taken it to our world and turned it into an Indian language. So now they are writing with a kind of confidence. I think it is not questioned anymore " (A. Desai to Costa 2001).

Given these observations, the transcultural paradigm seems more adequate for the study of South Asian American literature than the postcolonial approach, since it avoids the conflation of South Asian American authors with the representation of cultural difference in their works. The following section discusses the relationship between transculturalism and multiculturalism, suggesting ways in which the former can enrich the explanatory potential of the latter.

While seeking to transcend multiculturalist assumptions, the Russian formulation of the transcultural paradigm acknowledges the commonalities between transculturalism and multiculturalism. First, both directions seek to facilitate communication between different cultures. Second, they both resist ideological canons (multiculturalism reacts against Euro-centrism and male dominance, while transculturalism

opposes totalitarian communism). Third, the two paradigms are interested in "exotic" cultures (Russian transculturalism is attracted to the cultures previously restricted in the Soviet Union by the Iron Curtain, while multiculturalism promotes the cultures of oppressed minorities in the West (Epstein 1995, 300). The pluralistic conception promoted by multi-culturalism is mirrored by the American support for a multiplicity of separate and distinct minority cultures. By contrast, transculturalism focuses on the idea of wholeness—in opposition to totalitarianism—as it seeks to reach a "multi-dimensional totality" (Epstein 1995, 301). Promoters of transculturalism consider that the American emphasis on difference and pluralism disseminates a tolerant difference as a general criterion of acceptance "as if all people were essentially the same" (Epstein 1995, 302). An attitude of this kind erases the very content of difference and therefore homogenizes cultural variety: "If everything is equal, self-sufficient, or justified in and of itself, then we lose compassion or attraction for those who are different from us" (Epstein 1995, 302). Nikos Papastergiadis remarks that multiculturalism as a politics of recognition provides legitimacy to other claims, but he does not offer the means to dismantle barriers between different outlooks:

> "Conflict is not resolved by this process of recognition; at best it can suggest that differences must be respected and that they find a separate space in which coexistence is possible" (2000, 149).

At the same time, the multicultural discourse neglects the porous boundaries between groups, the deterritorialized links between their members, the globalising patterns of communication and the processes of cultural transformation (Papastergiadis 2000, 105). Hannerz considers that the multiculturalist argument promotes the "right to one's culture" (2001, 57), while reinforcing the definition of cultures as bounded, separated entities (2001, 57). Similarly, Schultermandl and Toplu argue that the multiculturalist politics of identity involves practices of labelling identities in terms of gender, class, race (2010, 13). Moreover, this premise also overlooks strategies by which people attempt to remake themselves by upholding alternative cultural models (Hannerz 2001, 58). In a similar vein, Harvey Siegel demonstrates that the multicultural credo needs to be supplemented by a transcultural element. The justification of the multiculturalist respect for difference rests on a moral argument that stresses the 'wrong' nature of cultural oppression, marginalization and hegemony (Siegel 1999, 391). At the same time, the argument places the validity of cultural ideals within the boundaries of particular cultures. While one dimension of multiculturalism favours cultural relativism, the

other entails a universal moral obligation implicitly denied by the relativist position (Siegel 1999, 395). Given the argument's internal discrepancy, the solution envisaged by Siegel implies the elimination of the cultural relativist argument from the multicultural discourse. Consequently, the moral obligation to avoid cultural domination and hegemony must be conceived as a cultural-transcendent (i.e., transcultural) requirement in order to actually work:

> "Consequently, the advocate of multiculturalism must see the requirements of avoiding cultural domination and hegemony, and of treating cultures and their members justly and respectfully, as themselves culturally-transcendent or *transcultural* moral requirements." (Siegel 1999, 396; emphasis mine).

Similarly, the Romanian historian Victor Neumann considers that multiculturalism should transgress its separatist bias by adding a transcultural way of thinking, that is, admitting that one's culture-specific values can become the values of other cultures as well. The vision proposed by Neumann appears as a synthesis of multicultural and transcultural premises: the multicultural respect for cultural specificity blends with the transcultural awareness that there are specific cultural values that promote openness to otherness (2003, 87). Attempting to solve the same dilemma, Robin Kelley advances the concept of polyculture as a means to overcome the multiculturalist "zoological approach to culture" (quoted in Prashad 1999, 196). The notion of polyculture overlaps with the transcultural approach as it underscores the emergence of creative cultural intersections:

> "A polyculturalist sees the world as constituted by the interchange of cultural forms, while multiculturalism sees the world as already constituted by different (and discrete) cultures that we can place into categories and study with respect (and thereby retain 1950s relativism and pluralism in a new guise)" (Prashad 1999, 197).

While considering the polyculture approach for its transgressive implications, I retain the term "transcultural" for its stronger emphasis on cultural dynamics, that is, cultural transformations as an effect of transferring values across cultural boundaries. The transcultural model of cultural interaction suggested by Epstein posits cultural diversification as a consequence of encounters, by means of interference. In physics, this notion defines the process of wave interaction that generates mutual reinforcement/neutralisation. In the context of cultural contact, interference refers to the further diversification of cultures as a

consequence of their encounter (Epstein 1999, 9).

The novelty of the approach lies in the fact that it regards cultural differences as factors that facilitate cultural communication, rather than inhibit it. In the global contemporary stage, the emergence of cultural networks creates the context for cultural proximity and interaction. The shift from cultural polarization to pluralisation and globalisation is a historical context that stimulates cultural interference (Epstein 1999, 10). The individuals' awareness of cultural interpenetration creates the premise for transcultural communication:

> "What transculture suggests is [. . .] a progression beyond culture, into the postcultural condition that is technologically shaped by contemporary global communications [. . .] This realm beyond all cultures is located inside transculture" (Epstein 1999, 25).

The transcendent dimension of cultures is also emphasised by the Romanian physicist Basarab Nicolescu, who considers that the transcultural realm denotes the openness of all cultures to elements that traverse and transgress them (2007, 73). Paul Gilroy also opts for a transcultural understanding of cultural contacts, emphasising the need for a non-hierarchical approach to cultures (1993, 217). Gilroy introduces the metaphor of the ship as a middle passage that stands for an outernational, transcultural model of the circulation of ideas and cultural artefacts (1993, 16–17).

Both Epstein's and Nicolescu's models intersect with Delanty's cosmopolitan approach that posits an "interrelated nature of cultures" (2009, 12). His notion of critical cosmopolitanism highlights phenomena of "cultural interaction, developmental processes and modes of self-transformation" (2009, 12) that distinguish cosmopolitanism from globalisation. Delanty's version of critical cosmopolitanism refers to the production of cultural reconfigurations as the effect of cultures' openness to one another:

> "The cosmopolitan imagination entails a view of society as an ongoing process of self-constitution through the continuous opening up of new perspectives in light of the encounter with the Other" (2009, 13).

Epstein's and Delanty's conceptions overlap, since transculture designates cultures' capacity for self-transgression, while critical cosmopolitanism entails cultural transformation as a consequence of cultures' immanent transcendence. As well as Epstein, Delanty considers it essential that cultures should seek for self-completion outside their own spheres: "Without some notion of alternative society, cosmopolitanism has a

limited normative application" (2009, 66). While taking into account the overlap between transculturalism and critical cosmopolitanism, I adopt the term "transcultural" in order to avoid the elitist/imperialist connotations of cosmopolitanism as well as the multiple implications of its varied definitions (Ribeiro 2001, Clifford 1997, Brennan 1997, Delanty 2009, Pollock 2002, Werbner 2008). By delineating itself from a cosmopolitan perspective, the present analysis relies on a transcultural approach for reaching a stronger conceptual clarity.

Given its dynamic connotations, the transcultural paradigm affords the discussion of relations between cultures in terms of cultural translation. Migration is closely associated with border-crossing phenomena, involving physical and symbolic movement from a source to a target culture. Hence, migrants are considered "translated beings" permanently engaged in a process of negotiating cultural values (Cronin 2006, 45). In this context, cultural translation is the transfer of meanings generated by necessity to render cultural plurality (cultures) into a common cultural language (Culture) that enables communication between different outlooks (2006, 47). Papastergiadis notes that migrants engender new cultural meaning by translating the previously known—together with the unknown—into something that is knowable (2000, 136). He considers that a right approach to cultural exchanges should not stipulate either the appropriation of a foreign culture according to rules of one's own or the faithful reproduction of foreign ways (2000, 129). The model of cultural translation envisaged by Papastergiadis entails a "dynamic interaction within which conceptual boundaries are expanded and residual differences respected" (2000, 129). Invoking Lechte and Bottomley, Papastergiadis defines the potency of the migrant's perspective as interplay of interweaving and retranslation. Interweaving refers to the process of constant interaction between cultural practices that leads to their mutual transformation. Retranslation is the process by which foreign elements are introduced into a new culture, a part of the ongoing practice of interpretation and central to the very construction of culture (2000, 136). Similarly, Basarab Nicolescu considers that the transcultural understanding guarantees the translation of one culture into any other culture, by an act of deciphering what both unites and transgresses cultures (2007, 75). The dynamic and transgressive connotations of transculturalism can be linked with intensified regimes of mobility that often trigger the emergence of transcultural awareness.

Cultural hybridity

Given that transculturality implies the idea of cultural blending, this concept overlaps with the notion of cultural hybridity. Yet they also differ, since transculture denotes the transgression of cultural and national boundaries, while hybridity designates a state of culture produced both pre- and post-cultural interaction. Theoretical accounts of hybridity as a discourse of cultural contact acknowledge both the utility of the notion and the limits of its explanatory power. M. Kraidy argues that the concept of hybridity remains useful as a critique of non-strategic essentialism since it dismantles the supremacy of categories such as nation, state, religion, ethnicity (2005, 80). Avtar Brah and Annie Coombes consider that the anti-essentialist overtones of the concept endow it with a potentially transgressive power (2005, 1). Kalra, Kaur and Hutnik claim that one of the productive directions of the discourse of hybridity is the potential to raise important questions as to "the political contexts and investments engaged in the scene of translation or in the 'contact' itself" (2005, 76). Pieterse discusses the paradigm of cultural hybridisation as a useful alternative to cultural differentialism and cultural diffusion/McDonaldization (2009, 59). Since it challenges essentialist notions of cultures, hybridisation "eventually ushers in post-hybridity or transcultural cut-and-paste" (2009, 89). N. Papastergiadis situates the evolution of the notion between a threat to the "fullness of selfhood" (2000, 168), and an acknowledgement of the negotiation of difference in the process of constructing identity (2000, 170). Homi Bhabha discusses hybridity in relation to alterity, defining cultural difference as an

> "intermediate and undetermined locus within the margins of hybridity, an interstitial space that emerges as a structure of undecidability at the frontiers of cultural hybridity" (1990, 312).

According to Bhabha, "the third space of borderline negotiations" (1994, 218) marks the occurrence of cultural translations that foreground the irreducible cultural differences between cultures, producing hybrid and split entities (1994, 224).

Despite the successful dissemination of the hybridity discourse, recent criticism has suggested the ways in which it needs to be revised in order to offer a more refined understanding of cross-cultural dynamics. By assuming the existence of cultural purity prior to cultural interaction, the notion of hybridity reiterates essentialist nationalist assumptions (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnik 2005, 72). Furthermore, the term's connotation of cultural mixture as a consequence of cultural contact relies on the