

Negotiating the In-Between: Hybrid Identities and Postcolonial Displacement in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract

This study examines the themes of hybrid identities and postcolonial displacement in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. Studying *Mrs. Sen's* as a primary case study, supplemented by intertextual references to *A Real Durwan*, *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* and *When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine*, the research explores how Lahiri's narratives articulate the complexities of cultural negotiation, belonging, and unhomeliness. The aim is to analyze how Lahiri's characters embody Homi K. Bhabha's theories of hybridity and the Third Space, which refers to the liminal site where cultural meaning and identity are negotiated, highlighting their struggles and adaptations in transcultural contexts. The methodology involves a close textual analysis of selected stories. The discussion reveals how characters navigate their in-between identities, oscillating between assimilation and cultural retention, and how Lahiri's hybrid storytelling refers to both the narrative technique and thematic hybridity, which challenges monolithic cultural representations. The findings underscore the dual nature of liminality as both a source of conflict and a catalyst for hybrid identity formation. The conclusion emphasizes that Lahiri's contribution to postcolonial discourse is foregrounding everyday negotiations of identity through fluid, diasporic experiences. Ultimately, the study highlights the resilience of Lahiri's characters in negotiating displacement, offering a nuanced understanding of identity in a globalized world.

Keywords: diaspora, postcolonial displacement, in-betweenness, hybridity, liminality

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1. Introduction

In contemporary postcolonial literature, such as Wehrs (2024), themes of hybrid identity and cultural negotiation (especially within diasporic contexts— have become increasingly central. The year 1999 sees Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* standing as a foundational work in postcolonial and diasporic studies in terms of the complex and varied experiences of Indian immigrants to the United States. Lahiri, as a second-generation diasporic writer, constructs narratives that traverse the boundaries of identity, belonging, and cultural hybridity. This research seeks to interrogate how Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* engages with postcolonial and diasporic theories to explore the liminal identities of immigrant characters navigating cultural translation. Even as the mentioned works lay great emphasis on Lahiri's thematic profusion, gaps remain in understanding the implications of the characters' in-betweenness with respect to larger theoretical constructs like Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity paradigm and Stuart Hall's idea of cultural identity.

The foundational premise of this study lies in the broader context of Indian diaspora literature, which has been instrumental in articulating the complexities of displacement, nostalgia, and the negotiation of identities. The Indian diaspora, second only in size to the Chinese, encompasses diverse migration histories, including the colonial-era old diaspora and the post-1955 new diaspora fueled by globalization and advanced capitalism (Mishra, 2006). Lahiri's oeuvre epitomizes the nuanced experiences of the new diaspora, particularly the generational distinctions that shape diasporic subjectivities. Her depiction of second-generation immigrants offers an incisive lens through which to understand the tensions between assimilation and cultural retention, thereby contributing to an evolving discourse on the fluidity of identity in a globalized world.

At the heart of this research is the problem of representing diasporic identity as an ongoing negotiation, rather than a static construct. Scholars like Homi K. Bhabha have emphasized the reciprocal interactions between colonizer and colonized cultures, a dynamic that generates spaces of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994). Yet, Lahiri's characters, such as *Mrs. Sen*, complicate this theoretical model by resisting both complete assimilation into dominant American culture and uncritical adherence to inherited Indian traditions. Their lives reflect the

dissonances and opportunities of what Bhabha terms unhomeliness, a condition of existing in the interstitial spaces between two cultures (p. 13). For example, Lahiri's characters negotiate the obligations of cultural translation and frequently find themselves inhabiting the liminal spaces between estrangement and belonging. The liminal nature of diasporic identity complicates arcane binary frameworks, requiring us to reconsider post-colonial models on the basis of her work. As Pourgharib and Asl (2022) aptly note, the endeavor to establish reconciliation between the opposing demands of two cultural communities lies at the heart of some literary works associated with postcolonial literature (p. 219).

The objective of this study is to analyze how Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* engages with theoretical constructs of hybridity, liminality, and cultural translation to articulate the psychological and social realities of immigrant life. Specifically, the research will examine how Lahiri's characters embody the mutual transformations that define diasporic existence (Shackleton, 2008). This investigation builds upon two key theoretical insights: first, as Pourgharib et al. (2018) demonstrate, the hybridity of colonial discourse shows that the relationship of the colonized/colonizer is not merely one of domination and submission (p. 50); and second, as Pourgharib and Asl (2022) contend, diasporic individuals are always required to interpret their inner world and that of the outside. Otherwise, they are doomed to failure and a life of alienation and isolation (p. 1668). These perspectives collectively reveal the complex power dynamics and psychological challenges that characterize Lahiri's narratives, where characters continually negotiate their identities within interstitial cultural spaces. For instance, Boori Ma in *A Real Durwan* is ostracized by her own community. By synthesizing Bhabha's framework and Lahiri's narrative, the underexplored tensions between gendered identity and diasporic liminality are emphasized. A particular focus on generational distinctions will illuminate how second-generation diasporic subjects challenge traditional notions of cultural continuity and rupture through their unique identity negotiations.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* investigates the lives of Indian and Indian-American characters encountering the issues of cultural displacement, identity process, and psychological dislocation associated with migration. These characters often exist in a liminal space between cultures (what Homi K. Bhabha refers to as the *Third Space*) where their

identities are continually negotiated and reshaped. Lahiri's portrayal of the diasporic experience invites a postcolonial reading, particularly through the lens of hybridity, unhomeliness, and cultural translation. Among the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies*, *Mrs. Sen's* stands out for its particularly vivid depiction of diasporic alienation, gendered liminality, and cultural nostalgia, making it an ideal case study for exploring postcolonial hybridity. Its focus on a first-generation immigrant woman navigating cultural displacement offers a rich narrative through which to examine Homi Bhabha's concepts of the Third Space and unhomeliness. To provide a broader contextual reading, the analysis is complemented by selected stories, *A Real Durwan*, *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar*, and *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, which present contrasting diasporic experiences and help illuminate the thematic and structural hybridity of Lahiri's storytelling across the collection. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does Jhumpa Lahiri represent the hybrid identities of the Indian diaspora in *Interpreter of Maladies* through a postcolonial framework?
2. In what ways does Lahiri's narrative strategy reflect the dynamics of cultural negotiation and in-betweenness described in Bhabha's theory of hybridity?

2. Literature Review

The existing scholarship on Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction has significantly advanced our understanding of her portrayal of diasporic identities, but notable gaps and limitations remain, particularly in analyzing gender and generational hybridity. Bandyopadhyay (2009) provided a foundational discussion on the cultural conflicts in Lahiri's narratives, examining the processes of assimilation and dissension across gender and generational lines. Bandyopadhyay highlighted the dichotomy between two paradigms of cultural perception: one rooted in essentialism, viewing identity as an immutable entity, and the other embracing hybridity, which conceptualizes culture as dynamic and contingent. While Bandyopadhyay's analysis offered a valuable framework, it remained somewhat descriptive, focusing on character dynamics without sufficiently interrogating the mechanisms through which Lahiri's fiction critiques and reimagines these paradigms. This study will examine thematic layering and narrative structure.

Rastogi (2015) further explored the concept of hybridity, drawing from Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical insights. Rastogi asserted that hybridity existed within Lahiri's work but did not sufficiently analyze how it operated in different narrative contexts or how it intersected with other postcolonial concepts such as liminality or unhomeliness. This oversimplification left significant gaps in understanding the complexities of Lahiri's characters, particularly their struggles with cultural translation and identity formation.

In contrast, Imtiyaz and Ashaq (2017) focused on the alienation and disorientation experienced by Lahiri's characters due to their liminal positions. While the authors acknowledged the dual nature of cultural in-betweenness, their primary emphasis on its negative aspects (alienation, obscurity, and identity crises) failed to capture the transformative potential of liminality. The present study will address how liminality can generate new forms of cultural negotiations. Asl et al. (2020), using the theories of Foucault, investigated the conception of orientalism and diasporic culture in the latter half of the twentieth century in the United States. They explored how the minority culture emerged from a political viewpoint focusing on diverse cultural and political entities. Their research suggested that Lahiri's *The Blessed House* and *The Third and Final Continent* are in line with the stereotypical opinion of the diaspora.

Rahman (2023) centered his research on the identity formation of Lahiri's characters in *Interpreter of Maladies*. He elaborated on the sense of belonging that hindered the shaping of the characters' identities in their new setting. Rahman emphasized the clash of American and Indian cultures in the stories and dealt with the sense of inadequacy resulting from the characters' inner conflicts. Likewise, Mor (2023) contended a similar perception regarding the Indian diaspora and how their sense of Indianness remained within the characters. Furthermore, Khan (2023) contended that Lahiri reinvented the notion of nation by reconstructing its original meaning. He explored the conception of identities where nation was no longer recognized as a monolith but a transformed structure. Khan elaborated on globalization through the lens of postcolonialism and painted a picture of transnationalism of the diaspora.

Additionally, Madhavi (2024) examined the immigrant experience in *Interpreter of Maladies*, focusing on themes of identity, displacement, and cultural duality. He portrayed the

psychological impacts of immigration, including issues of belonging, generational conflict, and cultural hybridity. The study also underscored her use of both literal and metaphorical illness as a symbol for the emotional challenges of twisted identities. Similarly, Wehrs (2024) argued that the emotional estrangement depicted in Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* largely stemmed from the characters' cultural dislocation, which disrupted their interpersonal relationships. Through introspection and cultural negotiation, they came close to coming to terms with their fractured identities. Wehr argued that Lahiri showed the challenges facing immigrants regarding their agency in a postcolonial setting. Shahmoradi and Zarrinjooee (2024) employed the theoretical foundation of Stuart Hall and Michael Ryan to investigate the cultural experience of displacement in immigrants in Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. Hall argued that cultural identity is not fixed but constructed through difference and representation, while Ryan emphasized the ideological tensions that shape diasporic belonging. They asserted that Lahiri demonstrated cultural diversity via a transcultural discourse.

Collectively, these studies reveal a fragmented engagement with Lahiri's fiction, characterized by selective analyses and limited theoretical application. Most critiques either disproportionately emphasize one dimension of Lahiri's exploration of hybridity or fail to engage comprehensively with the intersectionality of gender, generation, and cultural negotiation in her narratives, particularly through her portrayal of women who negotiate cultural hybridity as gendered subjects shaped by society. This lack of holistic analysis underscores the need for a more integrated approach that situates Lahiri's fiction within the broader frameworks of postcolonial and diasporic theories, particularly as articulated by Homi K. Bhabha. This study addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive and theoretically rigorous examination of Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, focusing on the interplay of hybridity, liminality, and cultural translation. By critically engaging with the entire text rather than selective instances, this research aims to elucidate how Lahiri's narratives embody Bhabha's concept of hybridity and temporal space as a dynamic space where cultural identities are constantly negotiated and transformed. Additionally, this study interrogates the intersectional dimensions of identity in Lahiri's work, exploring how generational and gendered experiences influence the processes of assimilation and resistance.

3. Method

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri explores different aspects of displacement and diasporic life. Most of the characters presented in this collection are bound to come to terms with their condition as diaspora subjects in some sense. “Almost all of my characters are translators, insofar as they must make sense of the foreign in order to survive” (Lahiri, 2002, p. 120). While striving to portray maladies, Lahiri manages to ‘translate’ the complicated, conflicting experiences of the Indian diaspora in her fiction, including displacement, diasporic alienation, sense of belonging, unhomeliness, desire for assimilation, and finally, the third space and hybridity.

Homi K. Bhabha’s model provides a theoretical framework for this research. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), he introduces the problem of identity once a postcolonial diasporic person is negotiating cultures in a new environment. The construction of the immigrant identity is a multifaceted process in which the sense of home is queried. In speaking of how the postcolonial identity takes shape, Bhabha asserts that:

We are no longer confronted with an ontological problem of being but with the discursive strategy of the moment of interrogation, a moment in which the demand for identification becomes, primarily, a response to other questions of signification and desire, culture and politics. (p. 71)

He proposes in-between spaces as a platform for developing strategies of selfhood - individual or communal - that introduce new markers of identity and begin to delineate “the idea of society itself” (p. 2). This in-betweenness creates a temporal space where identities are negotiated. Bhabha makes an example of a stairwell and calls it a liminal space, in-between the designations of identity (p. 5). Navigating identity, according to Bhabha, is never about the confirmation of a pre-given identity, never a *self*-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image (p. 64).

Another central theme in his work is hybridity– the formation of new identities that transcend the traditional dichotomy of Self and Other within the postcolonial context. Hybridity

contributes to the notions of in-betweenness and temporal space by explicating the postcolonial diasporic immigrant's experience. The immigrant creates a third space through hybridity to reassure oneself of their identity: it is not the nostalgic dream of tradition, nor the Utopian dream of modern progress; it is the dream of translation as 'survival' (p. 324), which is aligned with the direct quote of Lahiri mentioned above. This third space resembles living on borderlines and is a sign of the power that hybridity bestows the diasporic immigrant (p. 324).

Being torn away from the nation with which the diasporic immigrant sympathizes can create a sense of unhomeliness that underwrites the problem of identity formation. The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions (p. 13). As displacement takes place, the lines separating the home and the world start to blur, and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting (p. 13). The concept of being unhomed does not equate to being homeless; rather, it is a psychological experience—a moment when a sense of unhomeliness quietly overtakes you, like your own shadow, and you suddenly find yourself inhabiting a state of incredulous terror. This fear hinders identity development and keeps the diasporic immigrant in the in-between state, which results in a failure to finalize the hybridity process. In what follows, we witness how Lahiri presents the stereotypical narratives that one might expect in the colonial discourse at the surface level of her fictional work and deconstructs it through the various elements of the stories or through the connection of one story to the other ones, which is hybrid storytelling. Postcolonial criticism—particularly Bhabha's theoretical concepts of liminality, temporal space, cultural diversity, and cultural difference—offers valuable tools for uncovering deeper layers within Lahiri's stories, enabling a reinterpretation that reads between the lines. In this regard, *Mrs. Sen's* is an exemplary story in the collection which will be analyzed comprehensively in the following section; afterwards, other related stories will be discussed in order to sketch the similarities and differences that can help disclose new aspects of Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*.

4. Discussion

4.1. Analyzing *Mrs. Sen's* in Light of Lahiri's Hybrid Storytelling

Mrs. Sen's narrates the story of a thirty-year-old Indian-Bengali housewife who has moved from Calcutta to the USA with her husband, a university professor. In her new house in America, Mrs. Sen is babysitting an eleven-year-old American boy called Eliot whose mother works at an office. Eliot spends his after-school hours with Mrs. Sen. While *Mrs. Sen's* house should be seen as unfamiliar for an American, Eliot believes that his mother's house is actually the odd one. Gradually, Eliot finds more differences between his own house and that of *Mrs. Sen's*. She tells Eliot that back in India, everyone joins others in happiness or grief, for instance:

Whenever there is a wedding in the family,' she told Eliot one day, 'or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping. (Lahiri, 1999, pp. 127-128)

Through *Mrs. Sen's* nostalgic memories of India, Eliot infers that India is a friendly place contrary to America. He remembers that on Labor Day, one of the neighbors had a party and people were eating and drinking, the sound of their laughter rising above the weary sigh of the waves, but he and his mother were not invited (p. 129). Since the memory of India remains a nostalgic memory in *Mrs. Sen's* mind, she is still living in the temporal space to which she holds on. She cannot manage to successfully integrate into the new environment; thus, she lives with the memories and attempts to recreate that space within the new setting. Mrs. Sen is the perfect instance of liminality, of otherness, the tethered shadow of deferral and displacement. "[She] is not the colonialist Self or the colonized Other, but the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 64).

Mrs. Sen tries hard to feel at home in America, but in time, she feels more alienated and disappointed on the foreign soil. She refuses to cook elaborately anymore and still hates driving, but she repeatedly watches a videotape of her family. While she could not drive, she learned the bus route to the fish market so that she could buy fresh fish. The problem was that the passengers complained about the smell, and once more she felt desperate about her life in America. Still, she did not quit resistance. She attempted to drive to the fish market on her own along with Eliot. Unfortunately, she had an accident by driving the car into a telephone pole.

In this narrative, home takes on powerful meaning as it is intricately connected to *Mrs. Sen's* selfhood; her identity, nationalism, and sense of belonging. Her temporal space is a site for cultural translation where she reconciles her old and new identity. She retains the foreigner status even in her own mind, yet she has strayed from her Indian self due to her dislocation. As Bhabha contends, "the foreign element 'destroys the original's structures of reference and sense communication as well' not simply by negating it but by negotiating the disjunction in which successive cultural temporalities are 'preserved in the work of history and at the same time cancelled' (1994, p. 326). The unhomeliness of the foreign land would not diminish unless she consents to a hybridity of identity. Mrs. Sen holds a rigid and deeply rooted view of home and gender, which drives her persistent attachment to her family's memories and the traditions of her native culture. As a woman of the first diasporic generation, she experiences profound feelings of loss and alienation in the unfamiliar landscape of the host country. She is a traditional woman for whom her constructed gender role as a committed wife is very important. Partha Chatterjee, a postcolonial cultural scholar, states that women have the most important role in society and the family in maintaining and supporting the traditions of their national culture (Mannur, 2012).

Mrs. Sen resists her sense of loss by recreating a miniature model of her homeland for herself in the confinements of her flat; these domestic practices give her a sense of order and control in a world she renders chaotic; they provide her identity with a center in a de-centered space. The reader never learns the name of Mrs. Sen, and we just know her by the family name of her husband. The reason behind this lies in the title of the story, *Mrs. Sen's*, which refers to two ideas. Firstly, it suggests her faithfulness to her female subjectivity and gender role, and secondly, the possessive apostrophe indicates the control over the minimal domestic space that Mrs. Sen has created in a foreign country.

Mrs. Sen finds it utterly difficult to adapt to her new country. Her incompatibility and her failed integration are culminated in her refusal to learn how to drive. Mrs. Sen did not know how to drive, but her husband, Mr. Sen, assured Eliot's mother that his wife would learn to drive in the near future. In response, Mrs. Sen said, "Yes, I am learning, but I am a slow student. At home, you know, we have a driver" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 126). Later, Eliot understands that

home meant India, where Mrs. Sen believes that everything is there. Driving is an essential skill in the United States, and it is not a strange matter for women to drive; however, Mrs. Sen is attached to Indian ways. Mrs. Sen reluctantly drives in America, which is against her traditionally defined role as a woman, which is an unconscious progressive step toward independence (Madhuri, 2023). The role of women in India has been a matter of debate for years. Chatterjee describes the expectations of this idealistic view of Indian women, which can be seen in the appearance and behavior of Mrs. Sen, as:

Indian women were supposed to dress in Indian clothes, they must not eat, drink, or smoke in the same way as men; they must continue the observance of religious rituals that men were finding difficult to carry out; they must maintain the cohesiveness of family life and solidarity with the kin to which men could not now devote much attention. (1993, p. 130)

Lamb (2005) also emphasizes this idealization; she states that in post-independence Indian history, family has been recognized as a principal symbol of Indianness, and since women were the center of family life, Indian women were defined as the symbol of Indianness after the demise of British colonialism and establishment of anticolonial nationalism. Gayatri Spivak maintains that these narratives created a homogenized, abstract figure of woman in order to fulfill their political agendas, without considering the lives of real women in different spheres of Indian society (Morton, 2003); they created a totality which shaped how a lot of Indian women viewed themselves.

As Bhabha puts it, “identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality” (1994, p. 73). Should characters decide to access the image of their identity, they must negate any sense of originality or plenitude; “[as] the process of displacement and differentiation renders it a liminal reality” (p. 73). As is often the experience of many other Indian women, Mrs. Sen has come to embody the ideal of womanhood for her entire identity; her desire to perform this role under ethical imperatives hides an unobservable loss born out of a trauma of not belonging. This aligns with Bhabha’s notion of the distressing nature of existence within in-between spaces: “Space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and

outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’” (p. 2).

Bhabha considers that the liminal state could be destructive for the postcolonial, because the borders of identity become blurred, ambiguous and uncertain, making it not easy for the self to hold onto a stable center. Likewise, Mrs. Sen struggles against accepting the socially shifting orders, and by clinging to an image of totality, she is trapped in a world of in-betweenness. She stays located on the margins between the old force and the new, between the present and the past. Her desire for ideal wholeness means that she can never reconcile her sense of profound exile. Bhabha’s argument is that the familiar space of the Other becomes a historical cultural specificity through the fragmentation of the postcolonial or migrant subject.

Mrs. Sen’s inability to communicate, make connections, and her immobility create a sense of agony and disappointment. While the reader feels sorry for her, her resoluteness in clinging to the past is disturbing. Mrs. Sen is trapped in a self-imposed cage, feeling that her traditional cultural identity is threatened by the prospect of assimilation. In order for her to demonstrate her difference, she intentionally wears her heritage on her sleeve by wearing a shimmering white sari with orange paisley decorations. While Eliot’s mother’s style is Western, the contrast is so pronounced that Eliot starts comparing them. At this point, Eliot begins to recognize that Mrs. Sen is different than his mom in a lot of ways. His mother is a single mom working outside of the house. To Eliot, Mrs. Sen has a sort of femininity, a domestic quality that is lacking in his mother (Ruia, 2013). Above all else, culinary rituals and food culture serve as the primary means of highlighting the differences between Mrs. Sen and Eliot’s mother. Mrs. Sen spends a good deal of time preparing Bengali dishes, but Eliot’s mother does not care about food and cooking that much, which also demonstrates her independence (Garg & Kushu-Lahiri, 2012). Since Mrs. Sen adheres to her cultural tradition strongly, even Eliot, an eleven-year-old boy, can understand that she is a foreigner and different from others around him. Both Mrs. Sen and Eliot are navigating their identities through their clashing cultures (Kumar & Sushil, 2023).

Taking into account Eliot’s role in perceiving the significance of culture in his life, one must revisit Bhabha’s distinction of cultural diversity and cultural difference. He maintains that

“cultural diversity is an epistemological object –culture as an object of empirical knowledge – whereas cultural difference is the process of the enunciation of culture as ‘knowledgeable’, authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification” (pp. 49-50). Bhabha argues that the ambivalent space of colonial discourse paves the way to bring forth the similarities beneath the cultural difference and subvert the exoticism of cultural diversity (Ashcroft et al., 2006).

Bhabha differentiates between cultural difference and cultural diversity, and initially, Eliot perceives the distinctions between Mrs. Sen and his mother as a matter of cultural diversity —simple comparisons and categories. However, as the story unfolds, he realizes that these differences actually arise from deeper cultural differences. In other words, Eliot comes to understand how stereotypes shape the relationship between Mrs. Sen and his mother. Aware of their similarities as well, he challenges the fixed perceptions in their interactions and rejects the sense of otherness that his mother attributes to Mrs. Sen. If the title of the story provides us with the context of focusing on *Mrs. Sen*, as we go through the story, it becomes relatively clear that Eliot is the protagonist of the story. Although the story appears to be about *Mrs. Sen's* liminality or in-betweenness, it actually emphasizes hybridity, which relates to Eliot's readings. Eliot's experience goes further from cultural differentiation to the sameness of alienation, isolation, miscommunication, and misunderstanding. In the end, although the characters live their different monthly lives, they all wrestle with the coldness of their lives.

Lahiri ruptured the stereotyped relationship between Mrs. Sen and her surroundings in the host land and Eliot's mother and a foreigner via a boy who seemed a more reliable narrator for the story. Cultural, racial, and gender-stereotyping was fixedly constructed for adults in the story but not for Eliot, as he seems to see the non-stereotyped elements inherent in human relationships. In *Mrs. Sen's*, Eliot demonstrates that what we often see as difference is, in many respects, an illusion that conceals a greater reality of sameness. Eliot is able to see that neither fully adopting American culture nor living wholly through Indian culture provides him with happiness; thus, in his shopping trips or cooking sessions with Mrs. Sen, Eliot naturally develops his understanding of cultural difference. To fully show how Lahiri is relentless and

at the same time creative in challenging stereotyping, we must read *Mrs. Sen's* alongside other stories: *A Real Durwan*, *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* and *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*.

In *Mrs. Sen's*, Eliot functions as a lens through which Lahiri challenges cultural, racial, and gender stereotyping. While adults in the story often perceive Mrs. Sen through a fixed lens of foreignness —emphasizing her accent, attire, or emotional sensitivity— Eliot gradually perceives her with quiet empathy and emotional clarity. When he notes that Mrs. Sen feels lonely “thousands of miles away” from home while he is only “a few miles from his own,” he begins to understand that displacement is not just geographic but emotional, a universal experience rather than a culturally exclusive one. He grows accustomed to her sari, the smell of her cooking, and her daily rituals, eventually ceasing to view these as markers of difference. Rather than exoticizing her, he connects with her through shared feelings of solitude and quiet observation. His simple statement, “*Eliot felt sorry for Mrs. Sen*” reveals an emotional response unmediated by cultural prejudice, showing that his understanding of human connection surpasses the rigid frameworks adults often impose.

Eliot’s insight deepens as he compares the sensory richness of *Mrs. Sen's* home —filled with the sounds of chopping vegetables, the aroma of spices, and visual cues of tradition— to the sterile, silent environment of his own. This contrast leads him to see beyond surface-level differences, identifying the deeper emotional resonance that unites them. Even at the story’s conclusion, when Eliot declines to stay with Mrs. Sen again, his refusal is not a rejection of her cultural identity but a response to her emotional vulnerability after the car accident. It reflects concern, not judgment. Through Eliot’s evolving perception, Lahiri illustrates that the child’s perspective allows for a more fluid, humane understanding of identity —one that recognizes sameness in the face of apparent difference. In doing so, Lahiri subverts the adult world’s tendency to fix identities within rigid categories, using Eliot to model a more nuanced, relational engagement with cultural hybridity and human connection.

A Real Durwan tells the story of a 64-year-old Boori Ma, migrating from Pakistan to India. Boori Ma, like Mrs. Sen, did not migrate voluntarily or purposefully, but the historical and political situation, which is the partition of India in 1947, forced her to move to Calcutta and become a sweeper and durwan (guard) of the stairwell in an old building in a poor

neighborhood. The story reaches its climax when one of the neighbors, Mr. Dalal, put a basin on the staircase of the building, as it affected the aesthetic appeal of the building entrance and therefore pleased the visitors; what the other neighbors did was spite Mr. Dalal and say: "Is it beyond us to buy sinks of our own?" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 88). Soon, the wives decided to renovate their houses, and so the building became full of workmen. Since there were workmen in the building and Boori Ma was unable to sweep, one afternoon she left the house to wander around. Unfortunately, upon coming back, she understood that the recently installed basin was stolen. Boori Ma was accused by her neighbors of informing the robbers and also being ignorant of her tasks as a door-keeper. After this incident, she was fired.

While one may connect Mrs. Sen with Boori Ma for their forced migration from home, their displacement, and also their restricted life in a new society, the two are connected in terms of their fabricated description of the concept of home. Moreover, the story of Boori Ma challenges the imaginary home which Mrs. Sen portrayed for Eliot. Rumor, gossip, and hostility in the neighborhood are what Mrs. Sen intentionally or unintentionally neglects when talking to Eliot. One probable reason for *Mrs. Sen's* ignorance is the caste system, the stratification of Indians into ethnic or class categorizations, which means that Mrs. Sen has never experienced the lifestyle of the lower class in Calcutta. It shows that though the Indian government officially tried to destroy the caste system in 1949, it still has its influence on Indian society. Even if *Mrs. Sen* and *Boori Ma* are from different classes, the challenging point is that *Mrs. Sen's* idea of home (fictional or not) is merely at the level of her individual experience and not at a more inclusive national level.

Lahiri wisely put these two stories in one collection to show that the imaginary safe and friendly home that Mrs. Sen describes is not the only image of home in India, and there are other narrations of home such as the one told in *A Real Durwan*. Interestingly, in another story titled *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* Lahiri narrates the story of another Indian community whose positive representation depicts a balancing portrayal in *A Real Durwan* (Brada-Williams, 2004). These two narrations of India create a negotiation among Lahiri's short stories. The readers of *Interpreter of Maladies* are presented with balancing depictions of India which shatter but simultaneously complement *Mrs. Sen's* image of home.

While Lahiri depicts *Mrs. Sen's* naïve and stubborn resistance against the host culture, in other stories such as *The Third and Final Continent* she demonstrates how one can create stability by staying in touch with the homeland and simultaneously adapt and intermix with the new values of the host culture. Hybrid identity formation and third space turn migration into a celebratory experience. This third space serves as an occasion to let the characters navigate their identity in the diverging cultures (Baei et al., 2022). Additionally, the mother is well-aware of the importance of the dinner tradition and food-related practices in her national culture (McIntosh & Zey, 1998), as it is vividly obvious in Lilia's description of the dinner her mother prepared for the family.

From the kitchen, my mother carried out a sequence of dishes: lentils topped with fried onions, green beans cooked with coconut, and fish simmered in a yogurt sauce with raisins. I followed, bringing water glasses, a plate of lemon wedges, and chili peppers—bought during monthly trips to Chinatown and kept by the pound in the freezer—which they enjoyed snapping open and crushing into their food.

However, her belonging does not stop her from realizing that it could make her a docile female subject restricted to the conception of Indianness, and so, inevitably, isolation and loneliness will follow. She embraces cultural differences and carves out a new space for herself and her family, taking advantage of the opportunities available. Unlike *Mrs. Sen*, who invests great effort in preparing elaborate meals driven by nostalgia but struggles to create a true sense of home due to her unwillingness to engage with her surroundings, Lilia's mother successfully rebuilds familial and social bonds in a foreign land, helping not only her family but also others to feel at home.

In addition, the young couple in *The Third and Final Continent* stands apart from *Mrs. Sen's* in at least two significant ways. First, the narrator does not experience the sense of alienation in the foreign country. Second, Mala, while she is initially homesick for her family, starts to find ways to interact and adjust to the world she has arrived in. In this way, Mala is a persistent cultural translator, trying to engage with her world, trying to negotiate a form of interaction in a society which seems alien and unfamiliar. From Bhabha's theory of hybridity, the narrator and his wife represent hybrid diasporic subjects whose identities are undergoing

constant processes of translation, resulting in a culturally richer experience. In the context of *Postcolonial Representations* (1995), Lionnet writes about the mechanism that integrates that which contradicts or was once opposed: “All culture... far from being a given, is a result of continual negotiation with the external world, negotiation through which, like a horizon, an identity is affirmed which can only be defined as an ongoing creation” (p. 78).

She argues that any certain culture should not be considered a given, a presupposed concept with predestined values. On the contrary, culture is to arise from continuous contact with outside cultures. In today’s world of mass communication, a culture’s identity is only perceived and acknowledged based on how it is involved in an ongoing, creative process. “Culture can only be conceived of as a condition and consequence of social action, and interaction with the larger world society” (p. 78). This mechanism is exactly what the young couple in *The Third and Final Continent* and Lilia’s family in *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* adopt to adapt and flourish in a new space after migrating.

5. Conclusion

One of the main reasons for the global success of Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* at the beginning of the new century until now is the rotational approach that Lahiri employed to make the readers more involved and active in finding new aspects of each story as they read on, story by story. In fact, Lahiri challenges the readers by bringing forth different opposing aspects of one issue in various stories of the volume. This way, the reader should go forward and then come back in a rotational style to find out new layers of meaning in each story and the collection as a whole. In other words, while Lahiri presents postcolonial concepts and themes in her stories, the way that she presents them is also a sort of postcolonial approach called ‘hybrid storytelling.’ For example, in *Mrs. Sen’s* Eliot feels alone and disconnected, even in his own country, while in *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* Lilia enjoys spending time with her American friends. Lahiri gives a warm, embracing vision of India in *Mrs. Sen’s* and *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar*, but gives a less hospitable vision of belonging in *A Real Durwan*. While Mrs. Sen feels loneliness and isolation, Mala in *The Third and Final Continent* and Lilia’s mother in *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* feel the happiness of new lives on American soil.

The findings of this study suggest that although liminality can be a source of conflict and struggle for the characters, it also fosters the emergence of hybridity—a concept that embraces cultural diversity and the fluid, overlapping boundaries within the Third Space. At the heart of *Interpreter of Maladies* lies this dilemma: characters grapple with the persistent tension between the culture and society they left behind and those they now inhabit. Some resist all cultures other than their own, others readily embrace the new culture they encounter, while some oscillate between their native traditions and the foreign influences around them. What this study offers as a new insight is the way Lahiri's narrative technique itself performs hybridity—not only thematically but structurally—by juxtaposing divergent migrant experiences across multiple stories. This hybrid storytelling foregrounds identity as a process of cultural negotiation rather than a fixed state. Furthermore, by emphasizing gendered and generational dimensions of in-betweenness, the analysis extends Bhabha's theory to show how unhomeliness can be both a site of trauma and a generative space of resilience, especially for women characters like Mrs. Sen. Jhumpa Lahiri, as a postcolonial writer of Indian diaspora and as a cultural interpreter, through a hybrid storytelling illuminates how we should translate the contemporary world by problematizing the limited scope of only one culture and highlighting a better understanding of today's world through the hybrid perspectives of various cultures. Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* suggests that cultures are floating entities, and so are people who are living in them. Future research could explore comparative studies between Lahiri and other diasporic authors—such as Bharati Mukherjee, Mohsin Hamid, or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—especially on themes of gender, generational shifts, and transnational hybridity. Additionally, scholars may investigate how globalization and digital connectivity reshape postcolonial identity formations in later South Asian-American fiction. These directions could further illuminate how hybrid identities continue to evolve under changing socio-cultural and technological conditions.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) certify/certifies that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership,

or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in the present research paper.

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