

## Thinking Global? Local Globalisms and Global Localisms in the Writing of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Gauri Bhat argues that second-generation South Asian-Americans are more aware of their composite heritage than those who migrated previously, because they have been raised with limited connections to an Indian background, without “Hindu temple societies or Hindi Films” (qtd. in Mishra 185). Vijay Mishra believes that it is because of this “vacuum upbringing” that second-generation subjects critically articulate a “struggle to occupy the space of the hyphen, the problematic situating of the self as simultaneously belonging here and there” (185).

Jhumpa Lahiri’s work exemplifies the struggle to occupy this space. Born in London to Bengali parents who subsequently decided to migrate to America, Lahiri was raised on Rhode Island. Her biography makes her an American but English-born author, and potentially an “ABCD” American-Born Confused Desi (an acronym supposedly descriptive of the difficulties experienced by US-born children of Indian parents). She won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 with a collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), and has since published *The Namesake* (2003) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Critical scholarship has focused on Lahiri’s early work, in particular on the first collection of short stories. Among the most authoritative sources are two collections of essays entirely dedicated to the author, edited by Suman Bala and Indira Nityanandam, with the first focusing entirely on the 1999 short stories and the second adding a few pages on *The Namesake*. Although these constitute an important point of departure for the arguments this paper proposes, they do not engage with the subject of hyphenation in Lahiri’s life and work.

As Lahiri herself contends, her texts represent the legacy of belonging to two different worlds: “My writing these days is less a response to my parents’ cultural nostalgia and more an attempt to forge my own amalgamated domain” (qtd. in Bala 178). Her statement corroborates the view (as will be extensively argued in the third section of this article) that diasporic literature is potentially a privileged terrain of hyphenation. By extension, the “amalgamated domain” Lahiri mentions equates to the creation of a performative space, an imaginary homeland, restoring through fictionality what could otherwise be lost. It escapes easy categorisation, yet renders her texts emblematic of an Indian-English-American diasporic sensibility that accommodates two specific urban sites: Calcutta and New York.

Postcolonial London has been at the centre of scholarly debates on the reconfiguration of urban space in diasporic fictions.<sup>1</sup> Such localism has, to a certain extent, reasserted the centrality of the English capital as the old metropolitan heart of Empire. Yet it has failed to capture the increasing mobility that defines both the characters of diasporic texts and their authors. Lahiri's writing presents itself as a counter-hegemonic account of reconfigured transnational urbanism, defying the centrality of both Britain and the US. For instance, in *The Namesake*, the author's own autobiographical passage from the UK to the US is reflected in the fact that a number of characters experience brief encounters with a decaying English culture (as will be discussed in the following section). And, as a multigenerational narrative, *The Namesake* shows that despite the lack of a direct US imperial colonial history relating to the Indian subcontinent, there is no easy process of conformation to American lifestyles.

The paper will subsequently focus on the specificities of the author's writing, notably the utilisation of a choral narrative that epitomizes a particular kind of diasporic subjectivity. I will argue that the narrator's androgynous perspective in *The Namesake* problematizes the traditional process of identity construction. Here Western individualism is fragmented by a double narrative represented respectively by parents who locate belonging within the domestic space and children who appropriate sections of the city (as will be discussed in the third section). An ongoing dialogue between interior and exterior space is articulated in the narrative through an emphasis on food, as an important marker of the local and global practices involved in transnational urbanism.

*The Namesake* is the story of a family over a period of two decades. It revolves around Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli's settlement in the US; their relationship with their US-born children, Gogol and Sonia; and their attempt "to lay claim upon a patch of foreign land" without losing contact with their Indian heritage (51). The novel revolves around two major events: Ashoke's death and Gogol's consequent reconciliation with his Indian heritage. Although *The Namesake* is an account of Indian settlement in America spanning two generations, parents and children do not here ultimately present opposing narratives. The accounts of the parents, Ashima and Ashoke, are complemented by those of the children, Gogol and Sonia. They form a continuum which contributes to the novel's capacity to encapsulate both the past and the present in order to assess critically the ongoing implications of a diasporic process of identity construction in the US.

The narrative posits a dialectical story of identity construction, taking into consideration old and new histories. Here Moushumi, a second-generation child born to Bengali parents, now living in New York, tells Gogol how her family felt when they moved from the UK to the US:

She speaks with nostalgia of the years her family had spent in England, living at first in London, which she barely remembers, and then in a brick semidetached house in Croydon. She describes the narrow house, the gas fireplaces, the dank

odour of the bathrooms [...] she tells him that she had hated moving to America, that she had held on to her British accent for as long as she could. For some reason, her parents feared America, much more than England, perhaps because of its vastness, or perhaps because in their minds it had less of a link to India. (212)

This passage illustrates not only the multigenerational character of *The Namesake* but also a revelatory view of Indian immigration in Britain and the United States. The switching of tenses, present and past, suggests the multi-layered temporal dimension of the narrative that encapsulates the “here” and “then” pertaining respectively to children and parents. Differences between immigration in the US and the UK are represented by the “link”/legacies of colonialism to which Moushumi refers. Her parents, like the majority of early South Asian migrants to Britain, recall a contradictory feeling whereby early migrants to London both identify with and reject British culture. Applied to the reconfigurations of urban space, this translates into what I call a combination of “top down” and “bottom up” perspectives on the city.<sup>2</sup> While the first term describes a process of identification with the solidity of the icons of London that reflects a “pedagogical vision of the nation,” the latter encapsulates more subjective/individual attempts to reconceptualize its monumentality.<sup>3</sup> In other words, while the first migrants to Britain might have identified with the iconography of the capital that they found familiar, simultaneous tactics of reconceptualising the city as lived space inevitably occurred.

By contrast, the US, lacking a history of imperial subjugation on the Indian subcontinent, represents an unknown territory for migrating Indians. As Shukla points out, “the absence of a colonial history in the relationship between Indian and American cultures [...] means that Indians migrate with less detailed imaginative maps” (163). Free of the weighty legacies of the strained relationships between colonizer and colonized, Indians have experienced a kind of freedom that was denied in Britain; a sentiment further corroborated by the relatively liberal character of US immigration policy. This liberalism was underpinned by economic growth, stimulated by the New Deal and Second World War in the Forties and the post-war materialistic boom of the Fifties and Sixties. Roosevelt and Truman’s expansion of the Federal government’s intervention into social welfare and employment marked the beginning of two decades of liberal reform that “imbued the United States with a sense of purpose, unity and dynamism” (Brendon 231). During the 1960s and 70s and for some time afterwards, the US offered political freedoms and economic opportunities which attracted a vast number of people, whose entrance to the country was facilitated by an open door immigration policy. Indeed, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act led to a “wave” of Indian immigration into the US. While Britain was enforcing more restrictive entry requirements, the US presented opportunities for social mobility and an alternative to post-imperial society.

Employability ratios in the mid 1960s also testified to the diverse participation of South Asians in the respective economies: while in the UK they were predominantly engaging in unskilled manual labor in the industrial cities, in the US they occupied large sectors of medicine and

engineering. Joanna Lessinger argues that the most visible migrants of Indian origin in the US today are those who arrived after 1965 (169). Unsurprisingly, a study of their social composition reveals they are highly educated, well qualified and willing to invest in good schooling for their children in the host country (Brown 54). When asked about the primary motivation for leaving India, they answered that it was due to the hope of finding economic advancement in the host country (61). In particular, as Lessinger reports, a number of South Asians who arrived in the United States between 1965 and 1980 cited “money, increased earning power and access to consumer goods as their motivations for leaving India” (171).

This is echoed in Lahiri’s texts, which present a vast gallery of characters migrating to the US between 1965 and 1980. In *The Namesake*, Ashoke’s initial years in America are marked by his professional achievements: “the job is everything Ashoke has ever dreamed of. He has always hoped to teach in a university” (49). He is enthused by “the thrill of teaching: what a sense of accomplishment it gives him to see his name printed under ‘Faculty’ in the university directory” (49). In the short story “Only Goodness,” Rahul, a second-generation expatriate, expresses his resentment for not being able to find his “self,” for being an outcast rejected by society, towards his parents, who “dragged [him] [to the US]” (*Unaccustomed Earth* 138). He blames his father’s greed for forcing the rest of the family to shift location: “Baba left India to get rich” (138). The same applies to “Hell-Heaven,” narrated from the perspective of a second generation Indian-American who recalls the story of her parents’ migration to the US (60-84). Through the often critical lens of second-generation Asian-Americans, Lahiri unveils the mundane aspects that exerted a “pull” on Indian immigration.

Despite their overarching optimism about their future in the US, Ashoke and Ashima remain troubled by questions of belonging. In particular, Ashima after Gogol’s birth feels that “being a foreigner [...] is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts” (90). Spending the majority of time at home, with no connections with her previous life in Calcutta, Ashima struggles to keep the family’s Indian heritage alive. The first-generation immigrant creates an island into which the host culture is only partially allowed to intrude. Ashima’s work at home is totally focused and dependent upon her family. Ties with the Indian culture are established through the perpetuation of traditions and rituals alongside gatherings with her Bengali friends. Whenever Ashoke and Ashima have to make an important decision, they consult the members of their community: “each step, each acquisition, no matter how small, involves deliberation, consultation with Bengali friends” (64). The fear of losing their identity makes them hold on to their group and culture. This cultural isolation is countered by the children’s “Americanisation.” For Gogol, burgers, tuna sandwiches and Christmases are more appealing than Indian food and Durga Puja.

However, the death of Ashoke instigates a return to Gogol’s Indian roots. Shubha Singh’s study of the sociological impact of Indian

diasporic formations in the US offers an insightful perspective on the process of selective assimilation of second generations. It traces the rebellious attitudes of children to their parents in the early stages of life and contrasts this with the progressive sense of affiliation they develop as they grow older: “emotional associations linger on among migrant communities. The ties may lie dormant for years till an event or memory activates them” (49). As Pravin Sheth also concludes,

The formation or reconstruction of Indian identity has to be an on-going process. Identity has to be constructed by what one inherits as well as by what one has to struggle to make of oneself. The cultural baggage brought by the first generation has to be checked, irrelevant of unessential items ... and new ones need to be added to make life purposeful and relevant to the ethos of the adopted land. (427)

What follows will focus on the role of fiction as an intensification of reality. I will argue that Lahiri’s work presents an androgynous perspective with a prevalent female component, providing a focalisation point that converges on domestic space. Following on from this contention, I will explore the dialectic sustained between “inside” and outside space as an important maker of the local and global practices involved in transnational urbanism.

I suggest that by thinking retrospectively about her familial memories, Lahiri as a second-generation Indian expatriate “checks her cultural baggage” and disposes of the irrelevant items. As I have pointed out in the first introductory section, Lahiri is keen to explore her “amalgamated domain”: the world of her parents in the past and her world in the present. It is primarily through a recuperation of her parents’ past that she recreates India. Arguing that second generation South Asian writers experience a version of the Indian subcontinent primarily through their parental memories, this paper will focus on Lahiri’s writing as exemplary of “the space of the hyphen” (Mishra 185). As Nasser Hussain puts it:

Hyphens are radical ambivalent signifiers for they simultaneously connect and set apart; they simultaneously represent both belonging and not belonging. What is even more curious about a hyphenated pair of words is that the meaning cannot reside in one word or the other, but can only be understood in movement. (qtd. in Visweswaran 118)

By extension, the use of the hyphen conveys the idea of a movement that both “connects” and “sets apart” India and the US. Such a (dis)placing can be articulated in fiction, as a space where tensions are (ideally) accommodated and (sometimes) resolved. According to Bakhtin, every narrative has spatio-temporal coordinates. These, which he terms chronotopes—artistic visualisations of different spatial-temporal dimensions—“are mutually inclusive, they coexist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another or find themselves in ever more complex relationships [...] The general characteristic of [such] interactions is that they are dialogical” (“Forms of Time” 252). Therefore, in the same narrative, different spatial-temporal dimensions can simultaneously be present and can establish “complex relationships” through a dialogical encounter with each other.

Lahiri's writing establishes a dialogical relationship between the chronotope of the North and the chronotope of the South.<sup>4</sup> New York and Calcutta in *The Namesake* are places whose historicity is intensified by fictionality. The subtext of the novel, Nikolai Gogol's short story, "The Overcoat," enhances this process. It narrates the story of Akaky Akakievich, an unremarkable miserly clerk forced to buy a new coat (115). After managing to secure himself some money through much sacrifice, Akaky purchases his coat but, following a party organized by one of his colleagues to celebrate his new acquisition, it is stolen. Soon afterwards, he dies of grief. Akaky takes his revenge by appearing as a ghost and stealing other people's coats. His appearances manage to change the past and the way he was regarded when he was alive, simultaneously changing the present.

The citation of the short story throughout *The Namesake* metonymically indicates Lahiri's project of "connecting" and "setting apart" past and the present, the chronotope of the North and of the South, and the accounts of the parents and those of the children. These competing accounts are unified by the presence of the author, who continually organizes the characters' thoughts by elevating the narration to a superior level of representation. However, the novel is not simply embedded within naturalistic modes of representation, for its apparent linearity is disrupted by the intervention of multifarious accounts provided by the individual characters. This practice has been termed "third-person-centre-of-consciousness technique," a narrative mode that while presenting the characters' consciousness, according to their individual idioms, is cast into an authorial voice which is independent of the characters themselves (Ayers 100). In *The Namesake*, this technique provides an insight into the different characters' stories, and—more implicitly—into Lahiri's own experience as an Indian expatriate.

Here, individual stories are unified by a common sense of displacement experienced by the members of the family:

Though they are at home, they are disconcerted by the space, by the uncompromising silence that surrounds them. They still feel somehow in transit, still disconnected from their lives, bound up in an alternate schedule, an intimacy only the four of them share. (*Namesake* 68)

The Gangulis, returning home from a long trip to Calcutta, unanimously feel both separate from and connected to each other: the four of them "share an intimacy" that the narrator describes in her own idiom, whilst partaking of their individual thoughts. By recording the individual characters' stories, the narrative is channelled towards the telling of a unified set of events, thus assuming the connotation of a choral account. Here, the multigenerational character of the novel resides in the emphasis on the family, the nucleus around which Lahiri creates a number of universal yet peculiar stories.

These familial relationships, which constitute the crux of the narration, are predominantly reconstructed around the mother figure, Ashima. The emphasis on matriarchy is exemplary of the prevalence in the narrative of a particular kind of female subjectivity. Virginia

Woolf, discussing female writing in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), asserts that women writers "[think] back through [their] mothers" (112). Although she assigns a particular role to women's capacity to construct their narratives through matriarchal memories, Woolf also advocates androgynous creativity. This produces something of a contradiction, in that Woolf still privileges an inherited "feminine" perspective. Lahiri equally presents a familial account through a female lens and her writing can also be considered illustrative of the kind of androgynous creativity Woolf discusses. This is reflected in the way her narrators "traverse" all the bodies, typifying each character, while still carrying the peculiarity of a female subjectivity. As I have explained above, Lahiri's narrators present different characters' voices; they pass through the lenses of the diverse personalities, while still echoing her own individual voice.

Gayatri Gopinath's controversial essay "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion" is necessary to clarify my argument here. Gopinath suggests an interesting connection between gender and space. She argues that nationhood is constructed through domestic and familial metaphors traditionally associated with womanhood. As she puts it, "women's bodies, then, become crucial to nationalistic discourse in that they serve not only as the site of biological reproduction but as the very embodiment of a nostalgically evoked communal past and tradition" (138). Gopinath creates an explicit link between queer female diasporic subjectivities and the abnegation of traditional concepts of national belonging and affiliation. In her view, women possess an ability to reconfigure notions of national affiliation. As the repositories of concepts traditionally associated with nationhood, women can reshape "the confines" of rigid "identities" (138).

In *The Namesake* this results in an emphasis on domestic routine whereby Indian food and cooking are assigned a primary role. Ashima's meticulous concoctions encapsulate Lahiri's representation of India from abroad: an imagined world but one underpinned by a strong sensory dimension. The domestic environment is delineated by the savouring and preparation of different dishes:

Ashima sets out the paper plates that have to be tripled to hold the weight of the biryani, the carp in the yogurt sauce, the dal, the six different vegetable dishes she'd spent the past week preparing. (39)

In addition, food provides a way to interact with the outside world, evidenced by Ashima's numerous errands in Boston to buy ingredients for her culinary experiments. The emphasis on food also underpins the majority of the short stories contained in *Interpreter of Maladies*. In "Mrs Sen," Lahiri describes the daily life of a female Indian expatriate in Boston. Based on the eponymous character, the story revolves around the protagonist's attempts to find "a home." Mrs Sen is married to a Professor of Mathematics from Calcutta and spends the majority of her time in the house preparing food, and babysitting for an American five-year-old boy, Eliot. The narrative develops through an authorial voice that is refracted through each character's idiom, and

presents an overall fusion of minds and spaces, notably in the domestic environment inhabited by Mrs Sen and the outside world inhabited by Eliot. Both worlds are marked by quotidian and menial chores, where buying fish, chopping vegetables and combining spices are described as essential rituals to keep connections with India alive.

If the entropic or restricted domestic dimension of urban space is traditionally associated with a dystopic retreat from historicity, the escape “outdoors” tends to be read as symptomatic of a direct response to contingency, and represents a crux of interactions with the outside world.<sup>5</sup> Food becomes the correlative object of this process. As Turgeon and Pastinelli put it:

Eating evokes a process whereby space is compressed and miniaturised as food moves from the field to the market to the home, and then onto the table, the plate and the palate [...] Eating puts the outside world into the body [...] As well as producing a geographical inversion (the outside in), food consumption brings about a physical conversion (the inside changes the outside). These close associations between the biological, the geographical and cultural domains are what make food so effective in essentialising identities and domesticating space. (251)

The constant articulation of the dialectic between the interior and the exterior generates sites where the dynamics of the outside world are expressed through the enactment of the cultural practices of everyday life (Appadurai 55). As a result, the association of food with domestic routine constitutes an important facet in a study on transnational urbanism. In discussing the “social mix” of cities such as New York and London, Judith Brown observes that South Asians are making their most obvious cultural mark in the culinary domain, with the “Indian” restaurant and “take away curry” progressively becoming a “worldwide phenomenon” and consequently shaping the geography of the Western cities (145). Shukla suggests that “it is impossible to think of London and New York without acknowledging either the populations themselves or the foods, art or music of India as being integral to the social mix” (82). These enclaves of Indianness have been shaped by global economic development and shifting patterns of immigration. For instance, in the 1960s, New York and London experienced the transition from deindustrialisation to a service based economy. This process has contributed to the need to cater in these cities for the needs of different cultural constituencies. It is in this context that world/global cities have acquired the connotation of places of consumption of goods. Among such goods, food constitutes an important place of cultural encounter within the city. Thus, Jackson Heights in New York has been defined as an urban locality with translocal significations:

It exists as a place with goods to offer residents and visitors. These veritable market places, replete with Indian restaurants, food stores and sari stores, beauty salons, record stores [...] evoke images [...] through which India as a fantasy is made ‘real’. Indians meet there, eat there, and buy and sell there, and essentially perform an Indianness that functions to consolidate their migrant subjectivities. (Shukla 84)



In *The Namesake*, although Ashima and Ashoke are associated predominantly with the domestic domain, their trips to Queens, or Lexington Avenue, considered as the “Little Indias” of New York, are necessary to maintain contacts with the Indian community, where they eat and buy provisions (127). Food then represents an important marker of the reconfigurations of Indian diasporic existence which, according to Shukla, can be considered as a way to express “global belonging” in the form of “self and group representation” (8).

Food is one part of a wider process. The selective disposal and acquisition of root and host culture means that self and group representation tends to globalize the local and localize the global. In *The Namesake*, the first tendency is manifested in Ashoke’s and Ashima’s perspective, the second in Gogol’s. This bipartition, which opposes the parents’ domain to the children’s field of agency, is primarily functional. Thus, for example, when Ashima and Ashoke refer to New York in a conversation with Gogol, they speak of their dislike towards the city, as there are “too many cars [...] too many tall buildings” (149). In other words, New York epitomizes the fear of getting lost. Yet getting lost and forgetting about the past constitute the reasons for Gogol’s move to New York. Lower and mid Manhattan represent Gogol’s initial fields of agency, as demonstrated by his apartment on “Amsterdam Avenue,” and his numerous excursions to Tribeca and to Ninth and Tenth Avenues (126-127, 130). The character’s movements within New York describe an itinerary which covers the most affluent areas of the city. These parts correspond to de Certeau’s Concept-City, “the geometrical or geographical space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions” (97). Comparing the movements of city dwellers to speech acts, de Certeau argues that the Concept-City does not offer the opportunity to write a personal grammar of space, as its practitioners are trapped by the “panoptic certainties” it deploys. By extension, Gogol’s movements within the Concept-City, despite their putative agency, ensnare him in an initial assimilation to American conformist models. If American assimilation does not constitute a model to embrace, Indian essentialist notions of culture are equally rejected. This applies also to Ashima, who gradually acknowledges that she belongs to both worlds.

This condition of being “resident everywhere and nowhere” objectifies the trauma of displacement (*Namesake* 276). Lahiri’s narrators and characters unanimously share the “maladies of exile,” a sense of dislocation which derives from belonging neither to one place nor the other. This motif, informing Lahiri’s macro-text, is clearest in her first collection of short stories. Based on the third story, the title effectively summarizes the implications of the author’s writing: there is a sense in which all the characters are interpreters and work across languages to cure and articulate their feeling of displacement. Thus, in the short story “The Interpreter of Maladies,” Mr Kapasi, in addition to his part time job as a tour guide, works in a doctor’s clinic to translate the Gujarati spoken by his patients. On one of his guided trips to Kornak he meets Mrs Das, an Indian American woman who tells him the story of her life. Married with two children, she confesses her

unhappiness about her conjugal life to Mr Kapasi, who feels that her malaise derives from a sense of loss, from her perception of an irreversible condition of recuperation of the past. It is Mr Kapasi who is endowed with the ability to articulate this feeling, in a voice that resembles Lahiri's when she claims "I translate; therefore I am" (qtd. in Nityanandam 24). What the author is attempting to translate in her writing is further elucidated in the following statement:

[...] I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents [...] I am so much more American than they are. In fact it is still very hard to think of myself as an American [...] The problem for the children of immigrants, those with the strong ties to their country of origin is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. (qtd in Nityanandam 187)

Feeling "neither one thing nor the other" also constitutes the recurrent trope of *Unaccustomed Earth*. In the first story, which gives its title to the collection, Ruma, a second-generation expatriate, has moved from New York to Seattle. She is married and has a child. After her mother's sudden death, Ruma is scarred by a perpetual sense of loss and tries to cure herself through an assessment of her life. The absence of her mother is, like the homeland, a constant presence.

In *The Namesake*, the death of Ashoke similarly becomes a permanent presence in Gogol's life:

The train tilts to the left heading south to New York, to the right on the way to Boston. In that brief period of suggested peril, he thinks always, of that other train he has never seen, the one that had nearly killed his father. (185)

Here Gogol connects the present to his father's past: the journey on the train reminds him of another journey his father undertook when he was still living in Calcutta. On that particular occasion, Ashoke was travelling from Calcutta to Agra when the train derailed and most of the passengers were killed in their sleep. Ashoke, who stayed awake because he was reading Gogol's "The Overcoat," managed to survive. When the rescuers arrived, Ashoke, although unable to speak, could attract their attention by waving a copy of the short story. In an act of homage and recognition, he names his son after the Ukrainian writer. This is a story that he only tells his son days before he suddenly dies of a heart attack, by which time Gogol is calling himself by the name of Nikhil. Thus the content of Gogol the author's short story directs the threads of the narration. As does the ghost of Akaky in "The Overcoat," Ashoke returns to haunt Gogol, who can only then recuperate his past or "establish a link between past and present" (Bakhtin, "The *Bildungsroman*" 37). In so doing, the character positions himself in a liminal space between Calcutta and New York.

This process of self-liminalisation also redirects Gogol's itineraries within New York onto other trajectories: it instigates an exploration of the Metaphorical City, or what de Certeau terms "the mapping of a personal space":

[...] Craving the food [he]'d grown up eating, [he] ride[s] the train out to Queens [to] have brunch at Jackson Diner, piling [his] plates with tandoori chicken and

pakorras and kebabs, and shop afterward for basmati rice and the spices that need replenishing. (*Namesake* 229)

After his father's death, Gogol starts frequenting other areas of New York, where he can better perform his Indianness. The exploration of sites other than what de Certeau calls the Concept-City corresponds to Gogol's reassessment of his past. Queens, one of the three boroughs of New York City, represents an urban locality with translocal significations "as a market place with goods to offer residents and visitors"; it also "functions to consolidate [...] migrant subjectivities" (Shukla 84). Gogol frequents these enclaves of Indianness in order to eat "the food [he]'d grown up eating." Food again constitutes one of the main localisms Lahiri uses to endow her narrative with a sensory representation of India; it also reconstitutes the link between Ashoke/Ashima and Gogol.

These narratives of parents and their children reflect the heterogeneous composition of a diasporic existence, as well as the tendency to express global and self-belonging in the form both of local globalisms and global localisms. While parents in Lahiri's fiction tend to sanitize Indian culture and delocalize it, children are often charged with the task of localising their existence in a global environment. Together, they give the narratives a multi-generational dimension. Supposedly opposing narratives actually describe a common sense of displacement, and are reunited by a narrator/empirical author who is in turn trying to locate herself. While presenting the distinctive stories of parents and children, the multigenerational character of the novel displays an ability to encapsulate past and present, South and North, local and global.

Literature constitutes a privileged terrain for this process of hyphenation, as is evidenced by Lahiri's assertion that it provides the means by which she can forge "her amalgamated domain." *The Namesake* concludes with Gogol reading "The Overcoat," deferring once again to the potential of fiction and suggesting that arrival is "a textual process" (Doring 71):

Gogol is anxious to return to his room, to be alone, to read the book he had once forsaken, has abandoned until now. Until moments ago, it was destined to disappear from his life...for now he starts to read. (*Namesake* 278)

The short story, which had previously been consigned to oblivion by Gogol, now provides him with the means to establish a "link between past and present" (Bakhtin, "The *Bildungsroman*" 37). The same link is reflected in the short story itself, as it concerns the transformation of the miserly clerk from a lonely skinflint immersed in a tedious mundane job to a suddenly popular, joyous human being and finally to a ghost haunting passers-by.<sup>6</sup> On an allegorical level, the overcoat in the story, like the reconfigurations of home I have discussed, can be restored and "amended" through fictionality.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Ball and McLeod.
2. Adapted from Ball: "Homi Bhabha's distinction between the pedagogical and the performative also negotiates a version of this contrast between the top down prescription of history, precedent, and authority on the one hand and emergent, bottom-up use on the other" (206).
3. The phrase "pedagogical vision of the nation" combines postcolonial and Bakhtinian theory. It refers to the fixities of the nation in terms of myths, legends and folklore. These constitute crystallized notions of belonging to a particular place. See Bhabha 208; Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 25.
4. I am utilising the terms North and South to indicate respectively erstwhile colonizing and colonized countries, in order to avoid confusion with the Cold War division of the communist and capitalist blocks or an inference of subordination of one area to the other. As Brennan points out, the locution East/West "[asserts] an imperial divide of race and civilization conquest. To say, for example, that 'East is East and West is West' is to assume the sort of non communication among human types that has a long tradition in the work of Rudyard Kipling and of E. M. Foster and of empire" (39).
5. I mean this in the sense that dystopian realities are generally associated with a restriction of the characters' movements. See, for example Winston Smith in *1984* (1948), D-503 in *We* (1920). M. Ridda, "A Kind of India Happens Everywhere" (Diss. University of Kent, 2011), p. 55.
6. Like New York in *The Namesake*, Gogol's St Petersburg shifts at each stage of this progress: from a cold and unfortunate place for the "miser" to a bright fun-filled city for his new overcoat persona.

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