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Author Details:

1. Ph.D. Candidtae, Department of English Language and Literature, Borujerd Branch, Islamic Azad University, Borujerd, Iran.
faranak_shahmoradi@yahoo.com

2. Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Borujerd Branch, Islamic Azad University, Borujerd, Iran. (Corresponding Author)
bzarrinjooee@yahoo.com

Trans-Cultural Discourse: Displacement and Immigration in Selected Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

Faranak Shahmoradi¹; Bahman Zarrinjooee^{2*}

Abstract: The migration of Indians to various destinations during the past few decades has led to the emergence of a group of writers known as Asian-American authors in literature. These writers, including immigrant women from India spanning the first and second generations, have crafted a substantial collection of short fiction. Jhumpa Lahiri, a Bengali-Indian writer, explores themes of identity, belonging, displacement, and the challenges of straddling different cultural attitudes in *Interpreter of Maladies*. This article adopts a theoretical approach and utilizes the library research method, drawing on the insights of scholars such as Stuart Hall and Michael Ryan, to explore cultural displacement, identity, and the experiences of immigrants in a new multicultural environment. The central focus is to know how Lahiri addresses displacement and immigration through trans-cultural discourses while challenging cultural diversities in *Interpreter of Maladies*. By employing such a trans-cultural discourse, this study aims to analyze how Lahiri portrays the complexities of cultural differences, and identity formation in the context of immigration. The narratives in *Interpreter of Maladies* offer a rich tapestry of characters navigating the challenges of living between cultures, shedding light on the profound impact of displacement on individuals and families. By closely examining Lahiri's storytelling techniques and character development, this article aims to illuminate how the author captures the nuances of trans-cultural experiences and the facts that ultimately put their impact on the formation of immigrants' new identities in unfamiliar territories.

Keywords: Displacement; Identity Formation; Immigration; Jhumpa Lahiri; *Interpreter of Maladies*; Trans-Cultural Discourse.

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1. Introduction

Human history is characterized by the continual movement of people across geographical boundaries for various reasons such as personal aspirations, economic opportunities, or political instabilities. These migrations have often resulted in the exchange of cultures as individuals introduce their traditions into new territories, encountering and sometimes conflicting with the established norms of their host communities. As populations grew and local cultures took root, these migrations contributed to cultural exchanges, as newcomers brought their traditions while encountering those of their new homelands. This often led to significant cultural disparities and trans-cultural discourses between immigrants and native populations. Hence, the migration of people and cultures encounters challenges in new and established cultures, particularly in regions where Eastern and Western cultures intersect.

Jhumpa Lahiri, originally named Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, was born on July 11, 1967, in London, England, and has emerged as a prominent American Indian author celebrated for her compelling works of fiction, including short stories and novels. Lahiri's parents had migrated to London before the family moved to the United States. Her narratives depict the transnational aspects of migration, encompassing the acculturation processes, the challenges of inhabiting cultural borderlands, and the crucial task of establishing a new, transformed identity through encounters with diverse cultural discourses. Rachel Trousdale states that Lahiri's fiction is "based not on the location of their roots but on a shared willingness to reach beyond them" (194). Hence, her characters are willing to move beyond their cultural backgrounds and explore new experiences. Her fiction serves as a platform to examine the nuanced experiences of individuals straddling different cultural frameworks and the negotiations required to forge a sense of self within these transnational spaces.

This article examines the challenges of immigrants by using Lahiri's selected stories to illustrate how these issues resonate within her fictional realm and the broader globalized world. For that purpose, Stuart Hall's postmodernist sociological theories and approach to examining issues of identity are aligned with Ryan's exploration of the interplay between human culture and the environment. Hall's notion of identity is influenced by historical and social contexts that echo Ryan's assertion that culture is shaped by and shapes the world around us. Their perspectives provide valuable insights into navigating cultural challenges in multicultural societies. These perspectives offer insights into the complexities of cultural differences, and displacement in transforming

identity. They discuss the fluidity of cultural identity, multicultural affiliations, and the impact of historical and social factors on shaping identity, particularly in the context of displacement and immigration.

To achieve these objectives, the study will address the following questions: How does Lahiri depict cultural differences? What are the enduring effects of trans-cultural discourse in Lahiri's literary oeuvre? How can Lahiri create trans-cultural discourses to illustrate the themes of displacement and immigration in transforming identity in her fiction? By answering these questions, this article aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of the cultural exchange, identity formation, and the challenges immigrants face in navigating the intersections of various cultural frameworks.

2. Literature Review

Lahiri's works have been explored from diverse perspectives by critics and researchers, who have examined her fiction through various approaches and methodologies. The critiques on *Interpreter of Maladies* mostly focus on themes such as communication and miscommunication, ecological awareness, female subaltern, love and relationships, loneliness and isolation, nostalgia, tradition and modernity, trauma, postcolonialism, and spaces of ethnicity.

A detailed examination of Lahiri's works, as edited by Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung in the book *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies* (2012), offers a multifaceted examination of Lahiri's literary works. The nine essays presented in this volume demonstrate the multilayered nature of Lahiri's fiction, challenging simplistic categorizations. As the editors note, the essays "shed light on both universal dimensions of human experience [...] South Asian American, and Asian American politics" (xii). This intertextual and cross-cultural nature of her narratives is a valuable contribution, as it helps to situate her work within predefined literary canons. The subsequent chapters provide a historically grounded analysis of the postcolonial condition and the pervasive melancholy experienced by the Asian American community.

Alireza Farahbakhsh and Rezvaneh Ranjbar Sheykhani's article "A Study of the Concept of the Subaltern in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*" (2019) seeks to explore the concept of the subaltern in the life of the main characters through the theoretical frameworks of Gayatri Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha. They indicate that immigration alters the identities of first-generation immigrants and their children. They also suggest that having a blended and hybrid identity can empower marginalized individuals and allow

them to feel a sense of ownership and connection within their new cultural environment, ultimately becoming their true ‘selves’ in this new cultural context. This analysis examines how Lahiri’s characters embody identity, power, and agency complexities within their culturally diverse contexts.

Moussa Pourya Asl, in his article titled “Canons and Controversies: The Critical Gaze on Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction” (2019), explores the body of literature and debates that lay the foundation for understanding and contextualizing Lahiri’s writings within a broader conversation on ethno-racial identity. The literature under scrutiny addresses pivotal themes such as the reception of Lahiri’s works by the public, the complexities of labeling a diasporic writer, the reliability of Lahiri as a presumed authority on knowledge, her stance on assimilation/Americanization, her narratives as conduits of cultural and human wisdom, and her depiction of characters from diverse racial backgrounds. The fact that Lahiri depicts details of Indian culture and environment serves as substantial evidence that she is representing the ethnic group.

Ahmad Reza Rahimi and Shideh Ahmadzadeh Heravi in their article, “A Study of Trauma in Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘A Temporary Matter’” (2024) examine how the stillbirth of a child in the story is interpreted as a traumatic event, shaping the characters’ actions and relationship. They explore Cathy Caruth’s theories to emphasize that trauma often leaves individuals unprepared and struggling to comprehend the full impact of the experience. The characters struggle with the grief and the recurring nature of trauma, reliving the incident as they try to gain a comprehensive understanding. According to the authors, “To overcome the impact of trauma, the mind repeatedly revisits the event, allowing the individual to experience the traumatic event multiple times to achieve a thorough understanding and comprehension of the incident” (65). The story unfolds like a puzzle, with each piece contributing to reconstructing the full picture of the traumatic event, echoing Caruth’s idea that repeated engagement with the trauma is crucial for healing and comprehension.

In her dissertation titled, “Exploring Childhood and Maturity in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*” (2011), Kelly Cynthia Park examines themes of sexuality, geography, struggle, and hope that transcend boundaries and connect to a universal human experience. Lahiri’s exploration of childhood and maturity challenges traditional conceptions, offering insights into personal growth and understanding that resonate with readers of all ages. The narrative, being concluded with reflections on life’s complexities, encourages growth and a deeper understanding of the human journey.

Ramona Alice Bran, in her dissertation titled “Immigration: ‘A Lifelong Pregnancy’? An Analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction” (2014), examines Lahiri’s main works using Homi Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridization, cultural translation, and third space. Bran believes that characters’ “attempts to establish a coherent sense of self are made more cumbersome by the fact that they must harmonize the Bengali upbringing they receive” (320). This suggests that the future of ethnic literature may lie in narratives that provide protagonists with hybrid identities.

In his Ph.D. dissertation, titled “Diasporic Discourses in the Fictions of Jhumpa Lahiri” (2015), Andalib Ferdous seeks to explore themes like assimilation, exile, in-betweenness, and hybridity, offering a deeper insight into Lahiri’s role as a literary ambassador of the Indian diaspora. Ferdous explores the thematic and narrative elements in the literary works of Lahiri, particularly the short story collections *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*. Ferdous believes Lahiri’s “writings are filled with details of traditional Indian names, food descriptions, recipes, Indian dressing styles and rituals” (34). In his analysis, the researcher argues that Lahiri’s literary works are imbued with a rich tapestry of Indian cultural elements, serving as a literary preservation and celebration of the ancestral heritage of the diaspora.

This study seeks to address a gap in the literature by specifically exploring the complex interplay of cultural displacement and immigration within Lahiri’s work, focusing on the challenges of trans-cultural discourse. The aim is to provide an understanding of how individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds interact and manage the intricacies of trans-cultural discourse portrayed in Lahiri’s narratives. Through this analysis, the study aims to illuminate the profound impact of cultural displacement on identity formation and the experiences of immigrants within the context of Lahiri’s selected stories.

3. Theoretical Framework: Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies, a broad and multi-layered interdisciplinary field that emerged in the post-war years, represents a specific approach to cultural analysis. It encompasses theories, critiques, methodologies, and interpretations from diverse humanities and social sciences fields. Cultural studies explore how culture is created, maintained, shared, and influenced concerning power dynamics, social structures, and factors such as identity, class, ethnicity, location, gender, power, race, ideology, nationality, and similar aspects. Additionally, cultural studies explores the complexities of identity, representation, and meaning-making within different cultural contexts.

While overseeing the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), Stuart Hall (1932-2014) made numerous substantial methodological and theoretical advancements. Linda Steiner states that Hall saw “cultural studies as a noisy array of unstable, fluid formations with multiple trajectories [...]. Hall (1992) correctly described cultural studies as constructed by many methodologies and eclectic theoretical positions” (109). Steiner thinks that Hall saw cultural studies as a diverse and continually developing field comprising a range of methodologies and theoretical viewpoints. In his work *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History* (2016), Hall contends that culture is a fundamental element in shaping and understanding society which deviates from the traditional anthropological perspective. He describes culture as something, “which is exceedingly slippery, vague, and amorphous, with multifarious and diverse meanings” (4). He defines culture as a shared meaning, through which people can make sense of and give meaning to the world. Hall, in “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,” explains cultural studies as “a serious enterprise or project, and that is inscribed in what is sometimes called the ‘political’ aspect of cultural studies” (262). He emphasizes its significance as a rigorous scholarly pursuit with important political undertones and implications.

After proposing the metaphor of ‘wrestling with the angels’ to illustrate his engagement with theory. He emphasized that valuable theory requires challenging and defending, rather than one that is spoken fluently with profound expertise. His reception theory “Theory of Encoding and Decoding” (1973), challenged the dominant humanities theories and reasoned that culture was a much more abstract, complex, and fluid term, requiring the resolution of multiple elements within society to be understood. Hall, in “Introduction to Media Studies at the Centre,” states that media circulate and solidify “dominant ideological definitions and representations” (118). Media play a significant role in shaping perceptions of what is considered deviant; and therefore, unacceptable as opposed to what is deemed valuable. CCCS departed from the simplistic idea of a passive audience, focusing instead on exploring how various audiences with diverse social and political viewpoints interpret messages.

In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall concentrates on the issues of cultural identity. He discusses that it is not only a matter of being, and comments on the issue as:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process. (Hall 222)

Hall has associated culture with identity and stated that this is the culture that shapes the identity of immigrants. He outlines two ways to understand identity. The initial viewpoint defines cultural identity “in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (223). Hall believes that cultural identities have come from history, undergone changes, and are constructed within the narratives of history and culture. He continues to state that the second perspective is linked to diverse viewpoints on cultural identity and argues that the second definition is more appropriate because notable distinctions exist beyond the agreed-upon similarities. These differences shape who they are today. In other words, these differences form peoples’ identities.

Michael Ryan (1946-), is a prominent figure in cultural studies, particularly known for his book *Cultural Studies: A Practical Introduction*. Ryan offers a comprehensive and practical overview of the field. His contributions have enhanced individuals’ comprehension of culture and how it shapes societies. Cultural Studies is interdisciplinary and politically engaged, with roots in various subjects. It explores different cultural frameworks and customs, enabling individuals to analyze and critically assess diverse cultures. Ryan proposes a deeper understanding of cultural crises can be achieved through immersion in different cultural settings.

He states that culture encompasses various aspects of human expression and cognition. For him, the manner of speaking, thoughts, and beliefs, are influenced and shaped by the cultural environment in which individuals are raised and live. He delineates:

You only notice this really when you change place and enter another culture. Try crossing a border, any border, and you’ll feel it [...]. Culture becomes visible when we travel between ‘cultures’ and when we look back in time to other ‘cultures’ than our own. (viii)

Ryan believes that culture is always a perspective. The distinct experiences, beliefs, and perspectives of people and communities influence culture. He delineates “[if] the world around us shapes our lives, we also make the world around us over in ways that embody and embed our thoughts, imaginings, ideals, and meanings” (12). The relationship between human culture and the physical environment is mutual, as each community develops in response to the distinct effects of cultural practices. Those practices, in turn, construct and reconstruct identity.

Ryan's examination of how individuals navigate their identities within diverse cultural influences aligns with Lahiri's portrayal of characters struggling with the tensions and complexities of cross-cultural crises and the experiences of immigrants. Ryan believes

Who we are as individual beings – our 'identity' – is bound up with the culture we live in. Although it is something outside us, culture makes its way into us through our eyes and ears. We learn the languages of culture as we grow up – what particular kinds of clothes "mean," for example, or what particular actions are good or bad or what words and attitudes are appropriate or not in what situations. We also acquire ways of understanding and methods of reasoning that we use to read the cultural world around us (83).

He proposes that being raised in a specific culture leads to the internalization of its norms and values. Ryan highlights the importance of examining cultural phenomena and questioning how they mirror and sustain social inequalities and power dynamics.

4. Cultural Differences in Two Specific Stories

Lahiri's debut work, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was published in 1999. This collection of nine interconnected short stories looks into the challenges encountered by immigrants. Williams Noelle Brada delineates "[a]ll nine stories are woven together with the frequent representations of extreme care and neglect" (456). Through these stories, Lahiri captures the complexities of the immigrant experience. The collection's subtitle *Stories of Bengal, Boston, and Beyond* investigates the various dimensions of cross-cultural challenges that immigrants encounter in unfamiliar territories. It highlights the diverse cultural backgrounds of characters, many of whom originate from India and settle in the Boston area. The inclusion of 'beyond' suggests an immigrant journey that extends beyond physical borders, offering a shared reflection of the immigrant experiences that transcend geographical constraints.

Cultural differences are influenced by some factors: such as historical backgrounds, geographical locations, linguistic diversities, religious beliefs, and societal expectations. Hall in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" expresses, "[t]his is no mere difference of topography or climate. It is a profound difference of culture and history. And the difference matters" (227). These differences shape how individuals perceive themselves, behave, and construct their identities. Immigrants struggle with challenges related to identity, family expectations, and the clash between conventional norms and contemporary and modern lifestyles. Michael Ryan elucidates that the term culture has consistently been associated with various interpretations; "[i]n one sense of the word,

culture is inseparable from humans” (viii). Culture becomes apparent when immigrants traverse different cultures through travel.

These cultural differences can be seen in the the characters in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, and “This Blessed House.” In “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” Lahiri looks at the interactions between cultures through the lens of a young girl’s experience of having a Bangladeshi dinner guest during political unrest in his home country. This story highlights the complexities of cultural exchange, showcasing how individuals from different cultural backgrounds negotiate and learn from these interactions. These challenges are integrated into the stories, mirroring the conflicting aspects of life in a multicultural environment. On the other hand, “This Blessed House” highlights the cultural clash between a newly married Indian-American couple and their discovery of Christian paraphernalia left in their new home. The story explores the challenges of reconciling different cultural practices and beliefs within a shared space. Second-generation migrants in these stories struggle to establish their identity as they lack the immediate connections to India that their parents possess. By focusing on these stories, the analysis aims to showcase the diversity and depth of Lahiri’s exploration of cultural differences and how they shape individual experiences and relationships.

The first story indicates the cultural difference between Lilia’s Hindu family and Mr. Pirzada, a Muslim scholar from Dacca who pursued studies in botany. Mr. Pirzada’s praying before his meals is unfamiliar to Lilia’s family. As Lilia becomes aware of Mr. Pirzada’s experiences and the intricacies of the India-Pakistan dispute, she encounters the larger issues of belonging, and the interconnectedness of global events. Lilia’s curiosity about events in her parent’s native country is sparked by watching the news, leading her to investigate a book concerning Pakistan available in the school library. A classmate then informs her that Lilia’s teacher is looking for her. As she hastily closed the book, her teacher, Mrs. Kenyon, suddenly appeared before her:

[t]he aroma of her perfume filling up the tiny aisle, and lifted the book by the tip of its spine as if it were a hair clinging to my sweater. She glanced at the cover, then at me. ‘Is this book a part of your report, Lilia?’ ‘No, Mrs. Kenyon.’ ‘Then I see no reason to consult it,’ she said, replacing it in the slim gap on the shelf. ‘Do you?’” (IOM 33)

Lilia’s experience illustrates the pressure that surrounds immigrants. As a responsible American citizen, she is expected to align with the American history taught in the classroom, the only history considered acceptable for her to embrace to be recognized as fully American. Michael Cox, in “Interpreters of Cultural Difference,” states that the child

characters created by Lahiri have an “awareness of the immigrant world in juxtaposition to the particulars of an American childhood” (120). The experiences of first- and second-generation immigrants shape this perspective as they strive to forge a distinct Indian-American cultural identity.

When Lilia expresses gratitude to Mr. Pirzada for the delicious lollipop, leaving him uncertain about how to interpret the simple expression of ‘thank you’. He says:

What is this thank-you? The lady at the bank thanks me, the cashier at the shop thanks me, the librarian thanks me when I return an overdue book, the overseas operator thanks me as she tries to connect me to Dacca and fails. If I am buried in this country I will be thanked, no doubt, at my funeral. (*IOM* 29)

The contrast between the social behavior in Western countries, where expressing gratitude with a ‘thank you’ is routine, and in countries like India and Pakistan, where it is not a standard social practice and is reserved for situations involving a favor, is highlighted. According to Hall, immigrants’ identities “are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (235). Hall argues that identity is a continuous process of evolving and existing, encompassing both the past and the future. He suggests that identities are not cohesive or unified, rather they are becoming more fragmented and divided, and constructed across multiple influences. This illustrates how individuals from different cultural backgrounds may feel out of place when confronted with unfamiliar customs. Lilia is American-born and raised, so she naturally shows appreciation by saying ‘thank you’ when she speaks to Mr. Pirzada. Gita Rajan describes Lahiri’s writings as depicting the experience of those navigating transnational cultural identities “from the safe distance of an acceptable stereotype formulated around the 1960s when South Asians struggled and melted into America” (127). Rajan suggests that Lahiri’s portrayal of the immigrant experience may reflect a somewhat idealized or oversimplified view that aligns with the perceptions and expectations of that era, rather than capturing the complexity and diversity of the immigrant experience.

“This Blessed House” follows the newlywed married Indian couple Sanjeev and Twinkle as they move into their new home. While unpacking, they discover several Christian decorations left behind by the previous owners. Twinkle becomes enamored by the items and insists on displaying them throughout the house, much to Sanjeev’s dismay. As the narrative progresses, the couple’s contrasting views on the decorations lead to amusing and thought-provoking situations, ultimately shedding light on their cultural differences and the complexities of their relationship. Twinkle embraces and displays her

newfound fascination with Christian symbols and artifacts, challenging Sanjeev's traditional beliefs and upbringing. His perspective represents the viewing of the Christian objects as a threat to his Indian culture, as he asserts, "We're not Christian" (*IOM* 136, 145). Sanjeev, who repeatedly asserts his reluctance to keep the statues in the house, arises from the concept of cultural compatibility. He ponders about his wife:

He was getting nowhere with her, with this woman whom he had known for only four months and whom he had married, this woman with whom he now shared his life. He thought with a flicker of regret of the snapshots his mother used to send him from Calcutta, of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without consulting a cookbook. Sanjeev had considered these women, had even ranked them in order of preference, but then he had met Twinkle. (145-46)

Sanjeev reflects on the differences between Twinkle and the traditional image of a wife he had envisioned. This internal conflict signifies the impact of Hallian cultural differences on his perceptions and relationships. When Twinkle suggests putting the newly found plaster statue of the Virgin Mary on their front lawn, Sanjeev quickly snaps: "All the neighbors will see. They'll think we're insane" (145). Joel Kuortti delineates "Twinkle is resisting a confined, predetermined view of culture and herself" (210). Twinkle is portrayed as a cosmopolitan and diverse character who considers trans-cultural discourse. She prefers her American nickname Twinkle over her Indian name Tanima, has had multiple partners, and is researching a dissertation on an Irish poet who enjoys jazz music and dislikes cooking Indian dishes. Ryan has pointed out that "[c]ulture is spatial in several ways" which means it "is also information that is transmitted spatially. It diffuses over terrain, bringing the landscape within the reach of the ideas and conventions of that particular culture (13).

Sanjeev and Twinkle's differing cultural values and beliefs reflect a clash of cultural differences within the domestic environment. Sanjeev's unwillingness to embrace the Christian décor stems from his strong attachment to the cultural context of his Indian heritage. In contrast, Twinkle's fascination and desire to display the Christian decorations throughout the house represents a more fluid, open-minded approach to culture. Twinkle's willingness to engage with the Christian cultural elements, even though they are foreign to her Indian upbringing, demonstrates her ability to traverse different cultural landscapes and incorporate diverse influences into her evolving identity.

5. Cultural Identity and Displacement in Two Other Selected Stories

The issue of identity is inherently challenging, particularly for individuals who experience cultural displacement, such as immigrants, or those who navigate dual cultural backgrounds simultaneously. Hall confirms that the challenges of reconstructing identity are experienced by immigrant communities uprooted from their familiar cultural background to settle in metropolitan countries. He affirms “[i]t is because this New World is constituted for us as place, a narrative of displacement” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 236). Such themes are prominent in two other stories such as “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar,” and “The Third and Final Continent.” Such themes are prominent in two other stories such as “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar,” and “The Third and Final Continent.” Amartya Sen, in his work “Identity and Violence” (2006), delineates: “We do belong to many different groups, in one way or another, and each of these collectivities can give a person a potentially important identity” (24). Sen argues that maintaining a singular identity in today’s diverse society, particularly in immigrant communities, is no longer viable.

“The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” revolves around Bibi Haldar’s life, a woman in her thirties living in Kolkata, India, who desires to marry. Still, her aspirations are dashed when her cousin and his wife refuse to conduct her ceremony, deeming her marriage costly. Bibi suffers from an unknown medical condition that causes her to experience frequent seizures and fainting spells. As a result, she is considered an outcast in her community and is unable to find a suitable husband due to her condition. She undergoes “an ailment that baffled family, friends, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets and fools” (*IOM* 158). Her illness “confined her world to the unpainted four-story building in which her only local family, an elder cousin and his wife, rented an apartment on the second floor” (159). The biggest issue faced by Bibi is that her illness prevents her from getting married, as evident when she says: “I will never be cured, never married” (157). In Indian society, a woman above thirty is often seen very old to get married. Lahiri explores cultural identity and displacement through the character of Bibi, a woman ostracized by her community due to her inability to marry and have children. Bibi’s status highlights the cultural norms and expectations placed upon women in her society, reflecting the challenges faced by individuals who do not conform to traditional roles.

Bibi’s character exemplifies Hall’s notion of cultural identity as not fixed or essential, but rather a ‘production’ that is constantly in the process of transformation and

negotiation. Hall and Paul Du Gay in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996), concentrate on the ever-changing and adaptable nature of identity. They illustrate how historical, social, and political forces and the interplay of diverse cultural influences shape cultural identity. They believe that “[i]dentities are constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (4). Bibi’s experiences reflect a sense of displacement as she traverses the complexities of her cultural identity within the context of her community. Her inability to fulfill the traditional expectations, placed upon her, creates a sense of alienation and displacement within her cultural milieu. The story portrays how cultural identity and displacement can impact an individual’s sense of belonging, self-worth, and agency. Bibi’s experiences shed light on the complexities and challenges individuals face when navigating the intersection of their cultural heritage and their aspirations in the context of societal expectations and norms. Lahiri underscores the character’s deep melancholy within her familiar surroundings, despite being surrounded by the same individuals she has always known.

“The Third and the Final Continent” portrays a Bengali immigrant who initially struggles with the issue of assimilating into an unfamiliar culture. According to Hall’s theoretical perspective, the experience of displacement has a significant influence on an individual’s identity formation. One of the key ways the story illustrates Hall’s views on the impact of displacement is through the narrator and his wife, Mala, and their experiences of being displaced from their home country and Mala’s struggle to adapt to the new cultural environment. The narrative is focused on the complexities associated with displacement. His experiences with the new culture are depicted through his interactions with his landlady and colleagues. His landlord, Mrs. Croft, embodies American patriotism with traditional values. Having lived on three distinct continents, the narrator wants to settle in North America, his final destination. Reflecting on the early days of his arranged marriage and their shared unfamiliarity with American culture, he introduces Mala to Mrs. Croft as his spouse. When Mrs. Croft inquires whether Mala can play the piano, Mala responds negatively, prompting the elderly woman to ask her to leave the bench. At that moment, he recalls his wife’s initial days in London:

learning how to take the Tube to Russell Square, riding an escalator for the first time, being unable to understand that when a man cried ‘piper’ it meant ‘paper’, being unable to decipher, for a whole year, that the conductor said ‘mind the gap’ as the train pulled away from each station. (IOM 195)

The narrator reflects on his wife’s cultural displacement as an immigrant, recalling moments when she struggled to adapt herself to life in a new country and considering

the reactions of others such as Mrs. Croft, to Mala's cultural identity and appearance. He imagines whether Mrs. Croft had ever encountered a woman wearing a sari, adorned with a bindi— a small decorative dot or mark worn on the center of the forehead by women in South Asian cultures, primarily in India—and multiple bracelets on her arms.

The narrator's desire to explain Mala's cultural background to Mrs. Croft reflects the complexities of navigating cultural displacement and the sense of alienation in a new trans-cultural context. The narrator travels to Cambridge to visit his son and "bring him home for a weekend so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die" (197). The narrator tries to familiarize his children with their cultural heritage, reflecting the fear immigrant parents have that their children may not grasp the cultural values that were foundational for the parents. Second-generation immigrants often experience alienation and abandon their cultural legacy in favor of the host country's culture.

6. Conclusion

Lahiri's exploration of trans-cultural discourse in *Interpreter of Maladies* vividly illustrates the themes of displacement and immigration through different characters and settings. She intricately delves into the challenges immigrants face as they navigate cultural displacement in a rapidly globalizing world, touching on issues of identity, belonging, and the struggles of straddling multiple cultures. The characters' journeys from India to various parts of the world, particularly the United States, serve as poignant reflections of the displacement experienced by immigrants. Lahiri masterfully sheds light on trans-cultural discourses and the quest for identity and connection, resonating with readers on a universal level.

The characters embody the delicate balance between 'being', rooted in heritage, and 'becoming' through adaptation to evolving circumstances, as elucidated by Hall. Both, 'being' and 'becoming' are integral aspects of cultural identity. This cultural interplay often leads to crises as the characters feel drawn to and pulled away from their past and present. Immigrant identities undergo ongoing negotiation and transformation, leading to identities that are fluid and constantly evolving, rather than fixed or stable. Lahiri's ability to capture the intricacies of trans-cultural discourse has solidified her position as a prominent voice in contemporary literature. Her work transcends geographical boundaries, speaking to readers across cultures and generations. She explores how immigrants can navigate cultural differences and transcend the constraints of their displacement in creating new identities.

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