

ELENA FURLANETTO,  
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# A POETICS OF NEUROSI

NARRATIVES OF NORMALCY  
AND DISORDER IN CULTURAL  
AND LITERARY TEXTS

[transcript] Culture & Theory

Elena Furlanetto, Dietmar Meinel (eds.)  
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**Narratives of Normalcy and Disorder in Cultural and Literary Texts**

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# Neurosis as Resilience in Jhumpa Lahiri's Diasporic Short Fictions

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ANGELO MONACO

“I am neurotic. I could never settle down in either the country or the city.”

SYLVIA PLATH, *THE BELL JAR*

## THE NEW INDIAN DIASPORA BETWEEN MODEL MINORITY AND SENSE OF LOSS

The 2012 survey on immigrants of Asian origin, provided by the Pew Research Centre, reveals that Asian Americans are “the highest-income, best-educated and fastest-growing racial group in the United States” (Pew 2013). Asian Americans embody the neoliberal success of model minority migrants conforming to the new opportunities of the post-1965 immigration laws.<sup>1</sup> Asian Americans tend to be highly educated (61% of the adults aged 25-64 have at least a bachelor's degree); they exceed white American adults in median annual household income (\$66,000 *versus* \$49,800); and, finally, “they place more value than other Americans do on marriage, parenthood, hard work and career success” (Pew 2013).

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1 The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act abolished the quota system which had previously ruled the American immigration policy, introducing technical skills and expertise as prerequisites for visas. New ethnic communities, coming from South Asian middle-class backgrounds, started to settle in the country and they constituted a brain drain of specialized professionals (doctors, engineers, scientists, university professors, and doctoral students) who crossed the American border in search of material and financial success, seeing the United States as a place of better opportunities. For further details, see Chin and Villazor 2015.

Unlike other Asian American subgroups (Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese and Japanese), Indian Americans have higher shares in education and income and they rate parenthood highly, but they are less likely to see themselves as ‘typical’ Americans. Yet, they say that they can carry on a conversation in proficient English very well and, together with Filipinos, they are more inclined to define themselves as a successful “model minority”<sup>2</sup> in comparison with other ethnic groups (see Pew 2013).

Through emulation of white Americans, Asian Americans try to fill in the gap between their migrant status and the desire to adjust to the host society by embracing the fluid movements of accumulation and self-realization that define capitalist orthodoxy. With their flexibility, they exemplify a model of “reproductive citizenship” that, borrowing from Susan Koshy (2013), “harnesses heterosexuality to the productivity of knowledge work to enhance national competitiveness in a globalizing economy” (351). A perceived obsession with the pressure of accumulating economic resources and passing on human capital to future generations leaves a gap in the affective and filial dynamics of Asian American families. The myth of the Asian Tigers veils insecurities and contradictions that immigrants of Asian descent experience in their ordinary lives, particularly in maintaining affective and family ties. Intergenerational conflicts are stronger when second generations disrupt their parents’ expectations such as accruing economic success and neutralizing biases against minority status. According to Koshy, the subjection of daughters and sons to the pressures of their families entails a “filial gothic” form that shows how “the simultaneous idealization and instrumentalization of filial duty in the model minority family creates intense pressure to succeed on parental terms and creates a schism between the subjective experience of filial coercion and the benevolent image of filial love” (358).<sup>3</sup> At

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2 The term was coined by the sociologist William Petersen who, in a 1966 article in *The New York Magazine*, described how Japanese Americans were able to overcome racial discriminations thanks to family cohesion and hard work.

3 Koshy (2013) expands the concept of “marital gothic” proposed by Michelle Massé who identifies “a genre of fiction in which the women protagonists become insane or kill themselves because their roles as wives or mothers have become unbearable to them” (357). According to Koshy, Lahiri’s stories demonstrate how familial structures and generational conflicts may generate pain and vulnerability in migrant characters. Though gothic motifs (tombs, urns, wild natural environments and severe weather conditions) permeate Lahiri’s stories, particularly in *Unaccustomed Earth*, I find Koshy’s idea of the gothic too bleak and limitative. Not all the tales end in conflict and

what personal cost is such a neoliberal model reproduced and who bears its counter effects?

To answer the question, I look at fictional representations of Asian American immigrants in the throes of problematic assimilation into the American society of economic productivity and entrepreneurship.<sup>4</sup> By mapping the configurations of neurosis, trauma theory and diaspora studies, in this essay I shall focus on the narrative and rhetorical devices aligning Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories with the aesthetics of signifying neurosis. If neurosis is a way "of defending oneself from the pressures of intersubjective life" (Rosson 118), my hypothesis is that in diasporic literature this defensive strategy conjures up neurotic tensions that plunge into nostalgia and melancholia. At the heart of Lahiri's fiction there is a vision of neurosis that emerges from the failure to assimilate. Her characters seem to challenge narratives of wholesomeness, generating empathy in the reader's affective response. On one hand, Lahiri exposes neurotic symptoms of vulnerability in characters who face paralysis, mutism, repetition compulsion and depression, thus offering no hope of redemption. On the other, her macrotext charts the potential benefits for those who linger over the in-between, shuttling physically and imaginatively between two worlds. Lahiri's fiction retains the wounds of a "homeland trauma" (Mishra 153) which triggers divergent responses to the sense of homelessness. The prospect of the model minority is a source of anxiety for some of her fictional immigrants who face psychological dilemmas, whilst others, capable of adjusting to the host land, tend to dwell in the interstices of cultures. Lahiri's tales, therefore, juxtapose vulnerability and resilience in everyday life, bringing to the fore an aesthetics of neurosis as a way to criticise socio-economic pressures.

I shall, first, discuss how "suburban neurosis" (Taylor 759) discloses the controversial assimilation of the new Indian diaspora<sup>5</sup> into the American competi-

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when tensions remain unresolved endings are open, leaving the reader to figure out the outcomes of the narratives.

- 4 While 'integration' is typically viewed as incorporating individuals from different groups, I argue that 'assimilation' offers a better way of understanding how Lahiri's characters embody a condition of mimicry of certain American values. My use of the term invokes the connotations of imitation and it carries "a referent to which immigrants and/or their offspring can become *similar*" (Schneider and Crul 2).
- 5 Vijay Mishra (2007) draws a distinction between "old" and "new" Indian diaspora. The first migrant wave was oriented towards the colonial areas of Fiji, Malaysia, Trinidad and Suriname, where migrants were employed in sugar, tea and rubber plantations between the end of the nineteenth century and the post-war period. The "new"

tive society. Mrs. Sen, the eponymous protagonist of Lahiri's story in the 1999 collection *Interpreter of Maladies* – which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction – babysits an American eleven-year-old boy in her suburban flat while experiencing a repetition-compulsion that fractures her *ego*. By examining the dynamics between the narrative and “suburban neurosis,” I argue that metonymy is the master trope of Lahiri's poetics of neurosis in “Mrs. Sen's” since it figures the presence of the past and the persistence of a deep sense of nostalgia. Metonymy, according to Lacan, represents the impossibility of achieving unity between signifier and signified because it displaces meaning (see Wilden 241). I shall turn, then, to explore the maladjustments of Amit Sarkar, the hero of “A Choice of Accommodation,” a story in Lahiri's second collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Amit's problematic accommodation results in a melancholic exposure to pain, in which metaphor and prosopopoeia become the central tropes. Metaphors, a transfer of “one word for another” (Lacan 157), condensate meaning, while prosopopoeia, “the trope of address” (De Man 76), confers a human voice to a non-human speaker, a figurative choice that challenges the centrality of the subject. I finally maintain that Lahiri's stories rely on performance rather than representation. In presenting the effects and causes of neurotic behaviours, Lahiri's poetics of neurosis that I will briefly sketch here privileges performativity through contiguities, associations, substitutions and chronological disarray over resemblance and diegesis, evoking the performative power of emotions.<sup>6</sup>

## THE LANGUAGE OF “SUBURBAN NEUROSIS” AND CULINARY NOSTALGIA IN LAHIRI'S DIASPORIC WOMEN

In a 1938 *Lancet* article that described the anxieties and depressive states of women dwelling in suburban estates, Doctor Stephen Taylor launched the term “suburban neurosis.” According to Taylor, the symptoms of the affliction were insomnia, backache and loss of breath. Two major factors were deemed to be re-

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diaspora, instead, came with capitalism and hypermobility. It was triggered by the 1955 Indian Citizen Act that granted the double citizenship to those who emigrated to Europe, the United States and Canada in search of more qualified jobs.

6 My reference is to Sara Ahmed's discussion of emotions as performative acts that do not simply exist, but also “do things” (*Cultural Politics of Emotions* 13-26). Emotions, then, should be viewed not for what they are, but for what they do and their circulation allows for the construction of intersubjective relationships, joining the self with the other.

sponsible for this neurotic disorder: first, isolation and lack of kinship; second, suburban English women, or “Mrs. Everyman” as Taylor ironically dubs them, were suffering from being victim of “false values” (Taylor 760), such as housewares, electronic equipment, and ready-made food and clothes that left them with plenty of spare time. Suburban neighbourhoods, in addition, did not allow for comradeship nor did they offer amenities and services. Linked to diaspora, this connection between the stories of “Mrs. Everyman” and the migrants’ experience of domestic alienation opens new lines for studying Lahiri’s poetics of neurosis.

In the aftermath of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, suburban isolation came to affect the mental health of South Asian women who had followed their husbands in search of better professional opportunities in the United States. For Lahiri’s female characters suburban homes operate as prisons: the lack of transportation available and the inability to drive generate a sense of alienation in the bored existences of the immigrant women of suburbia. Lahiri’s fiction holds many examples of female immigrants as being tied to notions of domesticity and home and, as Dutt-Ballerstadt (2010) notes, while “the men come to America as intellectual migrants and work as professors, librarians and company executives,” the women “join their husbands as housewives and depend on their spouses to introduce them to America” (66). Like the protagonist of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, a woman who tries to escape growth through neurotic indecision, “wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time” (76), Mrs. Sen yearns for assimilation but constantly gazes back to the past.

In this section, I investigate “suburban neurosis” in the Asian American diaspora and I specifically consider how the linguistic trope of metonymy governs “Mrs. Sen’s,” a tale about the loss of ethnic, cultural and identity ties. Displacement is a *leitmotif* in Lahiri’s *œuvre* beyond gender differences and urban geographies. Mrs. Sen’s dislocation may be connected to other characters in *Interpreter of Maladies*, such as Mala in “The Third and Final Continent” or Shukumar and Sanjeev, the male protagonists of “A Temporary Matter” and “This Blessed House” respectively. Both Shukumar and Sanjeev are portrayed as nurturing husbands performing traditionally female housekeeping duties, such as organizing the cooking and vacuuming the floor. Lahiri, therefore, challenges the traditional stereotype of the kitchen as the place where only women are relegated. For Mrs. Sen, for instance, food and kitchenware signify the loss of the homeland. The taste of Indian food transports Mrs. Sen back to Calcutta through a culinary nostalgia that displaces her suspended affiliation. By weaving together culinary memories and neurotic disorder, Lahiri’s story foreshadows a melan-

cholic gap of identification: this space of loss and grief, for Mrs. Sen, is repeatedly amplified by metonymy and repetitions that, on one side, evoke the original loss, while, on the other, stage the sense of void of the Indian woman.

Mrs. Sen lives in a clean and warm “university apartment located on the fringes of the campus” (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* 112). Like Taylor’s Mrs. Everyman, the eponymous protagonist of Lahiri’s story is a woman in her thirties, married to an Indian professor of mathematics who uprooted her from her native Calcutta. The expatriate woman, thus, is a victim of the post-1965 brain drain and her abiding resistance to accommodate is epitomised by the refusal of getting a driving license and by a scrupulous clinging to Indian cuisine. The tale narrates how Mrs. Sen, who experiences loneliness in the suburban environment and faces marital problems with a man who embodies the “productive citizenship” of model minorities, builds an unexpected connection with Eliot, the eleven-year-old American boy whom she starts babysitting in her suburban flat. In spite of the differences in age and ethnicity, both Mrs. Sen, whose first and birth name is unknown, and Eliot share the same sense of isolation. Even though the Indian woman does not suffer from insomnia or backache, her pathological distress echoes the symptoms of suburban neurosis. Her homesickness for the community left behind in Calcutta is symbolically displayed by the way her apartment is neatly furnished. From Eliot’s perspective, which is the narrative focus of the story, the daily rituals of his new babysitter entail a traumatic neurosis reminiscent of her ethnic origins. Every afternoon, she “took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices, and shreds” (114). While the “daily procedure took about one hour” (115), Eliot, who is given food and comics to read, observes his babysitter’s inability to regulate moods. Euphoria and creativity in the kitchen are interspersed with agonizing moment of loneliness and acute nostalgia when Mrs. Sen is unable to prepare a proper meal. The woman repeats rituals that seem to come from outside the self, a form of neurotic enactment the *ego* cannot offer any resistance to. As Eliot notes, “[i]t was her custom to check the mailbox” (121), buy fresh fish, apply “a fresh stroke of scarlet powder” (117) on her eyebrows and prepare dinner in a kitchen where “brimming bowls and colanders lined the countertop, spices and pastes were measured and blended” (117) every evening. Cooking Indian food is the only way of reconnecting with her past, but it also triggers an automatic and unconscious neurotic mechanism against anxiety: even if the recreation of these past experiences generates wounds, it enables, as Freud explains in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” to recover “an initial state from which the liv-

ing entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return” (38).

Following Freud in “The Ego and the Id,” we can say that Mrs. Sen exposes herself to a repetition compulsion that revolves around “the antithesis between the coherent ego and the repressed which splits off from it” (17). The dialectic of coherence and repression produces an emotional turmoil hosted in Mrs. Sen’s ego. Whereas Indian recipes represent a vehicle for preserving the ego’s coherence, they also activate a sense of loss that emerges in manifestations of passivity and alienation. Once the moment of euphoria has passed, Mrs. Sen seems to plunge into depression: she “refused to practice driving,” “the blade never emerged from the cupboard,” and she “did not call the fish store” (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* 128-129). Her neurotic behaviours illustrate the tension between the real and the ideal *ego*, a conflict that, as John Russon (2003) argues, represents “some sector of a person’s behaviour [that] stands as a hindrance to achieving this normal selfhood” (85).

Though Mrs. Sen’s story foregrounds her sense of loss, the search for solidarity and mutual care interrupts the vulnerable strands of the plot, particularly from Eliot’s silent perspective. Albeit a visual observer, Eliot functions as a naïf and innocent narrative witness to Mrs. Sen’s neurotic behaviour. By using Eliot as the narrative focus, a second storyline emerges behind Mrs. Sen’s tale of suffering, a counter-narrative that leaves a significant impact on Eliot. Despite his young age, the boy seems to possess an awareness of his babysitter’s search of care. Eliot shares Mrs. Sen’s loneliness: he lives in suburbia, he does not know his father and his mother is almost absent. Unlike his mother who is accustomed to ordering pizza, Eliot seems to realize the importance that food plays in Mrs. Sen’s life. While experiencing new tastes, he acts as an observer and a translator of the Indian woman’s cultural conundrum but, since he lacks the rigidity of maturity, his perception of the differences is more fluid and nuanced. As Michael Cox (2003) suggests, Eliot may provide a “largely judgment-free perspective” (121) that enables him to develop a liking for his new babysitter, not only because “Mrs. Sen’s apartment was warm” (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* 114), but because the woman offers solidarity and care which he himself craves. In her house, Eliot undergoes a gradual transformation, becoming more aware of his needs as we can infer when Mrs. Sen asks him: “‘Do you miss your mother, Eliot, these afternoons with me?’ The thought had never occurred to him” (122). By reading the plot through his eyes and senses, the reader may encounter a possible way out of the paralysing neurosis of the Indian woman, thus envisaging a transformative process of self-discovery. Since linguistic exchanges are limited be-



tween Eliot and Mrs. Sen, food and domestic rituals becomes the arena for their interaction and for a reposition of their identities in the world.

Eliot is particularly attracted by two elements: a blade and the agonising wait Mrs. Sen endures upon receiving letters from her Indian relatives. The blade and the letters are metonyms of India and the boy realises that “when Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables” (115). The tidy and warm American apartment, therefore, is only a shadow of the original home that looms like a ghost throughout the narrative. Likewise, a sense of neurotic disorder permeates his babysitter’s reading of the letters: “[a]s she read, her voice was louder and seemed to shift in key. Though she stayed plainly before him, Eliot had the sensation that Mrs. Sen was no longer present in the room with the pear-colored carpet” (122). The metonymic analogy between the letters and India is the rhetorical device that provides access to the signified “[e]verything is there” (113). The implied allusion to India in the deictic reference, during the first conversation between Mrs. Sen and Eliot’s mother, indicates the sense of loss that haunts the Indian woman in her new American house.

Lahiri encompasses anxiety and desire at the same time through metonymic associations. Lacan equates desire with metonymy: in his words, desire is caught in “the rails of metonymy” (518). Metonymy indicates the pursuit of a lost signified since the original object is replaced by a substitute which creates a metonymic chain of desire. In Lacanian theory, desire stands between *jouissance* and anxiety, the latter being a signal that there is a lack and “if desire is the metonymy of the want-to-be, the ego is the metonymy of the desire” (623). Desire, hence, can be understood as a continuous displacement from one signifier to another, while anxiety reveals a gap. Those who suffer from obsession, like Mrs. Sen, are confronted with anxiety since they fail to stop this chain. Inspired by the distinction drawn by linguist Roman Jakobson, Lacan argues that while metaphors operate at the paradigmatic level through similarity and substitution, metonymies carry the signified across the syntagmatic axis through contiguity and associations. Metonymies, hence, displace emotions and desires from the original object to substitute ones: because “there is no connection between word [signifier] and thing [signified] in the way metonymy operates, the signifying function in language is metonymy” (Walden 241). Studying this linguistic opposition from a psychological perspective, Lacan says that metonymy “installs the lack of being in the object relation, using the value of reference-back possessed by signification in order to invest it with the desire aimed at the very task it supports” (274). The logic of metonymy follows a horizontal line that defers desires from one object to another and Mrs. Sen reads food items and kitchenware as meto-

nymic signifiers of a culinary nostalgia charged with profound dislocation. Mrs. Sen's blade, "that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas" (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* 114), is a metonymic reminder of India and of the sense of gendered community that the kitchen utensil epitomises:

"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 and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night." (115)

The sense of lack spells desires that are continuously deferred, reappearing in other guises. Mrs. Sen's daily ritual of chopping cabbages, potatoes and cauliflowers may symbolically be read as an attempt to reduce the distance between the United States and India, the representation of a desire she cannot fulfil. Lack and desire give shape to the memories of diasporic subjects and, in "Mrs. Sen's" culinary idiom, food emerges as metonymic vehicle of ambivalence.

Culinary nostalgia bears witness to the complex processes of diaspora and migration that recreate the homeland as a contradictory space, limiting and emancipatory at the same time. Culinary fiction, as Anita Mannur contends, "occupies a seemingly paradoxical space – at once a site of affirmation and resistance" (7). This ambivalence can be traced in Lahiri's fiction and similarly evokes Svetlana Boym's double vision of nostalgia as both restorative and reflective. In "Mrs. Sen's," restorative nostalgia, a strategy that, borrowing from Boym, "puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild a lost home and patch up the memory gaps" (41; emphasis in the original), structures the Indian woman's obsession with order and culinary practices. Mrs. Sen's re-enactments become a means of installing a sense of the self: having lost her previous self, connected to her life in India, Mrs. Sen seeks to reassure herself of the authenticity of her life and Indian food embodies the most genuine strategy of engaging with her condition. The textual fixation on kitchenware, such as "pots and mugs" (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* 112), "plastic bowl[s]" (115), "plates, glasses, napkins and silverware" (117) and the insistence on household chores, like vacuuming the floor, doing the shopping and preparing dinner, slow down the temporality of the text, contributing to a sense of paralysis and numbness.

In the eyes of Eliot's mother, a career woman who clings to ready-made food, Mrs. Sen's apartment looks like a small-scale reproduction of Indian tastes, where "[h]er profile hovered protectively over her work, a confetti of cucumber, eggplant, and onion skins heaped around her" (115). Mrs. Sen's neurotic daily

rituals of cleansing utensils, chopping and drying vegetables are incomprehensible to Eliot's mother, while for the Indian protagonist they stand for a compulsive restoration of lost traditions. When the American woman picks up her son from Mrs. Sen's apartment, she notices the evidence of Mrs. Sen's routine: "[t]he blade was scrubbed, rinsed, dried, folded, and stowed away" (117). Thus, Lahiri intensifies Mrs. Sen's habits through Eliot's mother's perspective, producing an effect of strangeness.

Loss and lack dominate the story and Mrs. Sen's cross-cultural neurosis defers desires that emerge in representations of loss and lost objects. Readers are not allowed to know the name of the Indian woman. Lahiri's heroine, the representative of a community with a plenty of names, South Asians, Asian Americans, *desi* and brown folk, is nameless. The woman's namelessness is counterbalanced by a plethora of Indian references that invade the American apartment. Not only tastes and letters, Mrs. Sen also listens to the tape where the voices of her relatives, speaking Bengali, resonate across the suburban house: "[o]ne day she played a tape of something she called a raga; it sounded a little bit like someone plucking very slowly and then very quickly on a violin [...]. Another day she played a cassette of people talking in her language [...]" (128). Without a name and with a gap between her teeth, that may be read as a further sign of absence that physically characterises her, Mrs. Sen compensates the identity conundrum by restoring her daily routines in the new American flat, though the missing genitive in the title illustrates the lack of a sense of home. Lahiri ironically reinforces loss and lack through the difficulty in finding ingredients for her cuisine: "[i]t's very frustrating [...] [t]o live so close to the ocean and not to have so much fish" (123). Mrs. Sen regrets the lack of fish she would always have in Calcutta where "people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky" (123) and her obsession with cooking fish, as a sign of cultural belonging, elicits Eliot's mother prompt reply, "[t]ry the supermarket" (123), a position that expands the distance between the United States and India. The fish is, once more, a metonymic motif charged with nostalgia and neurosis that animates everyday practices. Lahiri's female characters, therefore, are unable to change habits.

As Russon puts it, identity is based on habits and neurosis means "to find that one cannot control one's behavior in areas that, according to the narrative of normalcy, should be areas in which the free ego has an uninhibited ability to exercise choice" (86). Neurotic behaviours restore a memory of who we are, "the memory of those patterns of recognition through which, and as which, we were made familiar with other people" (94). The question of memory leads to nostalgic yearning for cultural roots, a central theme in Lahiri's prose: restorative nos-

talgia and neurosis entangle Mrs. Sen's desires, shedding light on the vulnerability of diasporic subjects over the myth of the model minority.

Even though Mrs. Sen's struggle to find her own place is stylistically performed in the text through the adaptation of metonymic solutions, suburban neurosis resurfaces through anxiety and distractions while she tries to drive Mr. Sen's car. Ignoring his advice to pay attention to road signs, Mrs. Sen seems to be incapable of adjusting to the rules of the road: "the same stream of cars made her knuckles pale, her wrists tremble, and her English falter" (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* 121). At the end of the story, in a final attempt to seize her chance to cross the border from neurosis to 'normalcy,' Mrs. Sen drives her husband's car with Eliot. In search of a halibut for a special Indian recipe, she embarks on an errand to the fishmonger's but a minor accident occurs. Although neither Mrs. Sen nor Eliot are hurt, the episode functions as a reminder of the ambivalent assimilation of South Asians into the United States. When the woman returns home, she stows back the blade and throws away the vegetables she had already sliced, offering Eliot "a plate of crackers with peanut butter" (134). Though the conclusion introduces a crisis, it also provides the reader with a change of culinary habit. The perpetual evocation of Indian food leaves space to an American snack, a solution that seems to reactivate temporality and open up to the future, at least for Eliot. Eliot's mother realises that the boy is old enough to stay on his own and takes him away from Mrs. Sen's care, putting an end to the solidarity between the babysitter and the boy. The story, therefore, concludes with the South Asian woman trapped in her suburban flat, crying for the impossibility to find her own place in the United States, and opting for American food as a sign of failure and change. By the end of the story, both characters have experienced change. While Eliot has come of age with a new intercultural awareness, Mrs. Sen's sense of loss seems to prevail. And yet, the American snack she finally serves conjures up a possible transformation: in this view, the Indian woman might achieve freedom from her neurosis through the renunciation of her past culinary habits. Lahiri, in conclusion, turns Mrs. Sen's metonymic activities into a performative space that serves as an example for the migrant's experience of nostalgic neurosis.

## TROPES OF "RACIAL MELANCHOLIA" AND DEFERRED DESIRES

In his *Seminar X*, Lacan suggests that desires create conflicts and split individual subjectivity between the "I" and the "ideal-I," generating neurotic anxiety and a

sense of loss. He argues that desires are always in motion and, like language, they are always deferred. Desires, Lacan explains, enhance an “incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (502). Following the French psychoanalyst, we can say that those who suffer from obsessional neurosis endure conflicts between the self and the external world, a tension that Freud categorized as “melancholia.” In his seminal essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud sees melancholia as pathological mourning that results in “cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity of love, inhibition of all activity” (244). The melancholic position stems from the idealization of a lost object and “racial melancholia” generates “a cleaving of the psyche” (Eng and Han 675) in ethnic minorities that aspire to accommodate. In their study, Eng and Han pinpoint how assimilation into mainstream American culture for South Asians means adopting a series of norms and how failures to integrate produce melancholic feelings which affect Asian Americans’ suspended assimilation. In this light, “melancholia describes an unresolved process,” an inability to assimilate entailing that “for Asian Americans, ideals of whiteness are continually estranged. They remain at an unattainable distance, at once a compelling fantasy and a lost ideal” (671).

Taking these assumptions as a starting point, I claim that Lahiri’s second-generation migrants epitomise the psychic splitting generated by mimicry and assimilation to whiteness. Extending Homi Bhabha’s concept of “mimicry” to racial issues, Eng and Han maintain that “Asians Americans are forced to mimic the model minority stereotype in order to be recognized by mainstream society – in order *to be* at all” (677, emphasis in the original). By imitating western norms and ideals, Asian Americans are exposed to haunting melancholia because they inherit losses from the first generations that lead to intergenerational conflicts. From such a perspective, the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth*<sup>7</sup> reveal Lahiri’s engagement with the politics of racial melancholia. In the process of signifying melancholia, two tropes come into play, metaphors and prosopopoeia, that create a poetics in which every event refers back to the recollection of an impossible desire, condensing loss into narratives saturated with exposure to vulnerability. Lahiri’s five stories, and one novella, chart the ordinary lives and daily rituals of Bengali American migrants who, in the wake of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, experience marital and filial conflicts in the “unaccustomed earth” of the American dream, split between the model minority paradigm and the neurotic disorders it produces.

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7 The title of the collection, winner of the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award, is inspired by a quote from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s preface to *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

In “A Choice of Accommodation,” Lahiri explores the complex dynamics of marriage across racial differences between Amit Sarkar, a second-generation Asian American, and his white wife Megan. The story chronicles Amit and Megan’s trip from New York to Langford, where they are attending the wedding ceremony of Pam, Amit’s friend on whom he had a crush from their time at Langford College. The couple wishes to spend a romantic weekend in the countryside, but Amit’s decision to book a room in a pricey hotel “in the middle of nowhere” (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 86), rather than staying at Langford with the other guests, hides his repudiation of Langford. The miscommunication and the silences between husband and wife are metaphorically rendered through the pine tree that obstructs the view from the balcony of their hotel room. Amit’s college infatuation with Pam is an instance of the sense of detachment between husband and wife: though Amit thinks that since Pam had “never been his girlfriend there had been nothing to explain” (88), Megan, as the narrator remarks, “was insecure about Pam, defensive the one or two times they’d met” (88). Impediments, silences, incidents and pouring rain are thus used to narrate the sense of haunting obsession that looms over the story: while the room is dark and the place is “without character” (84), the partners discuss whether to change room since “Amit and Megan had a tradition, in their relationship, of switching hotel rooms” (87), a habit that exposes the difficulties in making choices in their conjugal relationship and the need to find a proper accommodation. Lahiri juxtaposes the bleak description of the place with the thoughts running in Amit’s mind: the reader learns that he “was plagued by his daughters’ vulnerability, both to illness and to accidents of all kinds” (90) and that he “was still haunted by an incident in the cafeteria of the Museum of Natural History” (90) when his older daughter had choked on a piece of apricot.

Through metaphors and prosopopoeia Lahiri problematises the search of both physical and symbolic accommodation of her Asian American characters. The use of metaphors in the story allow a latent readability of the unconscious to emerge. The language of loss and vulnerability, of desire and fear, casts a special light on the neurotic content, unveiling its hidden meaning. The title incorporates two motifs, ‘choice’ and ‘the process to adjust,’ and it clearly resonates with irony since Amit seems unable to make choices and find a suitable accommodation, even when booking hotel rooms. Therefore, the metaphorical meaning of the title carries traces of a condensation that reveals a return of the repressed, in an echo of Lacan’s equivalence between metaphors and condensation (see 160). Metaphors manifest unarticulated or deferred desires and because the world in Lahiri’s story is replete with condensation, spaces are metaphors structuring Amit’s unconscious. Langford itself, for instance, functions as a metaphor in the life of

the protagonist: as the narrator explains, “there was nothing to remind him of those years of his life” (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 86) in a place where he was the only Indian student, “crippled with homesickness, missing his parents to the point where tears often filled his eyes” (97). The place gives us glimpses of the wounds from which the story emerges since Amit’s recollection of Langford is an eruption of his unconscious. His anger, directed at his parents who had sent him to the college, manifests itself as a physical disability limiting his freedom, as clearly indicated by the verb “cripple.”

In the same vein, the Langford days are intensely metaphorical, as place and language are used metaphorically. Though born and raised in the United States, Amit seems dissociated from himself. His deep sense of loss emerges from the struggles with his parents’ expectations and with the aloof adolescence spent at Langford, in a WASP environment, where his mates complimented him on his accent, assuming that “he’d been born and raised in that country [India] and not in Massachusetts” (97). Like many other characters in Lahiri’s fiction, Amit searches for identity and recognition externally, in relationship to others. Disregarding his parents’ expectations, he does not become a doctor, like his father, and he does not marry a Bengali woman. Both Megan and Pam are white, which suggests tensions between Amit’s desire and the Bengali habit of arranged marriages. Megan, who is a doctor and comes from a WASP family, represents a seething dissatisfaction for his parents who are already disappointed about Amit’s decision of dropping the medical studies in order to apply to a school of journalism. The trip to Langford, hence, is not a peaceful homecoming. In contrast, Amit associates the place with the lack of a stable sense of the self and with the first appearance of grey hair:

It was here, at Langford, that it had begun, when he was in the sixth form. At first it was just a few strands, well concealed in his black hair. But by the time he was a junior at Columbia it was the black hairs he could count on one hand. He’d read it was possible, after a traumatic experience, for a person’s hair to turn grey in youth. But there had been no sudden death he could point to, no accident. No profound life change, apart from his parents sending him to Langford. (93)

Again, Amit recalls the sense of loss for being left alone in Langford, whilst his parents had returned to India. His obsessional neurosis is conveyed through the recollections of the days at college that metaphorically seem to spoil his appearance. Strikingly, the past surfaces as a kind of disabling disease that not only physically limits Amit’s vital strength, it also spoils his youth. Though Amit’s mental disorder is not diagnosed in medical terms, the narrative portrays the ef-

fects of trauma. Amit's return to Langford reactivates the persistence of traumatic memories blurring the border between past and present. The flashback, which foregrounds Amit's sense of exclusion and suffering as a student at Langford, is an instance of Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*<sup>8</sup> that stretches to the limits the temporality of traumatic memory. Although Amit himself denies to have undergone any traumas, I would say that traumatic temporality is relevant since Amit is caught in the recollection of a returning past that leaves consequences on his psyche.

Among the metaphorical wounds in the protagonist's melancholic life, linguistic fragmentation comes at the top of the list. By evoking his journey to relatives in Delhi, Amit recalls his "broken Bengali [being] of no use in that city" (96). On one side, the man yearns for a sense of accommodation that Lahiri depicts through a ghost language that inhabits the protagonist's mind; on the other, Amit cannot come to terms with India and he misses the tranquillity of his American hometown. Lahiri's protagonist straddles the boundary between paralysis and agency. The linguistic state of loss underlines Amit's vulnerable side and ties in with Kristeva's insights on melancholia and linguistic representation. The melancholic buries his sense of loss in a sort of mental crypt, a trajectory that is translated into the failure to use language properly. The Kristevan version of melancholia is grounded on language pathology since "melancholy persons are foreigners in their maternal tongue. They have lost the meaning – the value – of their mother tongue for want of losing their mother" (53). While Mrs. Sen's English falters when she is confronted with American habits, Amit's limited mastery of Bengali is a metaphor for the loss of his origins, a template for his search of cultural and physical accommodation.

As described above, the man is obsessed with fears about his daughters who are staying with his in-laws while he is at Pam's wedding with his wife. Having studied surgery for some years and inured to the body's "inherent fragility" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 90), Amit is conscious of human vulnerability. While reading about accidents on newspapers, he is obsessed with the idea of the death of his daughters: "he imagined a wave at Jones Beach, where he had been taking them once a week during the summer, dragging one of them down, or a pile of sand suffocating them as he was flipping, a few feet away, through a magazine" (91). Though the two young daughters never make an appearance in the story, their absence summons the most vulnerable side of Amit's mind. The narrator

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8 The term that Laplanche has translated as "afterwardsness" (263) refers to Freud's observations on trauma. The memory of a traumatic experiences becomes traumatic only at a later stage, when it is revived with a belated understanding.



presents Amit as a split and fragile subject, torn between the desire to adjust and the fear of losing connections to his ethnic roots. His quest for a proper accommodation is interspersed with the fear of losing his origins, a threat that the two daughters embody in their physical features since both “Maya and Monika had inherited Megan’s coloring, without a trace of Amit’s deeply tan skin and black eyes, so that apart from their vaguely Indian names they appeared fully American” (94). The fact bothers Amit who, however, feels a connection to his daughters, dreaming catastrophic scenarios that “could toss his existence over a cliff” (91). Amit’s fears reveal his acute alienation and the metaphor of throwing away his own life is a symptom of his mental disturbance.

In the metaphoric line, signifiers tend to be substituted with others, while the signified, in Lacan’s terms, “crosses the bar” (164) of repression that separates it from the signifier, achieving a witnessing function and giving voice to what it previously refused to convey. With its metaphoric condensation of the place and of the experiences in the college, the short story discloses its narrative force and, by crossing the bar of resistance, the signified is made visible, determining the signifier. Amit’s tunnelling drags his unconscious out into the light, an evocative power that Lahiri also elicits through prosopopoeia, a figurative linguistic device providing non-human entities with discourse.

By linking a poetics of narrative neurosis to pathological memory, “A Choice of Accommodation” tends to resist silence through prosopopoeia, a new narrative energy that, by making Amit’s neurosis visible and audible, serves as a testimony and conveys his need of recovery – conveyed in particular by Amit’s failed attempt to find a phone booth to talk to his daughters. Slightly tipsy, he leaves the college where the wedding ceremony has just started, but the search of a phone booth collapses into a solitary wandering across the dark fields around Langford. In his stumbling through the natural landscape, Amit’s melancholic mood and cultural conundrum are intensified by the haunting “serenade of the frogs” (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 117), an uncanny sound he had already heard in his dormitory as a student:

It was a sound he had forgotten, one that had haunted him and kept him awake his first nights in a Langford dormitory, at the end of another August when he was fifteen years old. All the incoming students heard it as they slept in their new rooms, in their strange beds, missing their parents, their homes; they were told at their first assembly that the frogs were calling for their mates, defending their territory by the water’s edge before burying themselves under mud for the winter. (117)

Such a soul-stirring effect signals Amit's awareness of the things he cannot grasp. Not only does the eerie concert played by the frogs break the silence of the countryside, but their hoarse and "deafening" (117) croaks also vocalize his unvoiced obsession with death. If, as Paul de Man (1984) states, prosopopoeia is "the trope of autobiography" (76), a rhetoric representation of the self, in Amit's case, his inner silences are thus couched in the croaking of the amphibians. Furthermore, the frogs' movement downwards starkly contrasts with the outward process materializing in Amit's mind: while for the amphibians the aquatic burial is a symbol of shelter and comradeship, Amit's psychological tunnel leads him to paralysis and solitude, forcing him to deal with his controversial "accommodation" to America. Furthermore, the Hindi etymology of his name, 'boundless,' is at odds with his inability to adjust. Whereas boundless means 'without limit,' Amit seems to be paralysed, a passivity clashing with the restlessness of his parents who, after their departure to India, first move to Switzerland and finally settle down in Saudi Arabia. Their transcontinental migrations are opposed to the paralysis which metaphorically limits Amit's 'boundless' potentiality. Through paradoxes and reversal, prosopopoeia, like a Janus-faced trope, awakens Amit, making him aware "of everything in the world that teemed beyond his vision" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 117). At the same time, the performative logics of prosopopoeia gestures towards the end of the story, by indicating a path away from the past.

The story ends with Amit's awakening in the late morning in the hotel, where he finds Megan waiting for him. Before going back to New York, they return to Langford for the wedding brunch but they are late and find shelter from the rain in a dorm room where Amit finds the courage to confess that Pam was "nothing" (125) to him and the recollection of his erotic fantasy about Pam arouses him. "A Choice of Accommodation" ends with Amit and Megan having sex on a bed in the dorm room, a place bereft of any romanticism but that ultimately makes space for Amit's precarious accommodation into the American soil.

## CONCLUSION

The poetics of neurosis I have engaged with here offer a way for neurosis to develop fully, allowing ontological vulnerability to emerge. Lahiri's short fictions depict forms of disorder and fragility that problematise the status of the South Asian model minority paradigm, animating a mode of embracing the wounds. From this point of view, the exposure to neurosis as nostalgia and melancholia

portrays characters driven by contradictions and ambiguities which challenge the “promise of happiness” (see Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*) that migration ought to entail. As Sara Ahmed explains, “even if happiness holds its place as the object of desire, it does not always signify something, let alone signify the same thing” (201). Ahmed focuses on what happiness can do, exploring the ways happiness can generate affect. In other words, emotions have a performative quality, “creating a political and personal horizon that gives us an image of the good life” (*Cultural Politics of Emotions* 14), and what constitutes happiness is the ability to do things. Both Mrs. Sen and Amit epitomise examples of the kind of “melancholic migrants” embodying, in Ahmed’s words, existences that “cannot be wished away with happiness” (*The Promise of Happiness* 159). Ahmed criticises the imperative of happiness, a grief that the stories analysed here clearly expose: if the promise of happiness entails becoming a model minority, Lahiri’s short fiction reveals the gap between the myth of model minority and a more complex reality: the migrants, like Mrs. Sen and Amit, who are unable to do things, such as driving a car or booking a hotel room, do not fit into this notion of ‘normalcy’ and find themselves at loss. What is at stake in Lahiri’s stories is the myth of the model minority, a sense of achievement that for immigrants means “telling a certain story about your arrival as good” (158). Thus, when the stories are not positive, they involve silence and fragility, stretching the force of narrative representation to the limits.

As I have tried to underline in my analysis, Lahiri’s poetics of neurosis features a preference for linguistic tropes, such as metonyms, metaphors and prosopopeia that alert the reader to the situations of vulnerability and awareness of her migrant characters. If we return briefly to Russon’s exploration of neurosis, we may remember that he sees neurosis as “a memorial, bodily comportment, primarily realized as a way of having a world of objects – a place, a home” (94) and both Mrs. Sen and Amit imaginatively occupy multiple spaces in the attempt to find a sense of belonging. The fact that both short stories do not allow for closure may be interpreted as a possible way out of the neurotic content the narratives rely on. Whereas neurosis foregrounds a promise to realise happiness, the characters’ unhappiness alludes to the persistence of an emotional turmoil. And yet, the hidden meanings of the tales, accessed via metonyms, metaphors and prosopopeia, unveil a resilience of the subject that, in his/her neurosis, is however caught in a web of connectivity and interdependence. This leads me to a final point that I find extremely relevant for Lahiri’s fiction, which gives visibility to the disrupted memories of the past constituting the core of neurotic states. By focusing on everyday life and traumatic memories, Lahiri makes literature a privileged site for addressing neurosis and the search of care and solidarity.

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