

Transcultural Mobilities and Memories

EDITORS / ORGANIZADORES:

MÁRIO MATOS / JOANNE PAISANA

Mobilidades e Memórias Transculturais

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Paginação: Pedro Panarra

© Edição do Centro de Estudos Humanísticos
da Universidade do Minho

Edições Húmus, 2023

End. Postal: Apartado 7081

4764-908 Ribeirão – V.N. Famalicão

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www.edicoeshumus.pt

Impressão: Papelmunde, SMG, Lda. – V.N. Famalicão

1.ª edição: Dezembro de 2023

Depósito legal: 525681/23

ISBN 978-989-755-831-3

Este trabalho é financiado por fundos nacionais através da FCT — Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., no âmbito do projeto UIDP/00305/2020.

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Luggage heavy with memories: things and gendered identity within the diasporic space

SOFIA CAVALCANTI

1. Introduction

Over the decades before and after the turn of the twenty-first century, diasporic literature has become one of the main facets of recent India writing. After a period of nationalist fervor which continued until Independence and a phase of apparent modernization and national triumph during the post-independence era, a sense of rebellion and optimism spread through the population, who opened up to globalization, mobility, and transnational migration (Ashcroft, 2013, p. 30). The rigid construction of identity promoted by postcolonial nationalism comes to imprison rather than liberate Indian citizens because it inherits its model of governance from the colonial state. Hence, as the proliferation of South Asian diasporic writing shows, there has been a growing need to question the traditional idea of the nation as an imagined community. The boundaries of the subcontinent start to blur and a second phase of the Indian diaspora, characterized by hybridity and transcultural encounters, begins. Monbinder Kaur has highlighted a fundamental difference between the first and the second wave of the Indian diaspora due to historically-motivated discontinuities (2015, p. 68). Unlike the “old” diaspora, which originated from the colonial experience and was characterized by a break with the homeland, the “new” Indian diaspora, which started

out of India's globalization, is based on a connection with the homeland. Amitav Ghosh has defined this new phase as a "genuine historical anomaly" (1989, p. 76). He has acknowledged that Indian migrants who belong to the modern diasporic wave maintain a close relationship with their motherland not so much through the reproduction of social and political institutions, such as language and religion, as through culture and imagination. This is the reason why writers – "the specialists of imagination" (Ghosh, 1989, p. 76) – play an important part in the context of the diaspora-motherland relationship. Fakrul Alam, in his essay "The Mythos of Return and Recent Indian English Diasporic Fiction", has explained that while in the first phase of Indian English fiction its writers were nearly all rooted in the Indian subcontinent and focused almost entirely on the daily experience of Indians, in the second phase, an increasing number of writers began to make the life of diasporic Indians their main subject (2013, p. 248).

As Ruth Maxey also confirms, the years between 1970 and 2010 reflect the modern explosion of South Asian immigrant literature, both novels and short stories (2012). The writers located beyond the borders of India do not position themselves out-of-place, but in-between two cultures, which is a privileged standpoint and a locus of potential. On the one hand, they never leave their homeland completely because the spaces of India travel with the migrant and remain alive through imagination. As Ghosh puts it, "[e]ventually the place and the realities that accompany it vanish from memory and only the words . . . remain. The place, India, becomes in fact an empty space, mapped purely by words" (1989, p. 77). On the other hand, despite being deeply rooted in the Indian consciousness, diasporic writers show a significant engagement with the world as they deal with the hyphenated identities of the migrant subjects and "the bodily, psychological, and spiritual effects of belonging fully nowhere" (Friedman, 2004, p. 191).

The discourses around such a prominent force of world culture as the Indian literature of diaspora, however, have demonstrated a universalizing tendency in tackling the diasporic phenomenon from an unmarked, normalizing male perspective. In other words, until recently, the intersection between diaspora and gender has been overlooked. Aparna Rayaprol, in her book, *Negotiating Identities: Women in the Indian Diaspora* (1997), draws attention to the lack of social sciences research on the gendered aspects of migration.

Gender . . . has not been a significant analytic category in a number of studies about immigration. Nevertheless, the gender dimension is particularly significant as the experience of crisis as well as attempted resolution to it are both gendered. Immigrant women's experience cannot be treated as if they are identical to men's as their very reasons for entering alien society and culture may be different from those of men. (pp. 5-6)

Associating diaspora with a patriarchal dimension, thus analyzing the mobility of masculine subjects as primary agents of the formation of diaspora, would mean overlooking the specific individual experiences of women, and, consequently, ignoring the fact that the onus of retaining memories of home, reproducing them within the new place, and acting as cultural custodians is typically feminine. The “patriarchal and heteronormative underpinnings” of diaspora advocated by Gayatri Gopinath in her book, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Culture* (2005, p. 5) and the consequent primacy of patriarchal interpretations of the term have also been challenged by Stuart Hall, who rejects the monolithic interpretation of diasporic identity. He points out that diaspora is neither a phenomenon nor a historical fact, but, rather, a process and the resulting cultural identity is better defined by fluidity than fixity.

The diasporic experience as I intend it here is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite difference, by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (1990, p. 235)

In other words, Hall defines diaspora as a human phenomenon, lived and experienced differently depending on the contexts and the personal histories of the people involved, including their gender. Thus, in his view, cultural identity is not an essence, but a positioning and is always constituted through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. Unlike transnationalism, which speaks to more impersonal forces, such as globalization and capitalism (Brazier and Mannur, 2003, p. 8), diaspora refers to a dispersion of subjects. And this dispersal is based on the metaphor of the scattering or sowing of seeds – as the Greek origin of the noun “diaspora” suggests – which is traditionally interpreted from an androcentric perspective that emphasizes “active male procreation and patrilineal descent” (Kosnick, 2013, p. 123). This view, however, ignores the home-making role of women in the new land. Hence, it is imperative to draw on Hall’s study of the phenomenon and understand it as a gendered – and not general – process. As such, it needs to be looked at not only through the examination of different contexts, but also from the point of view of gender, which is a central organizing principle of the migrant’s life.

By focusing on Jhumpa Lahiri’s short stories “Mrs. Sen’s” (1999) and “The Third and Final Continent” (1999), I take into consideration the personal diasporic experiences that the protagonists live – as a woman and a man, respectively – through their different engagement with the material world. More specifically,

in the critical analysis that follows, I investigate the things onto which the diasporic protagonists of the two selected short stories project their identity in order to understand whether they lead their existence in the present or in the past. Through my object-oriented close reading I also intend to highlight how diaspora – and the processes of estrangement and integration it implies – is not only lived at a spatial and emotional level, but is also materialized in a mutual constitution of things and socio-cultural processes.

2. Diasporic things, diasporic memories

In a situation in which home needs to be reimagined, much of what the subject carries over is refashioned to facilitate a sense of belonging. Immigrants have to come to terms with the spiritual, material, and even linguistic luggage they carry or inherit. Salman Rushdie, in his novel *Shame* (1984), explores the nature of this luggage.

When individuals come unstuck from their native land, they are called migrants. . . . What is the best thing about migrant peoples and seceded nations? I think it is their hopefulness. . . . And what's the worst? It is the emptiness of one's luggage. I'm speaking of invisible suitcases, not the physical, perhaps cardboard, variety containing a few meaning-drained mementos: we have come unstuck from more than land. We have floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time. (p. 91)

While Rushdie talks about the symbolic luggage migrants carry over to the new land, Said, in *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (1986), writes of the objects “heavy with memory” cherished by the Palestinians living in exile.

[A]lbums, rosary beads, shawls, little boxes. . . . We carry them about, hang them up on every new set of walls we shelter in, reflect lovingly on them. Then we do not notice the bitterness, but it continues and grows nonetheless. Nor do we acknowledge the frozen immobility of our attitudes. In the end, the past owns us. (p. 14)

Exilic subjects' identity, then, is embodied by the objects they carry with them to every land they inhabit. They are elements of cultural signification, and, as Bhabha defines them, “contingent and arbitrary signs and symbols that signify the affective life of the national culture” (1994, p. 203). Said, however, also points out a significant risk posed by the attachment to these objects of memory, that is, to remain trapped in a past life which is no longer real.

When discussing things in the diaspora, memory inevitably occupies a prominent position. As Femke Stock argues, at the core of the concept of diaspora lies the image of the remembered home, far both in space and time (2013, p. 24). The past continues to speak to the displaced subject who enacts an “imaginative rediscovery” (Hall, 1990, p. 224) of his or her previous life. This means that memories of home are not factual reproductions, but “fluid reconstructions set against the backdrop of the remembering subject’s current positioning and conceptualization of home” (Stock, 2013, p. 24). In other words, diasporic people are involved in what Aristotle defines as “anamnesis”, that is, the active reproduction of the past, as opposed to “mneme” or simple evocation of the past (in Jain, 2015, p. 7). The acts of remembrance performed through photographs, places, re-enactments of past events and people, in fact, play a crucial role in the way identity and selfhood are reconstituted in diaspora. Keya Ganguly, for instance, conducted a study on the role of memory in Bengali middle-class diasporic families (like the one portrayed in “Mrs. Sen’s”) and discovered that the recalling of the past often involves a selective appropriation of certain memories as a cure for the painful fragmentation of the present (2001, p. 17). However, while the narration of memory evoked by things can be very positive since they activate processes of self-analysis, self-discovery, and relocation, its impact on the perception of the present can be problematic, especially for women. In her study, Ganguly noted that memories act differently for men and women. For men, the past functions only as an affirmation of how much better off they are in the present and as a reiteration of how migration has liberated them. Women, on the other hand, dwell on the comforts of their pre-immigrant lives and idealize the past.

Re-making the past . . . serves at least a dual purpose. It is a way of coming to terms with the present without being seen to criticize the *status quo*; it also helps to recuperate a sense of the self not dependent on criteria handed down by others – the past is what the women can claim as their own. The past is seen as autonomous and possessing an authority not related to the privileges acquired through marriage and emigration. (p. 107)

What women recall with particular fondness, Ganguly adds, are the memories of a female community, kinship, communal ties, and a certain authority that they had in the household, which is lost in the immigrant context. Maurice Halbwachs defines it as “collective memory” (p. 38), which is not based on things that happened to oneself personally, but on the remembrance of events, languages, and attitudes that reflect one’s membership of a group. Memory, then, is never self-contained or isolated, but embedded in a continuum of events,

people, or environments, and is often intermixed with imagination. Moreover, since memory works differently according to the individual perception of events, different mediums of remembering are involved depending on the subject who remembers as well as the context of remembrance. The things through which memories work within homes, landscapes, and inner-scapes offer an important clue to understanding the role of the past for a diasporic subject, its relationship with the present, and its impact on the future.

In the next section, a critical analysis of the diasporic things in “Mrs. Sen’s” and “The Third and Final Continent” is provided in order to understand whether the emotional and physical baggage they represent in the hostland facilitates or impedes belonging. By examining the material objects the protagonists orientate themselves towards, an evaluation of their different processes of identity construction in the West is possible.

3. Belonging(s) in “Mrs. Sen’s” and “The Third and Final Continent”

An increasing number of women writers have been dealing with the implications of being female in the diaspora. For Indian women writers, who form a majority of the Indian writers who have emigrated to the West, a change of location is an opportunity to break with the past and build a new space, thus challenging and revising women’s traditional roles. In postcolonial India, women have been pushed to the margins of society, despite the national ideals of freedom and self-regulation. Therefore, the rise of a transnational horizon has opened up new possibilities for them to claim their space in the new geographical location.

Among the numerous Indian women writers who have emigrated to the West, such as Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kiran Desai, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Anita Rau Badami, the author on which this chapter is focused, Jhumpa Lahiri, is one who fictionalizes the multiple cultural tensions of diasporic life through a sensitive and realistic insight into the complications of being feminine. Moreover, as a second-generation Indian-American writer, she explores the diasporic experience from a perspective which differentiates her from first-generation authors. She deeply explores diaspora dilemmas without idealizing women’s experience in the new culture and is fully aware of the connection between identity and everyday life. Lahiri was born to a Bengali family from Kolkata¹ in 1967 in London and moved to the United States when she was just three years

1 In 2001, the government of West Bengal decided to officially change its capital city’s name from Calcutta (the Anglicized version of the Bengali name “Kalikata”) to Kolkata, in order to reflect its

old. As a second-generation immigrant, she has personally experienced what it feels like to be Indian growing up in a foreign land while maintaining a strong link with the family's native culture. In an interview entitled "My Two Lives" (2006), Lahiri discusses the difficulties of having a hyphenated identity and the importance of writing as a way of embracing her Indian-American identity. She has travelled several times to Kolkata, which she describes as "a bustling unruly city, so different from the small New England town" where she was raised (in Jha, 2008, p. 139). Her recurrent visits to Kolkata initiated her talent for fiction writing, as she has stated herself: "Calcutta nourished my mind, my eyes as a writer and my interest in seeing things from a different point of view" (p. 139). She was the first South Asian writer to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000 with her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*. This collection combines stories set in the United States with others set in India, unlike her second collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, that is set entirely in the West.

Interpreter of Maladies, published in 1999, obtained great popularity in both India and the United States. It focuses on Indian migrants' problems of adaptation, integration, and assimilation in the West and portrays characters dealing with identity crises, the trauma of loss, and the struggles for the negotiation of a new identity.

According to Noelle Brada-Williams (2014), the common theme that links all nine stories together – which makes the book a short story cycle rather than a simple collection of short stories – is the frequent representation of extreme care and neglect demonstrated by the characters. I would narrow Brada-Williams's statement by arguing that the recurring theme is more precisely the carefully executed rituals that mark the relationships between the characters as well as their link with their lost homes. This will be the focus of the examination of the short stories "Mrs. Sen's" and "The Third and Final Continent" provided in this paper. More specifically, I will look at the material world through which the rituals are performed by the protagonists within the diasporic context and evaluate whether they act as anchors to a lost past or propellants for a new life ahead.

3.1. "Mrs. Sen's"

"Mrs. Sen's" is the sixth short story included in Lahiri's collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). It occupies a unique position in her corpus of writing as it is a piece about a first-generation female immigrant based on her mother's personal

Bengali pronunciation. Here, I am using the new name of the city, while Lahiri, in an interview focused on her childhood, uses the old version of the name.

experience of babysitting American children after arriving in the United States. Jhumpa Lahiri's short story focuses on the process of adaptation of a young Indian woman who has moved to the United States because of her husband's decision to work abroad. Although the protagonist is a woman, the story is told by a third-person narrator whose point of view coincides with that of an eleven-year-old boy, Eliot, who is looked after every afternoon by Mrs. Sen. Given their relationship of mutual sympathy, Eliot progressively senses Mrs. Sen's state of unease and disorientation due to a condition of constrained displacement. The woman indirectly admits her disapproval of her husband's decision to leave India through comments such as "[h]ere, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 115). Through Eliot's eyes and his acute sensitivity, we are provided with a clear picture of the Indian woman's psychological life, dominated by feelings of stasis and entrapment. Trapped in a condition of social disorientation, Mrs. Sen finds confidence and strength only when, in the privacy of her home, she surrounds herself with familiar objects reminding her of India.

One of the most important things owned by Mrs. Sen is a blade she had brought from India "where apparently there was at least one in every household" (p. 115). It represents a very strong cultural element and Eliot immediately notices the relevance it has in Mrs. Sen's daily life, as she uses it in her ritual of cutting vegetables into pieces on the living room floor. In that moment of the day, Mrs. Sen transforms herself into a confident woman mastering perfectly the art of handling the cooking tool. However, only apparently does the contact with this Indian object provide confidence and relief. In fact, it only increases Mrs. Sen's sense of frustration as in her memories, the blade is associated with the moments of joy and sharing she experienced in India, surrounded by the chatter of her family and neighborhood women while cooking vegetables.

"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". (p. 115)

This image of community life contrasts vividly with the loneliness in which Mrs. Sen performs this ritual at her new home in America. The feelings of incompatibility, nostalgia, sense of loss, and disruption intensify her endeavor to belong, to make a house home. However, by fetishizing this Indian artifact, the woman paradoxically increases the distance that separates her from

India as she transforms the blade into a symbolic entity with spiritual qualities embodying an idealized place.

The inauthenticity of the India recreated by Mrs. Sen is also represented by her clothes and body ornaments. The garments we wear play a fundamental social role as they are the way we present ourselves to the world and inevitably alter others' perception of who we are. For a migrant, traditional clothes are ever-present reminders of the homeland and keep his or her original identity alive, thus evoking a multiplicity of self. Mrs. Sen's habit of wearing saris even in the Western context, despite the very different weather conditions from India, suggests she keeps identifying herself with her original culture, which she is not willing to give up. The cultural anthropologist Daniel Miller led a study on the sari as a piece of cloth which does not merely represent Indian women, but actually constitutes who they are. In his book *Stuff* (2010), he claims that the sari wears the Indian woman – not the opposite – and it makes her what she is, both woman and Indian.

Mrs. Sen's colorful saris are her distinctive trait as Eliot notices the day he first meets her: "She wore a shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys, more suitable for an evening affair than for that quiet, faintly drizzling August afternoon" (p. 112). The sari represents a strong anchor to Mrs. Sen's past, which is her only certainty, and in the moments of strong pathos and emotional involvement, she instinctively touches her sari as if it could transfer its symbolic power to her. For example, when Mrs. Sen recalls India while talking to Eliot's mother, "she neatened the border of her sari where it rose diagonally across her chest" (p. 113); or while she is having an argument with her husband over the phone, "she seemed only to be replying to things, and wiping her face with the ends of one of the saris" (p. 126). Saris also dominate the scene in which Mrs. Sen suffers a real nervous breakdown, when she is unable to get her husband to bring fish for dinner. After bursting into tears, she goes to her bedroom, where "she flung open the drawers of the bureau and the door of the closet, filled with saris of every imaginable texture and shade, brocaded with gold and silver threads. Some were transparent, tissue thin, others as thick as drapes" (p. 125). As she sifts through the saris, she cries: "'When have I ever worn this one? And this? And this?' She tossed the saris one by one from the drawers, then pried several from their hangers. They landed like a pile of tangled sheets on the bed" (p. 125). As happens with the Indian blade, the cultural reminders of India accentuate, if possible, her feelings of frustration over living a life she does not want and keep her stuck even more firmly in a liminal space, between an unreachable past and an equally uncertain present. The emblems of festivities, rituals, and ceremonies can only increase the distance from a life she has left behind and cannot access in her present situation.

Another body ornament that captures Eliot's attention is the vermilion powder Mrs. Sen applies every day on her scalp, over the line dividing her braided hair. She explains to Eliot: "I must wear the powder every day, . . . for the rest of the days that I am married. 'Like a wedding ring, you mean?' 'Exactly, Eliot, exactly like a wedding ring. Only with no fear of losing it in the dishwasher'" (p. 117). Read in the light of the whole story, this symbol of marriage is a strong metonymic element not only for what it represents culturally, but also as a signifier of her personal married life. Indeed, the straight scarlet line suggests her husband's role in the fracture of her identity, which is never going to heal unless she finds a way of merging the two halves of her self: that of an Indian woman devoted to her original family and tradition, and that of a migrant woman who is supposed to integrate in the new place, while keeping her Indian culture alive. The red line on her hair also evokes the straight line drawn by Mr. Sen in terms of his expectations towards her: it is the clear direction he has established for both of their lives, without considering his wife's possible difficulties in coping with the standards he has set.

As Sarah Ahmed suggests (2006), the lines on our bodies, such as the laugh line or the furrow created by the frown, are external traces of an interior world. Mrs. Sen's artificial line on her skin is a symbolic sign of the past, a way of facing and being faced by others. She faces others as an Indian woman unwilling to give up her tradition even in the Western world. On the other hand, other people see her as a subject out of place whose body lines exteriorize a backward orientation of her interior world.

This is not only evident in Mrs. Sen's habit of adorning her body, but also in the relationship she establishes with her American home. Home has an ambivalent meaning in the story, which reflects the confusion in Mrs. Sen's mind about which is her real home now that she has moved to the United States. An example of this is the confused use of the word "home" noticed by Eliot: "Eliot understood that when Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 116). The ambiguity of the concept of home is not only related to the liminal position occupied by the protagonist, but also to the material and symbolic value home has in the story, where the physical world merges with the metaphysical aspect of things. A concrete manifestation of the home she has left in India is a cassette recording of all her relatives' voices.

[S]he played a cassette of people talking in her language – a farewell present, she told Eliot, that her family had made for her. As the succession of voices laughed and said their bit, Mrs. Sen identified each speaker. 'My third uncle, my cousin, my father, my grandfather.' One speaker sang a song. Another recited a poem. The final voice

on the tape belonged to Mrs. Sen's mother. It was quieter and sounded more serious than the others. There was a pause between each sentence, and during this pause Mrs. Sen translated for Eliot: 'The price of goat rose two rupees. The mangoes at the market are not very sweet. College Street is flooded.' She turned off the tape. 'These are things that happened the day I left India.' The next day she played the same cassette all over again. (p. 128)

By continuing to listen to those voices and hear the same stories, Mrs. Sen positions her own existence in the past, as if it were frozen in time, stuck in the moments and contexts in which those events were produced. The deep feeling of nostalgia for the people and life she has left in India is temporarily alleviated by the letters she occasionally receives from her family. Eliot learns that "[t]wo things . . . made Mrs. Sen happy. One was the arrival of a letter from her family (p. 121); the other thing "was fish from the seaside" (p. 123). Her two sources of happiness derive from an ideological contact with her motherland and mother culture. However, while life in India goes on, she feels excluded from the natural cycle of time. This happens, for example, when she gets a letter announcing the birth of her niece: "My sister has had a baby girl. By the time I see her, depending if Mr. Sen gets his tenure, she will be three years old. Her own aunt will be a stranger. If we sit side by side on a train she will not know my face" (p. 122). Another letter informs her of her grandfather's death, causing an emotional breakdown in Mrs. Sen, not only because of the sad news, but also because she feels totally excluded from all life cycle events.

The same detachment from real life is visible in Mrs. Sen's new home in the United States, namely in the way she has arranged the furniture. When Eliot enters the apartment for the first time, he notices that the pieces of furniture are all covered: "White drum-shaped lampshades flanking the sofa were still wrapped in the manufacturer's plastic. The TV and the telephone were covered by pieces of yellow fabric with scalloped edges" (p. 112). Such an absence of contact between her – the main inhabitant of the house spending the whole day there – and what should be a familiar place denotes a sterile relationship, lacking in emotional involvement of any kind. No intimate bond has developed between the woman and her home, as if she had not settled in permanently.

Mrs. Sen's failure to inhabit the present and her present space engenders a series of acts of remembrance connecting her to her past, when she had a defined identity and a clear position in the world. She, therefore, enacts a material recreation of her original culture through a series of "diasporic things", representing a tangible bond with the motherland as well as a comforting presence in the new home.

While for Mrs. Sen the cultural luggage brought from India is too heavy for her to be able to cope with her hyphenated identity, for the protagonist of “The Third and Final Continent” the opposite is true. His luggage, both metaphorical and physical, carried across three continents, as the title suggests, is light and, consequently, easily transportable while travelling.

3.2. “The Third and Final Continent”

“The Third and Final Continent” is undoubtedly one of the most important stories in the book *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), as also indicated by its position, being the story that closes the collection. Moreover, the message it conveys sheds a new light on the texts that precede it. Unlike “Mrs. Sen’s”, the outcome of the process of migration experienced by the unnamed protagonist of this story is far more positive. The main character and narrator is an Indian man who leaves India in 1964 as a young boy to move to London. After spending a few years there, he is offered a good job at an important American library and, a week after getting married, he leaves for Boston. As in “Mrs. Sen’s”, the Indian wife has to accept her husband’s decision to pursue his career and move to another country, thus facing a huge change in terms of culture and daily habits. Their wedding is arranged, which means that they were essentially strangers to each other before marriage. As the narrator explains, “[i]t was a duty expected of me, as it was expected of every man” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 181). This comment suggests that women are not the only victims trapped by the shackles of patriarchy and that men are also oppressed by traditional duties that deprive them of their freedom of choice and independence. The husband and wife arrive in America at two different times. The man leaves first in order to start his new job and settle in, while the woman joins him six weeks later. From that moment on, although they are almost strangers, they are a family in a new continent and are supposed to build a new life together.

Another similarity with “Mrs. Sen’s” is that a series of rituals performed by the protagonists of the story – especially the man – are presented, but the material things they entail reveal a completely different orientation of the subjects involved in the process of migration. Indeed, as my close reading will show, they are not metonymies of a “desire for homeland”, but of a “homing desire” (Brah, 2005, p. 32), that is, the constructive desire to make a certain place home through “*processes of multi-locationality across geographical cultural and psychic boundaries*” (p. 212). The homing desire contemplated by Brah is based on a form of cosmopolitanism, which Hannerz has described as “an orientation, a willingness to

engage with the other . . . an intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences” (1996, p. 103). According to this view, the cosmopolitan migrants accept the challenge of adapting to new traditions while also maintaining the old traditions in a syncretic way. Indeed, diasporic people may simultaneously adopt and transform cultural phenomena drawn from others around them by “gathering, recognizing, and applying cross-cultural scripts” (Vertovec, 2013, p. 65). Hannerz further claims that, in addition to attitudes and practices, cosmopolitanism also entails “a personal ability to make one’s way into other cultures through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting” (1996, p. 239). This outlook on migration suggests the dynamic role of the subject who does not passively accept his condition of outsider, but instead engages actively in the constitution of a new self. The things related to the male protagonist reflect this future-oriented attitude as opposed to Mrs. Sen’s nostalgic recreation of the past.

The field of food is particularly representative in this respect. The young man’s stay in London, for instance, is characterized by frugality as he is penniless and is there to try and get an education and find a job in the West. He shares an apartment with twelve other young Bengalis, like himself, and all they can afford is egg curry: “We lived three or four to a room, shared a single, icy toilet, and took turns cooking pots of egg curry, which we ate with our hands on a table covered with newspapers” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 173). The man’s ritual of eating Indian food is not fueled by the need to keep the contacts with his homeland alive, but is dictated by the circumstances of a simple lifestyle. No symbolic value is hidden behind the consumption of Indian food – it is just a recurring choice shared by young Bengali migrants to save money and try and build a life. Once in the United States, during the six weeks he spends there without his wife, he radically changes his culinary habits. Describing his first day in America, he states: “I bought a plastic bowl and a spoon at Woolworth’s” and “a small carton of milk and a box of cornflakes. This was my first meal in America” (p. 175). The man’s purchase and consumption of food is profoundly different from Mrs. Sen’s. Unlike the Indian woman, who spent hours selecting the right ingredients and cooking them with passion, the protagonist of this story devotes neither time nor care to what he eats. As opposed to Mrs. Sen’s ritual of chopping vegetables with a specific Indian tool, the man’s habit is to eat the same meal every day, using a spoon as his only tool: “I ate cornflakes and milk, morning and night, and bought some bananas for variety, slicing them into the bowl with the edge of my spoon” (p. 175). He consumes a quick, ready-made meal bought at the supermarket in line with the Western lifestyle.

Another significant thing at the center of a recurring act performed by the man is his newspaper. Every night, before going to bed, he reads the *Boston*

Globe. The man says: “I read every article and advertisement, so that I would grow familiar with things” (p. 176). He is not afraid of the culture of the host land. On the contrary, he is curious about it and is eager to understand it in order to accelerate his process of integration. Moreover, to read a daily newspaper means to be focused on the present and involved in the society and culture one lives in. The man protagonist realizes that alienation can only be overcome by opening himself up to the new world he is inhabiting, trying to understand rather than being overwhelmed by the differences from his own culture. For instance, on his flight to America, the man reads *The Student Guide to North America*, a paperback volume thanks to which he learns, among other things, that “Americans drove on the right side of the road, not the left, and that they called a lift an elevator and an engaged phone busy” (p. 174). Such behavior reflects Hannerz’s definition of cosmopolitanism as willingness to engage with the other (1996, p. 103) as well as the ability to make one’s way into cultures through observation and reflection (p. 239).

As far as clothes are concerned, they are less problematic for men than for women as Indian men’s garments are easier to adapt to the Western context. However, an episode that took place a few days after the protagonist’s arrival in the United States can be read as an attempt to open himself up to the host culture. The young man arranges a meeting with the owner of an apartment as he wants to find cheap accommodation for himself until his wife joins him. In order to impress the lady he is going to meet, he wears the clothes that seem most appropriate to him for such an occasion. He says: “In spite of the heat I wore a coat and a tie, regarding the event as I would any other interview; I had never lived in a home with a person who was not Indian” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 177). He is ready to bridge the gap between the Indian and the American cultures, thus adapting to the cultural standards of the place in which he lives. This image contrasts vividly with the description of Mrs. Sen’s meeting with Eliot’s mother for the job as babysitter. In spite of the conventions of the local culture, she wears a shimmering white sari and a pair of slippers as she receives Eliot and his mother at home. Interestingly, the man protagonist of “The Third and Final Continent” also walks barefoot in the house, specifying, however, that: “I still felt strange wearing shoes indoors” (p. 185), implying that later he will get used to this Western habit.

Six weeks after the young man’s arrival, Mala, the protagonist’s Indian wife, obtains her Green Card and flies to America to join her husband. Hence, the second part of the story is focused on the process of integration of the woman and the evolution of the couple through their new life together. While the man was in America settling in and getting accustomed to the local culture, Mala had stayed

at her brother-in-law's house, as tradition requires: "She had worn an iron bangle on her wrist, and applied vermilion powder to the part in her hair, to signify to the world that she was a bride" (p. 189). They had lived two quite distinct lives: the young man was orientated towards the future and actively involved in a process of change during which he abandoned certain cultural habits and acquired others; the woman was orientated towards the past, perpetrating tradition by wearing the Indian symbols associated with marriage.

The moment she gets off the plane, her husband recognizes her as she is wearing a colorful sari that covers her head in sign of modesty, as perfect Indian wives do. Her arrival disrupts the man's life. He is already used to American life, but he is not used to his wife, as he himself says: "I was used to it all by then: used to cornflakes and milk, . . . used to sitting on the bench with Mrs. Croft. The only thing I was not used to was Mala. Nevertheless I did what I had to do" (p. 190). Indeed, in order to welcome her, he speaks Bengali – "for the first time in America" (p. 191) – and prepares egg curry at home, which they ate with their hands – "another thing [he] had not yet done in America" (p. 191) –. The first days of cohabitation plunge the man into a world he had forgotten. Paradoxically, he perceives the Indian habits resuscitated by his wife in the American context as strange. He reflects:

I still was not used to coming home to an apartment that smelled of steamed rice, and finding that the basin in the bathroom was always wiped clean, . . . a cake of Pears soap from India resting in the soap dish. I was not used to the fragrance of coconut oil she rubbed every night into her scalp, or the delicate sound her bracelets made as she moved about the apartment. (p. 192)

All the symbols associated with India, such as the steamed rice, the bar of Pears soap, the coconut oil, and the bracelets, paradoxically provoke a feeling of estrangement in the man protagonist. A process of reversal is occurring, that is, he has become unfamiliar with the habits of his own native culture. His wife understands this and instead of remaining obstinately stuck in Indian traditions, she demonstrates her acceptance of change. A case in point is when she stops cooking rice for breakfast and serves cereals and milk.

As two wives who emigrated to the West to follow their husbands' projects, Mrs. Sen and Mala share the same experiences of uprooting from their homeland. However, a big difference between them can be noted. Their respective marriages are based on completely different values: while Mr. and Mrs. Sen's relationship is dominated by silence, individualism, and distance, Mala and her husband talk, explore the city, make friends and plan things together.

Together we explored the city and met other Bengalis, some of whom are still friends today. . . . We bought an Instamatic camera with which to document our life together, and I took pictures of her posing in front of the Prudential building, so that she could send them to her parents. At night we kissed, shy at first but quickly bold, and discovered pleasure and solace in each other's arms. (p. 196)

As this quotation shows, a growing intimacy links the two people, which helps them find a good balance between the old life they have just left behind and the new life waiting ahead. Unlike Mr. Sen, who never seems to show any sympathy for his wife's sufferings, the protagonist of "The Third and Final Continent" realizes the difficulties Mala has faced: "Like me, Mala had traveled far from home, not knowing where she was going or what she would find, for no reason other than to be my wife" (p. 195). The collaboration within the couple, then, is fundamental for a successful integration in the host country.

A few observations can be made before concluding the analysis of this story. Firstly, the story Lahiri concludes her book with offers a sense of hope linked to the experience of migration because although adaptation can be painful, integration is possible for both men and women. This means that not all diasporas sustain an ideology of return and, therefore, a "desire for homeland" – they may also be based on a "homing desire" (Brah, 2005, p. 32), a constructive ideal of home in a new land. The couple's joint effort to integrate in the diasporic place demonstrates that the tension between homeland ties and the new home is a propellant to find strategies of integration while also honoring the original culture. Secondly, the experience of migration described in "The Third and Final Continent" is what Van Hear has defined as "circular migration" (2002), that is, a kind of diaspora in which the subjects involved are well settled in the foreign land, but maintain a strong bond with their place of origin. Luis Eduardo Guarnizo has noted the practice among migrants of "transnational living", which is referred to as "a wide panoply of social, cultural, political and economic cross-border relations that emerge, both wittingly and unwittingly, from migrants' drive to maintain and reproduce their social milieu of origin from afar" (2003, p. 667). The narrator and his wife's reproduction of India is not paralyzing, however, as it was for Mrs. Sen, but coexists in a syncretic way with the adoption of the American culture. Finally, then, it may be argued that a necessary pre-requisite for settling is a dynamic conversation between homes. Memory needs to be balanced by projects, acts of remembrance by acts of construction.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the things I took into consideration in Lahiri's short stories has highlighted a number of interesting points. On the one hand, the things examined in "Mrs. Sen's" show her continued engagement with her culture of origin as well as her everyday longing for the tastes, smells, and sounds of the home she left behind. Mrs. Sen's processing and working on things like food, the cooking utensils, and the Indian memorabilia inside her home suggest the physicality of her activities, performed mainly with her hands. Her active duties, however, never involve things related to Western culture, like the car, which are usually kept at a distance or totally avoided. The visual reminders of Indianness within her home anchor her to her past and the familiar things she surrounds herself with alienate her from the present. In other words, she never leaves India as it is always kept alive through material memories which, however, constitute a virtual prison. India is a constant presence while America is an absence in both the physical and the emotional sphere. The clash between the Western exterior and the Indian interior, for instance, shows Mrs. Sen's clear resistance to the dominant culture. However, although she uses Indian artifacts as an anchor to a sense of self, they only contribute to increasing her sense of alienation and loss. Hence, the cultural baggage she has carried over from her homeland is too heavy and impedes integration in the hostland.

In stark contrast, the things I have discussed from the short story "The Third and Final Continent" show the man protagonist's orientation towards the future, an active engagement with the construction of a new identity, as well as a projection towards the outside rather than the inside of the home. The guidebook and the newspapers he habitually reads, for instance, show his desire to understand the society in which he lives and reduce the cultural distance that separates him from local traditions. The consumption of a certain type of food – which does not involve any ritual or nostalgic reproduction of his original culture – also reveals the narrator's flexibility in terms of adaptation to new points of reference. His personal adjustment to American society is so successful that he ends up perceiving as strange the habits and things associated with India, such as the smell of steamed rice or coconut oil, the habit of eating with one's hands, and his wife's traditional Indian clothes and jewels. Unlike Mrs. Sen, who is only comfortable in the closed space of the home, surrounded by the things that link her to the past, the man protagonist of this story is frequently depicted outside, both alone and with his wife, surrounded by the new places he is inhabiting. As for his marital relationship, it is based on the simultaneous remembrance and revision of Indian traditions. The protagonist couple of this story are capable of balancing

forgetting and remembering. Their shared effort to belong and make their new house a home allows them to settle down successfully and accomplish a mission as great as that of astronauts who familiarize themselves with an alien land. The home they build together, in its physical and emotional details, is not a way of recalling the past – as in “Mrs. Sen’s” – but a means of changing and rebuilding from the past.

In both stories representations of rituals are included, but the outcome is completely different for the two protagonists. Mrs. Sen’s recurring habits entrap her in a mental and physical prison, while the repeated actions performed by the narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” contribute to his progressive assimilation in the United States. Consequently, the material artifacts through which the two protagonists perform their rites orientate them in opposite directions. To use Butler’s expression (1988), Mrs. Sen is affected by “Repetitive Strain Injury”, that is, she is stuck in a certain alignment as an effect of the repetition of a series of acts. Repetition, as the story also shows, is not neutral since it orientates the body towards specific things and the values they embody. Certainly, this is a painful condition as Bhabha, in his contribution entitled “DissemiNation”, explains with a question: “What kind of ‘present’ is this if it is a consistent process of surmounting the ghostly time of repetition?” (1994, p. 205).

This is not the case of the narrator in “The Third and Final Continent”, who, being a man, has a different, generally lighter cultural burden to carry. Avoiding simplistic depictions of women as passive victims and being aware that today women have various degrees of agency in the diaspora – in terms of choices with respect to migration, involvement in decision-making processes within the household, political mobilization and participation in social and cultural activities (Al-Ali, 2013) – it can be argued that men have more opportunities to look at the future by achieving self-fulfillment in their jobs and public life, while women are often stuck in a position of in-betweenness, as they no longer belong to the homeland, but still do not belong to the hostland. Consequently, women often develop confused identities and a sense of displacement, which affects their strategies of new identity formation. Thus, they find themselves constrained in a constant tussle between past and present. Hence, in order to understand the complex phenomenon of the diasporic experience, an intersectional perspective needs to be adopted relating gender and diaspora. In this way, individual experiences and the specific contexts in which they occur can be considered instead of generic accounts which often exclude the female voices.

In conclusion, the analysis of the materialization of diaspora contributes to shedding new light on the link between gender and migration. Diasporic gendered identities are forged through the production, circulation, and consumption

of material things, which constitute both the physical and the spiritual baggage carried over to the new land. Things are not simply personal belongings, passive tools, or mere accessories disseminated around the home, but perform diasporic memories – both personal and social – and play a central role in the process of integration in the new culture. The entanglement of things, values, and social relations that emerged from a close reading of Lahiri's two short stories has shown that "to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul" (Weil, 1952, p. 41). However, clinging to one's roots impedes movement and this is incompatible with the very idea of diaspora, which is a "travelling term" (Clifford, 1994, p. 302). In order to fully belong what is needed, then, is not baggage heavy with memories, but baggage light enough to be carried on the journeys back and forth between past and present undergone by the identities in flux.

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ISBN 978-989-755-831-3

