Cristina-Teodora BRAIŢ
(West University Timișoara)

Of Food and Fashion: A Dual Approach to Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Fiction

Abstract: Jhumpa Lahiri is an influential American writer of Indian (Asian) origin whose work has received a number of labels from American to South Asian and global. Her multifaceted short fiction explores topics such as immigration, gender equality and the forging of 'hybrid' female identities. The complex enterprise that immigrant women of Indian descent embark on relies on such cornerstones as male-female relationships, culture shock, capitalist practices, and Indian traditions. This study aims to pinpoint the role and varied implications the Bengali author assigns to food and clothing as defining components of the Indian heritage in the process of migration from the homeland to the adoptive country. To this end, I shall carry out an analysis of selected short stories from Lahiri's two collections published to date – *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) - and show how the aforementioned key identity factors intertwine in a ''matrix of domination and resistance' to counter the effects of the double marginalization of female immigrants.

Key words: immigration, female identity, South Asian, matrix of domination

Rezumat: (**Despre mâncare şi modă – O abordare duală a imigrării în opera de ficţiune a lui Jhumpa Lahiri)** Jhumpa Lahiri este o influentă scriitoare americană de origine indiană a cărei operă a fost catalogată în diverse moduri, de la americană, la sud-asiatică sau globală. Proza sa scurtă, multifaţetată, abordează teme ca imigrarea, egalitatea între sexe şi formarea identităţilor feminine „hibride". Iniţiativa complexă în care se angajează femeile de origine indiană are la bază concepte ca relaţia dintre sexe, şoc cultural, practici capitaliste şi tradiţie indiană. Studiul de faţă intenţionează să stabilească rolul şi variile implicaţii pe care autoarea bengaleză le rezervă mâncării şi îmbrăcăminţii ca şi componente definitorii ale moştenirii indiene în procesul migrării din ţara de origine spre cea adoptivă. Alături de eternul interes în obiceiurile vestimentare feminine ca determinant nonlingvistic şi manifestare exterioară a identităţii, s-a deschis o nouă şi prolifică direcţie investigativă pe teren culinar. Mâncarea şi obiceiurile alimentare sunt tot mai adesea introduse în ecuaţia indetităţii individuale sau de grup, ca mărci ale diferenţei sau indentificării. Ca urmare, voi efectua o analiză a unor povestiri selectate din cele două volume publicate de către Lahiri până la această dată – *Interpret de maladii* (1999) şi *Pământ neîmblânzit* (2008) – pentru a evidenţia felul în care mâncarea şi îmbrăcămintea ca factori-cheie ai identităţii se împletesc într-o „matrice de dominaţie şi rezistenţă" pentru a contracara efectele dublei marginalizări a imigrantelor.

Cuvinte-cheie: imigrare, identitate feminină, Asia sudică, matricea dominaţiei

Jhumpa Lahiri, a young and influential American writer of Indian (Asian) origin, has received a number of labels from postcolonial to American, South Asian and global, as her multifaceted short fiction explores topics such as immigration, gender equality and the forging of 'hybrid' female identities. Although the complex enterprise upon which immigrant women of Indian descent embark relies on multiple cornerstones including male-female relationships, culture shock, capitalist practices, and Indian traditions, one of the most compelling lines of study follows the role and varied implications the Bengali author assigns to food and clothing as defining components of the Indian heritage in the process of migrating from the homeland to the adoptive country.

In order to assess and understand the position and identitary makeup of the postcolonial subject depicted in Jhumpa Lahiri's two volumes of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), I will turn to recent scholarship in

feminist studies which proposes the concept of *assemblage* 'as a way of mapping smaller shifts in the global economy, culture, and politics that have remained unattended' (Reddy 2013: 31) The exploration of postcolonial phenomena through assemblages seeks to provide an alternative to the observation and recording of large-scale transformations that occur on the political and social scale (Puar 2007; Rai 2010) by redirecting attention to the formative experiences of the individual that allow a different, more personal type of insight.

The food-clothing assemblage might come across at first as an unlikely association, considering the different implications, history, and sociology that have been ascribed to each. However, alongside the fundamental position that the necessity for sustenance and protection from the vicissitudes of nature holds on the pyramid of human needs, the importance and significance that people give to the two defining areas of human existence transports these areas onto the territory of sociological and cultural constructs. The ubiquitous 'You are what you eat' truism could easily be extended into 'You are what you eat *and what you wear*' and there is an outpouring of literature – in fields such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology - investigating the connection between human identity and eating and sartorial practices enforcing the idea that food and clothes are rarely just shallow appendixes to one's existence.

Theoretical approaches to food and eating practices, falling under three great categories of functionalist, structuralist and developmental, have contributed to a better understanding of what alimentary habits mean to and how they affect the human body, and by extension socialization as a larger process. Among the resonant names associated with the sociological study of food, a few are worth mentioning here as their contribution will later become relevant to my analysis of Lahiri's work. Durkheim (1984) and Davis (1966), promoters of a functionalist view on the matter, supported the analogy of society as a living organism, with specialized organs, each accomplishing a precise set of functions. Consequently, production and consumption of food were heightened to sociological importance. French anthropologist Levi-Strauss took a particular interest in culinary practices playing on the assumption that 'the examination of these surface structures would lead to the recognition of universal, underlying pattern.' (Beardsworth and Keil 1997: 61) Mary Douglas, another noted social anthropologist, closely aligned with the views of structuralism, treated food, cooking and eating as part of a social code, all items charged with meaning and messages about social constructs such as: 'hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries'. (Douglas 1975: 61) Roland Barthes also took a peripheral and loosely structured interest in the culinary field: 'For him, an item of food constitutes an item of information. All foods are seen as signs in a system of communication.' (Beardsworth and Keil 1997: 63) Alongside the well-shaped theoretical approaches by functionalists and structuralists, the lightly-theorized developmental trend has brought to sociology of food the idea of what Mennell (1985: 39), drawing on the earlier work of Elias, dubbed the 'civilization of the appetite' in the Western society which translates into a shift from external constraints underpinning the selection, production and consumption of food to internal, self-regulating mechanisms. (Elias 1982) The effects of this self-regulation have come to be known as anorexia, bulimia, vegetarianism and other forms of dieting meant to promote and sustain a certain external image of the individual.

Essential to the creation of image and self-worth, clothing and fashion have also enjoyed longstanding interest in the cultural arena. From Kant to Simmel, there has been a need to theorize and distinguish between items such as *fashion, taste,* and most importantly,

good taste. Transcending Kant's rather vague notion of *sensus communis*, Simmel tackles the idea of fashion – widely understood as the outfits that people decide to put on for different reasons – with more practicality. To him, 'fashion is a societal formation always combining two opposite forces. It is a socially acceptable and safe way to distinguish oneself from others and, at the same time, it satisfies the individual's need for social adaptation and imitation'. (Gronow 1993: 89) In postcolonial, postmodern times, fashion occupies a central role in the process of identity formation and personal expression, evidenced by an impressive number of studies, as Arora rightfully observes in her 2014 article, 'Globalized Frames of Indian Fashion': 'Postmodernism has impacted fashion by its rejection of total grand narratives and its refutation of traditions, norms and universal styles. The post-modern turn emphasizes individuality, diversity and variability of forms and style.'(Arora 2014: 18). Alternatively, fashion can be conceptualized as 'an exemple of a broader phenomenon, the creation and attribution of symbolic values to material culture' (Crane and Bovone 2006: 320). This so-termed 'object turn' in sociology emphasizes the role of garments as objects that carry and convey cultural meaning. In their 2006 article, Crane and Bovane strongly recommend a more intense focus, on the part of sociologists, on the 'vast supply of material culture in which we are embedded, as a medium for cultural change through its capacity to embody symbolic values and to change or reinforce those values in consumers when they acquire and use material objects.' (Crane and Bovone 2006: 320)

Having given a concise overview of the sociological stance on food and fashion, as well as a few brief considerations on where these two items of material culture stand in postcolonial times, I shall move on to explore the way in which the symbolic value attached to them creates a unique interplay of relations between the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's unaffected yet poignant prose.

Traditionally, the preparation of food, as well as the preoccupation with dress has been considered a female pursuit, and consequently inferior and lacking in value. Sadly enough, the above statement does not apply only to 15th century France, but has been the conclusion of numerous modern-day studies conducted by sociologists and anthropologists. Murcott (1983), DeVault (1991), Sullivan (2000), Breen (2005) have all reported similar results upon investigating the status quo in the division of domestic labor, as a whole, or 'kitchen duty' in particular: women continue to play the primary role in 'the planning, provision and preparation of meals' (Beardswoth and Keil 1997: 82) and their relegation to the territory of the kitchen supports the idea that 'these responsibilities effectively contribute to their oppression.' (DeVault 1991) An underlying tendency to please the 'head' of the household becomes apparent in the findings produced by these studies: 'The provision of proper meals, in line with the relatively conservative taste of the husband, was seen by wives as a way of showing affection and a device for retaining the husband as a breadwinner and keeping him working.' (Beardswoth and Keil 1997: 78) Moreover, the desire to orient the 'feeding work' towards satisfying the needs of the head of the family translated in men consuming in the great majority of cases the highest quality food available while women and children, who allegedly were in need of lighter nutrition, would subside most commonly on fruit, vegetables and tea, all lower quality items. (Charles and Kerr 1988; DeVault 1991)

Although the fulfilling of domestic duties may place women in a disadvantaged position in the family, and by extension, in society, the question of domination and oppression, does not take a clear-cut form, with the dominant agent and the subaltern clearly delineated, but it is rather a fluid affair often with interchangeable roles, as posited, among

others by, Patricia Hill Collins and illustrated by the complex dynamics that govern the interaction of characters in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri.

Patricia Hill Collins, although primary a theorist and supporter of feminist black thought and the rise of black feminism, has contributed to postcolonial studies a number of highly versatile concepts that may be employed in the attempt to analyze and understand the postcolonial subject regardless of their nationality or ethnicity. One such concept that I would like to rely upon is the ***matrix of domination*** that she put forward in order to underscore the fact that one's position in society is not fixed and cannot be assessed from just one, 'essentialist' standpoint. Rather, Collins asserts that 'depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed…Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives.' (Collins 2000: 227) In addition, Collins explains that people 'simultaneously experience and resist oppression at three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the system level of social institutions.' (Collins 2000: 227)

Collins' terminology and classification of the various levels of domination and oppression can be readily and successfully applied to gain new insight into the ways in which the characters in Lahiri's short stories, mostly female immigrants, relate to the culinary and sartorial sites after being transplanted in a world that they cannot fully perceive as their own. My contention is that these postcolonial subjects, who are by no means in a position of power, are able to resist different levels of oppression by making use of what is available to them: food and clothing.

The first level of oppression that female characters are confronted with derives from the ideology of their new, adoptive country and this applies particularly to first generation immigrants who have already established a sense of self in the country of origin. Highly relevant in this direction is the story of Mrs. Sen, the wife of a Bengali academic, who joins her husband in New England in order for him to pursue a career at the MIT. With no employment or desire to find one, she restricts her existence to the level of the domestic sphere which becomes at once her queendom and her prison. Although her husband's position in the American academia ensures a privileged status that might help her integrate the new environment and gain some degree of personal independence, Mrs. Sen prefers to exercise her agency in a different direction, by resisting the process of 'Americanization' and internalization of American values and refusing the options of either 'imitation' or 'identification' as presented by Bhabha in the *Location of Culture* (1994).

Narrated from the perspective of an eleven-year old American boy who has been left by his mother in the charge of Mrs. Sen, the story compares and contrasts two different sets of values and lifestyles: the quintessentially American Eliot's mother and his Bengali caretaker. From the very beginning, Eliot observes the striking opposition between the clothes worn by Mrs. Sen and those worn by his mother, despite their close age: 'She [Mrs. Sen] wore a shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys, more suitable for an evening affair than for that quiet, faintly drizzling August afternoon. Her lips were coated in a complementary coral gloss…Yet it was his mother, Eliot had thought, in her cuffed beige shorts and her rope-soled shoes who looked odd.' (Lahiri 1999: 190)

Although presented with a model of what her new community might expect of her in terms of sartorial code, Mrs. Sen, whose first name is never revealed to the reader, makes

a clear choice to resist outside influence and what Tyson refers to as *mimicry* on the part of the colonial subject. According to Tyson, mimicry results from 'having a colonized consciousness, from believing that one is inferior because one does not belong to the dominant culture'. (Tyson 2011: 249) By holding on to the traditional dress code of her ethnicity, Mrs. Sen makes a strong statement against taking on the markings of a culture that she perceives as foreign. It is worth mentioning here that the practice of adopting Western (British) attire and hairstyles during British colonial rule in India was widely popular especially among the Bengali, a group that colonizers favored as the elite. (Tyson 2011; Mannur and Sahni 2011) Clothes function thus as a 'barrier' between self and other, between one's personal choice and what society might expect of one, an opportunity to protect one's individuality as Simmel (1981) observes.

Mrs. Sen continues to distance and differentiate herself from the mainstream 'other' by adhering to a certain domestic conduct in relation to the preparation and serving of food. Her days at home revolve around the preparation and serving of meals, iniatially for herself and her husband, and later on for Eliot. The young boy, accustomed to a frugal diet and irregular meals that his mother, a single and successful career woman is able to provide in her scare spare time, never ceases to wonder at the 'brimming bowls and colanders that lined the countertop, spices and pastes' that were 'measured and blended' and added to the 'collection of broths simmered over periwinkle flames on the stove'. (Lahiri 1999: 198)

Although a more than satisfying variety of ingredients and pre-cooked, packaged food would have been readily available at any supermarket, Mrs. Sen prefers to prepare every meal 'from scratch' and dedicate herself to an exhausting, extremely time-consuming, multi-phased process of food preparation. Seated on newspapers, under Eliot's mesmerized gaze, she uses her Indian blade to chop impressive and often too plentiful quantities of 'cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash…producing florets, cubes, slices and shreds'. (Lahiri 1999: 193) Her young American charge is amazed at her dexterity: 'She could peel a potato in seconds.' (Lahiri 1999: 193) By investing inordinate amounts of time and energy in carrying on what she believes to be a connection to her home, where 'everything is', she separates herself from modern, consumerist practices while at the same time feeding her incurable nostalgia for the homeland in the Diaspora, as Garg and Khushu Lahiri remark in their 2012 article, 'Interpreting a Culinary Montage: Food in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*': 'Thus, diasporic food ritual paradoxically satiates and reinforces nostalgia. It responds to homesickness while triggering it further. Food reaffirms the consumer's identity in term of nationality and race.' (2012: 77-78)

It is this identity that Mrs. Sen fights to protect through her small-scaled private battle that will not however remain unacknowledged as Dorothy E. Smith has proven with the concept of *institutional ethnography* as method of investigating relations between every day individual practices and higher societal and political constructs: relations of ruling at global, national, or community level are reinforced, contradicted or opposed by how people act and interact on a daily basis. (Smith 1987) Because food will never be a mere object of material culture but rather, an 'endlessly interpretable, materialized emotion' (Eagleton qtd in Garg and Khushu Lahiri 2012: 74), it will serve many different purposes amongst which resistance to ideological pressure is only one.

The famous contention of poetry and short fiction writer, Janice Mirikitani, 'Preparing fish is a political act' takes an almost literal turn in Mrs. Sen's story of estrangement and accommodation. As Eliot rightly notes, two things made Mrs. Sen happy,

'One was the arrival of a letter from her family….The other…was fish from the seaside.' (Lahiri 1999: 203) Mrs. Sen goes to great lengths to ensure that she has fish available as often as possible and although more difficult to get by, she will not settle for the quick and easy canned solution: 'In the supermarket I can feed a cat thirty-two dinners from one of the thirty-two tins, but I can never find a single fish I like, never a single.' (1999: 203) Krishendu Ray, quoted in Garg and Khushu-Lahiri, noted that 'Rice and fish become particularly potent symbols of Bengaliness precisely because outsiders, be they other Indians or Americans, are considered unable to appreciate them or incompetent in handling the bones.' Furthermore, there appears to be a certain anxiety associated with the process of preparation and consumption of these items that 'it will vanish if it is not repeatedly performed'. (Garg and K. Lahiri 190-191) Consequently, Mrs. Sen relishes in preparing this particular staple that serves to reiterate her identity and handles the task with almost professional expertise: 'She pulled the blade out of the cupboard, spread the newspapers across the cupboard and inspected her treasures. One by one she drew them from the paper wrapping, wrinkled and tinged with blood. She stroke the tails, prodded the bellies, pried apart the gutted flesh. With a pair of scissors she clipped the fins. She tucked a finger under the gills…She grasped the body, lined with inky streaks, at either end, and notched it at intervals against the blade.' (1999: 211)

For a woman in a strange land, whose life is severely restricted by the lack of connections, the inability or unwillingness to drive, to shop at the supermarket or adopt more Westernized sartorial habits, the freedom, however small and unspectacular, to exercise agency in her own kitchen, may be the sole agency that she could enjoy at that particular point in her life. Therefore, when professional duties prevent her husband from making the habitual trip to the fish market and retrieve the fish set aside for his wife, Mrs. Sen decides to leave the sheltered space of her home and drive Mr. Sen's car to the seaside, unsupervised and taking Eliot along for the ride. Her little culinary expedition results in a minor traffic accident that leaves Mrs. Sen terribly scarred even if neither Eliot nor herself have sustained major injuries. Her immediate reaction, of isolating herself in her room, may suggest, I would say without taking a symbolic leap, a temporary or perhaps permanent defeat in her attempt to resist certain prescription by a society that she perceives as hostile. Mrs. Sen has failed in her attempt to secure the reiteration of the Bengali tradition of preparing and consuming fish on a daily basis and acknowledges this sense of failure by a final gesture: 'She prepared a plate of crackers with peanut butter, placed them on the coffee table, and turned on the television for Eliot's benefit. 'If he is still hungry give him a popsicle from the box in freezer', she said to Mr. Sen. …Then she went into her bedroom and shut the door.' (1999: 222)

Alongside the opposition to local, Western or capitalist pressures through repetition of almost ritualistic culinary practices and the preserving of traditional sartorial codes, other sites of resistance arise in the life-stories re-imagined and documented by Lahiri. *Resistance to oppressing or unsatisfying family environments through adopting certain attitudes to clothing as well as food preparation and consumption will mark the level of personal biography of several characters.*

The aforementioned idea that fashion is an extension of one's identity can be interestingly debated in connection with Lahiri's story, *This Blessed House*. Sanjeev and Twinkle, a young Indian couple, are just settling into a suburban existence shortly after their traditional wedding in India. Sanjeev, a successful civil engineer 'with an excessively

generous income for a single man' has difficulties in adjusting to his wife's Westernized ways and idiosyncratic behavior and from, time to time, he thinks 'with a flicker of regret of the snapshots…of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without consulting a cookbook.' (1999: 240) Preoccupied with maintaining the appearances of an Indian allegiance, he insists on introducing Twinkle by her Indian name, Tamina, and refuses to display any of the religious paraphernalia left behind by the Christian family that occupied the house before them and which his wife is ready to embrace with excitement.

Twinkles however, despite her husband's frowns and grunts, adopts what one might call a cosmopolitan type of identity, more readily acceptant of change and of the American 'other', while holding on to the Indian values that agree with her personal perception of life. For their housewarming party, Twinkle chooses to wear a combination of Indian and mainstream fashion items that attract the praise and approval of the guests, a mixed crowd of American and Bengali families: 'Most of all they admired Twinkle and her brocaded *salwar-kameez* which was the shade of a persimmon with a low scoop in the back and the little string of white rose petals she had coiled cleverly around her head, and the pearl chocker with a sapphire at its center that adorned her throat.' (1999: 243)

his attempt on the part of Twinkle, whether or not conscious, to present their ethnicity in a distilled, more palatable manner that will not appear shocking, threatening or repulsive to an American public can be inscribed in the larger discussion of Indo-chic, the fashion and cultural trend that marked the young generations of the 1960s and 1970s, all hungry for meaning and spirituality outside the consumer-driven culture of the West. As Maira, quoted in Mannur and Sahni asserts: 'The visual signs of this ethnic difference…are recreated as signifiers not of South Asian bodies but of the American 'cool'…There are certainly South Asian Americans who continue to wear ethnic markers, but this now happens in a context where Whiteness, especially white femininity can also bear the mark of the exotic.' (2011: 185) The image Twinkle chooses to embrace and project for her guests is that of an American couple of successful intellectuals – she herself is pursuing a master's in Irish literature – with ethnic roots that do not place them in stark contrast with mainstream ideas of family, fashion or beauty, but add an air of exoticism to their personal charm: 'Everyone congratulated him.' (1999: 249)

It thus becomes Twinkle's choice and prerogative to resist her husband's hostile attitude towards the mixing of cultural and religious markers, by adopting a hybrid style in fashion as well as taking a certain attitude to cooking and eating. For instance, Twinkle could not be bothered with elaborate meals and was content to feed herself on whatever she found while Sanjeev, not wanting to abandon his own idea of a proper Indian household, serves the guests 'big trays of rice with chicken and almonds and orange peels' which he 'had spent the greater part of the morning and afternoon preparing' (1999: 245-246) Twinkle manifests no trace of desire to please the head of the family as earlier indicated in the overview of sociological studies but rather an explicit resistance against kitchen and domestic chores: 'She was not terribly ambitious in the kitchen. She bought pre-roasted chickens from the supermarket and served them with potato salad…Indian food, she complained, was a bother; she detested chopping garlic, and peeling ginger.' (1999: 236)

When she does take an interest in cooking and domestic pursuits, she insists on 'making up' her own recipes, that she finds delicious, free from any kind of culinary or cultural constraints. The result is, in her husband's opinion, 'unusually' tasty despite the

non-normative way of preparation: 'I made it up…I just put some things into the pot and added the malt vinegar at the end.' (1999: 237)

Towards the end, there is an obvious shift in the traditional matrix of domination that sets women as the subaltern of men. Sanjeev becomes the partner with less power and more responsibility and he tacitly accepts the new order of things: 'She would never put it [the bust of Christ] in her study, he knew. For the rest of their days together she would keep it on the center of the mantel, with the rest of the menagerie.' (1999: 257)

Similarly, family strains and personal struggles concatenate the existence of Lahirian characters in *A Temporary Matter*. Here a husband and wife fight the growing alienation that mars their relationship in after the death of their stillborn baby. Prior to this tragic event, Shoba, a proofreader, and Shukumar, an academic, enjoyed a satisfying life together, with Shoba investing a considerable amount of time and interest in making a home for the both of them. Her laborious and extravagant efforts in the kitchen delighted and amazed her husband: 'There were endless boxes of pasta in all shapes and colors, zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole sides of lambs and goats from the Muslim butchers at Haymarket, chopped up and frozen in endless plastic bags…Shoba would throw together meals that appeared to have taken half a day to prepare, from things she had frozen and bottled, not cheap things in tins but peppers she had marinated herself with rosemary and chutneys that she cooked on Sundays, stirring boiled pots of tomatoes and prunes.' (1999: 18)

The mouthwatering profusion of carefully selected ingredients, as well Shoba's enthusiasm for feeding both herself and her husband, appear to reflect the status of their relations as a couple. As Laura Anh Williams remarks in an article published in *MELUS* in 2007, 'Shoba's emotional state is reflected in the abundance of her pantry'. (Williams 2007: 71) When the strength of their relationship begins to dwindle, the fact is immediately apparent in a sudden and abrupt change in Shoba's behavior. She loses all interest in using cooking as an expression of who she was before the fateful incident that derailed her entire development as a wife and future mother and begins treating her house 'as if it were a hotel', emerging herself in her work even when she was not at the office (1999: 16)

Consequently, the young couple no longer share meals and play a game of avoiding each other at which they now excelled. The self-imposed absence of commensality only serves to alienate them further. In the words of Fischler, 'Commensality produces bonding. In apparently all cultures, eating the same food is equated with producing the same flesh and blood, thus making commensals more alike and bringing them closer to each other'. (Fischler 2011: 8) However, Shukumar is not yet prepared to abandon the fight all together and, in order to resist the total and irreversible dissolution of their family, he decides to carry the culinary torch that his wife has now so carelessly abandoned.

In an attempt to preserve at the least a simulacrum of the former status quo, Shukumar, during a series of scheduled power outings, prepares dinner for the two of them every night of the week, using the ingredients that she has stacked up on. Over candle-lit meals, Shoba and Shukumar, begin a new game, of drawing closer together by revealing more or less consequential secrets of long ago. Encouraged by the regained intimacy of their renewed commensality, it is Shoba who proposes the dangerous confession game that allows them to put their relationship into perspective and at the same time raise the essentially physiological and individualist act of food incorporation to new sociological and relational heights. Conversation, Simmel argues, 'is necessary to lift the meal to the highest aesthetic

order, because social interaction disguises the bodily need for sustenance and the foundation of eating.' (Oyangen 2009: 7)

In the course of their conversations in the dark, closeness and mutual affection seem to once again strengthen their relationship and Shukumar begins to look forward to their shared dining experience. However, Shoba's behavior during their last meal together belies the apparent recovery of their relationship. The absence of meaningful conversation as well as of any gesture of gratitude for the meal prepared and served by Shukumar announces the full and final dissolution of the marriage: 'When she came downstairs they ate together. She didn't thank him or compliment him. They simply ate in a darkened room, in the glow of a beeswax candle.' (1999: 40) Later that evening, this time under the harsh light of the electric bulb, Shoba communicates her decision to move out of the house, thus marking Shukumar failure to preserve the integrity of his family by maintaining commensality and normative culinary habits.

The gradual descent into nothingness of the marital relationship had been equally signposted by a certain attitude towards the body image that Shoba embraces throughout the story. Her unkempt appearance betrays her hidden emotional fragility if not a full blown state of depression. A lack of interest in one's dress and personal care is listed as one of the most common signs of depression. Seen indirectly from her husband's perspective, Shoba is introduced upon her return from the gym: She looked 'at thirty-three, like the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble…Her cranberry lipstick was visible only on the outer reaches of her mouth and her eyeliner had left charcoal patches beneath her lower lashes.' (1999: 9) During her time at home she wears a pair of sweatpants and an old robe, although this had not been her style before.

This state of renunciation, of abandonment of conventions of beauty and good grooming, signifies a relinquishing of any desire to resist the decline in the quality of family life. Shoba's character comes to life through narration, through what she does and how she behaves, but at the same time through disnarration, i.e. what she does not do (anymore). This negative construct, introduced by Laura Kartutten in relation to the field of postcolonial studies by arguing that 'the negative mode is useful for illustrating a focalizing agent's norms and what s/he expects of others' (Kartutten qtd. in Oltedal 2011: 34), clearly adds a great deal to characterizing Shoba in the flawed relation she has with herself, her husband and social constructs such as appropriate attire.

The only instance when Shoba breaks this pattern of what one in *not* expected to do, or more precisely of what her husband would rather she not do, is when she returns home one day dressed in a suit, with her make up freshly retouched. This pattern- breaking moment is however overlooked by her husband, who will shortly be faced with the shocking news of her having met with a real estate agent and found an apartment where she could live on her own.

Here the character's connection to and attitude towards sartorial habits is no longer a mark of a larger, traditional or cosmopolitan process, of creating and recreating immigrant identity but rather a more personal reaction of a woman who has been refused the state of motherhood and who does not find any meaning in the preservation of her family. While Shukumar, through his efforts to reconnect with his wife by taking over the responsibility for the feeding work, engagea in a site of resistance against family dissolution, Shuba, by abandoning her previous culinary and sartorial preoccupations, yields to the overwhelming force of the traumatic event and pursues an alternate existence.

A question of resistance through the intermediary of material culture may be raised at the level of personal emotions that are not necessarily generated by or oriented towards members of the family as a narrow construct but rather towards members of the outside circle. Case in point, the ill-fated almost-love story between a married Bengali immigrant and a young student from the Indian community recounted in *Hell-Heaven*, the second story in Lahiri's 2008 volume, *Unaccustomed Earth*. Aparna, a young wife and mother, following the rules of Indian hospitality, accepts and entertains in her home Pranab Kaku, 'a fellow Bengali from Calcutta who had washed up on the barren shores' of the couple's social life. Their never openly expressed, quasi-romantic connection does not go beyond a one-sided affection harbored by Aparna but its sartorial and culinary trappings delight and entrance the reader.

Pranab is first attracted to Aparna upon recognizing the traditional habit of married Indian women that she was wearing during the course of her daily chores. Upon noticing 'her red and white bangles unique to Bengali married women', the 'common Tangail sari' and the 'thick stem of vermillion powder in the center parting of her hair', Pranab decides to approach her and make her acquaintance. (Lahiri 2008: 104) Given a certain sartorial code that both of them shared and recognized, the young man does not hesitate to introduce himself to a married Indian woman, a gesture that might have otherwise or other place been considered bold. Consequently, Aparna does not take offence in his forwardness and decides to invite him to accompany her and her daughter to the family's apartment for tea.

For members of the Diaspora, commensality and entertaining members of the same group may often be a translation of a strong desire to resist the debilitating sentiment of loneliness and isolation that sometimes affects their daily existence: 'Food exchanges between individuals can be used to symbolize their mutual interdependence and reciprocity…the role of food and food preparation conventions in symbolizing ethnic differences is also significant given the fact that these conventions are such central features of cultural distinctiveness.' (Beardsworth and Keil 2002: 52-53)

Pranab Kahu's visits were exactly what the family, and especially Aparna, needed to enliven the 'barren shores' of their social life.

Therefore, out of desire to interact with members of the same community in order to strengthen a sense of belonging and out of a non-confessed infatuation with their new guest, Aparna launches herself in particularly laborious culinary endeavors. Her young daughter, upon returning from school, would find her in the kitchen, 'rolling out dough for luchis which she normally made only on Sundays for my father and me…she planned, days in advance, the snacks she would serve with such nonchalance.' (Lahiri 2008: 108) Her mother is no longer 'desperate to leave the apartment where she had spent the day alone' but rather full of energy and absorbed by the preparation of delicious snacks for the family's new acquaintance.

Having found a way and an object through which to fight her isolation, Aparna resorts to the preparation and serving of traditional food as the only allowed and conceivable expression of her newfound attachment. As seen before, 'the very absorption of given foods is seen as incorporating the eater into a culinary system and into the group which practice it' (Beardsworth and Keil 2002: 54) and this is her way of appropriating this man that she knows could never belong to her in any other way. In her attempt to incorporate Pranab into her own family, she spoils him with the treats that ritually are reserved to her husband and daughter.

When Deborah, an American woman, engages Pranab's interest and affection, she manifests her opposition to their relationship by complaining about having to include her in their culinary rituals and subtly rejecting her for an open commensality: 'When he wasn't

around, my mother complained about Deborah's visits, about having to make the food less spicy, even though Deborah said she liked spicy food and feeling embarrassed to put a fried fish head in the dal.' (2008: 117) Oyangen asserts that 'If eating food implies an acceptance of those who cook and serve it, rejecting someone's food and foodways implies the opposite' (2009: 339) Conversely, refusing to share the food with someone else, especially a member of a different group, signifies rejection and resistance against their joining the group. Pranab's acceptance of Deborah takes the form of initiation into the foodways of his people: 'Pranab Kaku taught Deborah to say *khub bhalo* and *aacha* and to pick up certain foods with her fingers instead of with a fork.' (2008: 124)

To mark the end of his bachelorhood before his marriage to Deborah and, in a symbolic way, to fight against the pain of having to lose him from her life, Aparna prepares an 'elaborate array of food' (2008: 144) to which she treats Pranab all the while thinking to herself: 'She will leave him…He is throwing his life away' (2008: 125) To her, the preparation of food for a stranger had began as means of fighting against social isolation and become, towards the end, a social practice through which to resist the assimilation of a strange 'other' into the group of Bengalis.

Conclusions

Due to the 'ambiguous, fluid and polysemic' nature of the field of postcolonial studies, many different directions of study and research have been able to flourish under the umbrella creed of 'understanding the other'. Consequently, the social implications of sartorial and culinary habits have engaged the interest of many scholars, even before the establishing of postcolonial studies as a strong field in the academia. Functionalists such as Durkheim, great structuralists like Barthes, Levi-Strauss or Mary Douglas, developmental theorists like Mennell and Fischler all pondered the functions of food as more than a physiological concept. A preoccupation with theorizing fashion and good taste emerged in the works of Kant and continued with a great number of current-day researchers.

Using the feminist concept of assemblage as a 'way of mapping smaller shifts in the global economy, culture and politics that have remained unattended', as well as Patricia Hill Collins's assertion that people 'simultaneously experience and resist oppression at three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the system level of social institutions' (Collins 2000: 227), I have taken a critical look at the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. Starting from these concepts, I have identified three different levels within personal biography on which sartorial and culinary practices operate as forms of resistance against a variety of forms of oppression.

In *Mrs. Sen's* the eponymous female character chooses to forego mainstream American representation of food consumption and dress code by preserving her Indian garments and making the ritual of acquiring and preparing ingredients for Bengali food into a life purpose. In *This Blessed House* and *A Temporary Matter* both female and male characters display resistance to unsatisfying family environments by adopting certain attitudes to food and clothing. Twinkle, a young Indian wife, opposes her husband's desire for a traditional household by resorting to a type of idiosyncratic Westernized behavior, a systematic indifference to cooking Indian food and the construction of an Indo-chic style of dress, more palatable to the American public. Shukumar, the husband in *A Temporary Matter*, attempts to oppose the dissolution of his marriage after the loss of his stillborn daughter by choosing the kitchen as a site of engagement and a way to preserve normativity. On a more personal level, Aparna, the female character in *Hell-Heaven*, engages with

commensality on the level of avoiding isolation in the Diaspora while at the same time refusing commensality to unwanted additions to her Bengali group.

Once again, this time around in the literary world, conscious or unwitting choices in sartorial and culinary practices have implications that go beyond the physical and physiological and serve to illustrate and reinforce norms on a larger scale, with different consequences for the wider process of transition undergone by immigrant communities in the United States.

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