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Home and Homelessness in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's"

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Abstract

The continuous process of movement in the diasporic context results in a feeling of homelessness for immigrants. In this paper, I will focus on the impact of displacement and the significance of the Western urban locations in the lives of South Asian diasporic women and the ways geographical locations affect the identity of the female protagonist, as represented in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story, "Mrs. Sen's". The struggle between home country and the host nation is a common theme of every diasporic literary work, which results in alienation, loss of belonging, rootlessness and trauma, in the lives of the female immigrants. My paper will further probe into the ways culinary art, for instance, cooking and serving food, and vehicles, such as buses and cars, have a significant impact on the reconstruction of female identity and the ways female characters gain agency within the narrative structure.

Keywords: Agency, Identity, South Asian diaspora, Western urban location, Women

1. Introduction

Displacement, especially if it is forced, has an affective impact on migrants. The experience influences how "homely" one might feel the trauma of displacement.¹ In this article, I focus on the conflict between "home" and "homelessness," which is a common feature in diasporic literatures, and the impact of this tension on the identity of the female protagonist in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's". As Avtar Brah argues, 'home' is a "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination," which is a place of "no return".² The continuous transformation of migrants' identities challenges their sense of belonging to any tangible place; as John McLeod claims, "[t]hey can be deemed not to belong there and disqualified from thinking of the new land as their 'home'".³ The impact of displacement is not only physical, for instance, lack of certain kind of food in the host nation may affect the health of the immigrants, but it is also psychological. The emotional and psychological turmoil that immigrants undergo results in them becoming rooted in their past and can lead to alienation, melancholia and nostalgia. As migrants long for their homeland, they "love, hate, fear, panic, resent, envy, mourn, cheer,

¹ Sara Ahmed, "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (1999): 341 and Isabel Macedo and Rosa Cabecinhas, "Diasporic Identity(ies) and the Meaning of Home in Autobiographical Documentary Films." *Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2014): 60.

² Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 188–89.

³ John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 212.

complain, etc. within a different emotional register than the host country”.⁴ The yearning of these diasporic people incites them to recreate a “home” away from home.

This struggle is depicted in Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Mrs. Sen’s,” the sixth short story in her collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). The narrative explores the life of a young Indian woman, Mrs. Sen, who, similarly to Ashima in *The Namesake*, moves to the US to accompany her husband, Mr. Sen, who teaches mathematics at a university. In this article, I intend to investigate how the concept of “home” is constructed in the diasporic narrative. For the main character, Mrs. Sen, “home” refers to Calcutta and not to the apartment in New England. Her relentless effort to preserve her culture, mostly through clothes and food, is akin to Brah’s notion of “homing desire,”⁵ defined as a wish to recreate “home” in the diasporic space. But simultaneously it critiques discourses of “fixed origins”.⁶ This desire also acknowledges the pain that is involved in the journey and the process of settling down: the struggle between the routes and the roots that immigrants confront in their day to day lives. In this article, I will focus on the role displacement plays in the construction of a “home” between cultures in the short story, the significance of the geographical scale where the main character lives and its impact on the Bildung of the female protagonist. I aim to analyse these themes through focusing on the narrative strategy of “Mrs. Sen’s” and foregrounding the role of the two female characters, Mrs. Sen and the mother of the eleven-year old American boy, Eliot, whom Mrs. Sen babysits every afternoon.⁷ Furthermore, I will also explore the ways culinary art (preparation of food, serving and other skills related to cooking), which is associated with the native culture of the main character, and vehicles, such as cars and buses, reflect Mrs. Sen’s sense of displacement and participate in the transformation of her identity.

2. Narrative Strategy and Its Significance

Even though “Mrs. Sen’s” is recounted by a third person narrator, the American boy, Eliot, serves as the lens through which the protagonist’s habits and emotions are focalised.

⁴ Adriana Margareta Dancus, “Diasporic Feeling and Displaced Nostalgia: A Case Study: ‘Import-eksport’ and ‘Blodsband’” [sic] *Scandinavian Studies* 83, no. 2 (2011): 250.

⁵ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 189. In the anthropological sense, culture is defined as a “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Lib Tylor, “The ‘Unhomely’ Stage.” *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 26, no. 3 (2006): 1. To define “space,” I rely on Lippard’s definition: space is where culture is lived. Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentred Society* (The New Press: New York, 1997): 10.

⁶ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 189.

⁷ The character of Mrs. Sen is inspired by Jhumpa Lahiri’s mother who used to babysit when she was in London.

Relying on Martina Caspari's assertion that the American child's position in the narrative creates a possibility of a "new space, new hybrid and fluid sense of community,"⁸ I argue that Eliot acts as the spokesperson for the Indian protagonist, Mrs. Sen, in this short story. His significant role is evident from the narrative structure which is framed by Eliot: the short story begins and ends with a reference to him. By placing Eliot's vision in the centre of the analysis, my paper will show that the discourses of fixed origin⁹ can be critiqued in Lahiri's short story.

Mrs. Sen's lamenting for her family members, as witnessed by Eliot, is akin to Brah's claim that "home" is "a place of no return"¹⁰: "My sister has had a baby girl. By the time I see her, depending if Mr. Sen gets a tenure, she will be three years old. Her own aunt will be a stranger"¹¹. Thus, Eliot's witnessing of Mrs. Sen's nostalgic recollections makes it apparent that though India appears to be a "mystic place of desire"¹² for her, this vision is different from what the country signifies for Eliot, the focalizer of the short story. For him, India is just a country in the East. In other words, the very narrative technique of the story problematizes discourses of fixed origin.

3. Comparative Analysis of the Two Female Characters

From the very beginning of his babysitting days, Eliot is aware of Mrs. Sen's obsession with her home and her traditional habits. While chopping vegetables, Mrs. Sen usually refuses to let Eliot walk around, except for one occasion: "she broke her own rule; in need of additional supplies and reluctant to rise from the catastrophic mess that barricaded her, she asked Eliot to fetch something from the kitchen".¹³ I claim that her willingness to allow Eliot to invade the kitchen space, an area that symbolises an ongoing composition of her home culture traces,¹⁴ marks the beginning of her integration into the host nation. The episode makes it obvious that although Mrs. Sen is comfortable sharing her innermost feelings in

⁸ Martina Caspari, "Changing the Dominant Discourse and Culture, One Eater at a Time: Subversive Discourse and Productive Intervention in 'Mrs. Sen's' in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*" *Pacific Coast Philology* 49, no. 2 (2014): 249 and Contrary to earlier readings of Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's," which focused extensively on the figure of the protagonist, Martina Caspari places Eliot more in the centre of the narrative to explore how the child experiences his "home culture with new critical eyes." Caspari, "Changing the Dominant Discourse," 249.

⁹ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 189.

¹⁰ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 188.

¹¹ Jhumpa Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" *Interpreter of Maladies* (London: Flamingo, 2000), 122.

¹² Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 188.

¹³ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 115.

¹⁴ Jon Anderson. *Understanding Cultural Geography: Places and Traces*. (London: Routledge, 2015), 15.

the presence of Eliot, she ensures that his mother does not witness her daily activities: “By the time Eliot’s mother arrived at twenty past six, Mrs. Sen always made sure all evidence of her chopping was disposed of. The blade was scrubbed, rinsed, dried, folded, and stowed away in a cupboard with the aid of a stepladder”.¹⁵ Mrs. Sen’s urgent act to dispose of the evidence of her chopping reveals her inferiority complex and shame in front of the American woman. To Eliot, Mrs. Sen represents the “other,” and it is ironic that even though Mrs. Sen serves her ethnic food to his mother, she “removes everything” related to her culinary art that “marks her otherness,”¹⁶ as if she was a powerless, marginalised figure compared to the dominant American woman.

I further wish to argue that Mrs. Sen and Eliot’s mother act as foils for one another. Mrs. Sen is a young Indian woman who has moved from Calcutta to the US after her marriage, following her husband. Though the narrator does not provide adequate details about Eliot’s mother so as to familiarise the readers with her practices and actions, her constant presence in the narrative is foregrounded mostly through Eliot. The striking contrast that instantly comes to the forefront is that Eliot’s mother is a financially independent, American woman. Even though she is a single mother who has to work outside her home to support her family, she seems to be emotionally detached from her son. On the other hand, Mrs. Sen is loving, affectionate and welcoming. In short, Mrs. Sen is everything that an eleven-year-old can desire for in a parent and which he seems to lack from his own mother. Hence, Eliot does not mind being at Mrs. Sen’s place during the afternoon. He becomes involved in Mrs. Sen’s life emotionally and she is often portrayed through his eyes in the narrative.

4. Creation-Recreation of “Home”

As Brah points out, “home” is the “lived experience”¹⁷ of a particular locality. For the diasporic women, the concept of “home” marks the varying experiences of the “pains and pleasures,” the “terrors and contentments,” or “the highs and humdrum of everyday lived culture”¹⁸ that remind them of the moments that they have spent with the people in their homeland. The lived experience results in a desire to recreate a home-like experience, which Brah calls “homing desire,”¹⁹ within the diasporic space of the host nation. Mrs. Sen’s

¹⁵ Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen’s,” 117.

¹⁶ Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in the South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2010), 159.

¹⁷ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 188.

¹⁸ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 189.

¹⁹ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 189.

trauma is caused by her displacement and constant struggle to establish a stable sense of home in the host culture. Throughout the narrative, she tries to recreate traces of her native country, her home in Calcutta, within the university apartment in the US. Unfortunately, however, she is never successful in reconciling the differences that lie between these two homes. At the beginning of the narrative, the notion of "home" for her is fixed: "Everything is there"²⁰ in Calcutta, she asserts. The narrator's detailed description of Mrs. Sen's US apartment proves her detachment from her new home:

The lobby was tiled in unattractive squares of tan, with a row of mailboxes marked with masking tape or white labels. Inside, intersecting shadows left by vacuum cleaner were frozen on the surface of a plush pear-colored carpet. Mismatched remnants of other carpets were positioned in front of the sofa and chairs, like individual welcome mats anticipating where a person's feet would contact the floor. White drum-shaped lampshades flanking the sofa were still wrapped in the manufacturer's plastic.²¹

It is rather obvious why Mrs. Sen has never really felt at home in her new apartment. I would claim that the chaotic situation in her apartment is akin to Homi Bhabha's notion of "unhomeliness,"²² which highlights the protagonist's lack of desire to integrate into the host culture. Adapting Freud's theory of the *unheimlich*,²³ Bhabha defines the feeling of unhomeliness as "the sense of dislocation that arises when the boundaries between the outside world and the domestic domain blur."²⁴ Mrs. Sen's displacement from Calcutta to the US has resulted in a similar unhomely situation: she is expected to negotiate, erase and blur the boundaries between the inside and the outside, that is, her home and public place, and between her past and present. I argue that Eliot's presence in Mrs. Sen's household blurs the boundary between her domestic and public space, which results in a chaotic situation within the private space of the apartment. The American boy perceives her constant uneasiness and disorientation in her new environment to be due to her forced displacement. By positioning Eliot as a focalizer, the narrative mediates the cultural differences²⁵ such as

²⁰ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 113.

²¹ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 112.

²² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 141.

²³ Freud in his essay "The Uncanny" ("Das Unheimlich", in German), uses the term *unheimlich* and its opposite *heimlich*. Freud defines the term uncanny as something which is frightening yet familiar. For Freud, the uncanny situates the strangeness within the ordinary. Annette Russell, "Journeys through the Unheimlich and the Unhomely," *Roehampton Journal for Academic and Creative Writing* 1, (2017): 3.

²⁴ Russell, "Journeys," 3.

²⁵ As Hofstede explains, although certain aspects of culture are physically visible, their meaning is invisible: "their cultural meaning...lies precisely and only in the way these practices are interpreted by the insiders."

Indianness and Americanness, and it also highlights different attitudes towards food and driving, which are deployed by the two female characters.

“Mrs. Sen’s” portrays the isolation of a female immigrant in her apartment. At the beginning of the narrative, she is unable to part with her native customs and traditions as she refuses to acknowledge that India is no longer her geographical home. Her dissatisfaction with her new environment is also evident when she discloses to Eliot that “[h]ere, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence”.²⁶ The silence that Mrs. Sen complains about is the result of the absence of her family members and the memories associated with her nearest and dearest. It is not only through her home decor that Mrs. Sen attempts to preserve her home culture but her connection with her homeland is also apparent through her obsession with Indian clothes. Even when in the US, she prefers saris to Western attire and the lack of opportunity to wear them frustrates her:

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, with tassels knotted along the edges. In the closet they were on hangers; in the drawers they were folded flat, or wound tightly like thick scrolls. She sifted through the drawers, letting saris spill over the edges. “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.²⁷

The pile of unworn saris in the cupboard symbolises Mrs. Sen’s resistance to American culture. She is reluctant to relinquish her past and is caught between two contrasting worlds. But it is also important to note that Mrs. Sen has no friends in the US neither does she like to leave her apartment, without her husband. Thus, she lacks an opportunity to display her designer traditional wear.

Even though Mrs. Sen is unable to fit in due to her preoccupation with the past, for Eliot, it is his mother who “look[s] odd” when she visits Mrs. Sen in her “cuffed, beige shorts and rope-soled shoes”.²⁸ Her shaved knees and thighs are “too exposed”²⁹ amidst the covered objects in Mrs. Sen’s apartment. This is confusing as what Eliot’s mother is

Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (London: Harper Collins Business, 1991), 8.

²⁶ Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen’s,” 115.

²⁷ Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen’s,” 125.

²⁸ Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen’s,” 112.

²⁹ Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen’s,” 113.

wearing is typical American attire, yet in Mrs. Sen's apartment, which resembles a miniature version of her Calcutta home, the American clothes look out of place. In contrast to Mrs. Sen's apartment, which is nice and warm, the tiny beach house where Eliot and his mother live is rather cold, and they have to carry a portable heater from one room to another. I read the differences between these houses as a reflection of Eliot's relationship with the two female characters within the confines of the houses. Although he is a mere audience at Mrs. Sen's place, he always feels the warmth in her behaviour and never senses any communication gap with her which is in contrast to the relationship that he has with his mother. But at the same time, Eliot finds it strange that Mrs. Sen, who is otherwise very affectionate and loving, does not display emotions for her husband. She always refers to him by his surname, "Mr. Sen,"³⁰ as if "they are only distantly acquainted" and "disobeying some unspoken rule between them".³¹ Therefore, the narrative suggests that "home" is not only a geographical location, but it is human feelings and emotions that make a place "homely". This is evident from the relationship and bonding that Mrs. Sen and Eliot share despite their cultural differences.

5. Memory and Nostalgia: Remembering "Home"

Similarly to most diasporic narratives where nostalgia produces frustration and disappointment in diasporic subjects, Lahiri's short story exposes the protagonist to be suffering from "double displacement"³² through Eliot's vision. This anguish is not only because of a physical displacement but also a "metaphorical one that adds to her sense of exile".³³ Eliot realises that one of the things that makes Mrs. Sen happy is the arrival of letters from her family. It is her "custom to check the mailbox"³⁴ daily. Apart from letters which connects Mrs. Sen to her native land, the memory of "home" is also evoked by a cassette recording of her relatives that was her farewell present when she travelled to the US with her husband:

³⁰ One explanation that can be provided here is that it is a custom in many Bengali households that a wife is not supposed to address her husband by his first name and mostly uses a nickname or refers to him as her child's father.

³¹ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 112 and 118.

³² Gayatri Gopinath, "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion" in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 261–79.

³³ Gopinath, "Nostalgia," 261–79.

³⁴ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 121.

she played a cassette of people talking in her language...As the succession of voices laughed and said their bit, Mrs. Sen identified each speaker...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 the things that happened the day I left India." The next day she played the same cassette all over again.³⁵

The above recording may seem trivial but for Mrs. Sen it is priceless. Her repetitive desire to listen to the recorded cassette ascertains that she "positions her own existence in the past, as if it were frozen in time, stuck in the movements and contexts in which these events were produced".³⁶ Although she scarcely communicates with anyone in the US, it is not only her Indianness which is at stake that causes alienation, but she also faces difficulty in integrating into the host culture.

Even though Eliot becomes a part of Mrs. Sen's nostalgic journey by being a witness to her emotions, his mother, an American living in her home country, is unable to grasp the emotional agony that Mrs. Sen goes through. In contrast to his emotional bonding with Mrs. Sen, when Eliot recalls his memories with his mother, he can only think of the times when he is deprived of his mother's affection: "It was one of the rare days his mother had a day off, but they didn't go anywhere [...] Eliot had suggested that they go through the car wash a few miles down the road [...] but his mother said she was too tired".³⁷ Therefore, while Mrs. Sen suffers from the trauma of being physically away from home, that is, her country of origin, Eliot is psychologically homeless as he lacks a close and emotionally stable relationship with his mother.

6. Culinary Art and Kitchen as a Transformative Space

Culinary art, such as cooking food, serving and other skills related to the preparation of meals, is usually regarded as a practice that confines women within the world of domesticity and, at the same time, reflects a nostalgic longing for home. The protagonist's obsession with her home culture is clear from the very beginning of the narrative. Mrs. Sen's ever-

³⁵ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 128.

³⁶ Sofia Cavalcanti, "Unreal Homes: Belonging and Becoming in Indian Women Narratives" *Humanities* 7, no. 133 (2018): 6.

³⁷ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 116.

present nostalgia for India is not only evident through her recreation of an Indian home within her US apartment, her preference for Indian attire or her reminiscence of the time she spent with her family members, but also through the portrayal of her elaborate culinary performances. As James Gilroy observes, "taste and smell, 'our most delicate and seemingly fragile senses,' act as the most 'persevering and zealous keepers of our past experiences'".³⁸ The narrative represents food as a cultural signifier³⁹ since it evokes Mrs. Sen's home culture, as well as a source of physical nourishment and sustenance. Mrs. Sen takes refuge in culinary art to dissipate nostalgia and homesickness, an attempt to negotiate her homely emotions.⁴⁰ It is my contention that Mrs. Sen's culinary art signifies her accomplishment as a successful female immigrant in the host nation, because her preparation of Indian snacks for Eliot's mother highlights her desire to cross her cultural boundaries, but, at the same time, she also preserves the culture of her homeland. Her kitchen space and the living room, the locations where she cooks, eats and serves food, become ambivalent spaces, akin to Bhabha's hybrid third space.⁴¹ This hybridity is primarily due to the presence of the American boy, Eliot. The kitchen and the living room not only become the meeting ground for cultural exchange, but they also affect Mrs. Sen's identity as within these spaces she becomes empowered through her culinary performances. Thus, the culinary practices transform the kitchen from a limited, domestic area into an empowering location. In other words, the food imageries in Lahiri's narrative not only bring back memories of "home" as the protagonist uses the medium of food to remain culturally tied to her motherland, but they also epitomize her agency.

Besides the arrival of letters from India, the other thing that makes Mrs. Sen content is "fish from the sea side".⁴² Fish plays a significant role in her everyday life as it is a "tool for nostalgia"⁴³ and has the power to change her emotional stability. What makes her unhappy is the unavailability of the right kind of fish in the US:

³⁸ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 98–109.

³⁹ Caspari, "Changing," 246.

⁴⁰ To emphasize the relation between food and memory in diaspora narratives, Paula Torreiro Pazo indicates that "the evocative and emotional power of food, as a cultural artefact, continues to be the backbone of many Asian-American narratives of migration and displacement, in which the characters, frequently described as deeply nostalgic and homesick, 'eat in order to remember'." Paula Torreiro Pazo, "Diasporic Tastescapes: Intersections of Food and Identity in Asian American Literature." Thesis. University of Coruna (2014): 110.

⁴¹ Bhabha, *Location*, 252.

⁴² Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 123.

⁴³ Madhuparna Mitra, "Lahiri's 'Mrs. Sen's.'" *The Explicator* 64, no. 3 (2006): 185.

'I can never find a single fish I like, never a single.' Mrs. Sen said she had grown up eating fish twice a day. She added that in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky. They ate the tail, the eggs, even the head. It was available in any market, at any hour, from dawn until midnight.⁴⁴

Her dissatisfaction with the types of fish available in the US is not only a food-lover's struggle, it is rather a cultural issue which shows an immigrant woman's desire to keep her native culture alive in the diaspora.

The space of the kitchen in any household is usually associated with domesticity but for Lahiri's protagonist, the living room, where she sits on the floor and performs her culinary art of chopping and cutting vegetables, symbolises a site of agency. Migrant women, "unable to gain access to other spaces, turn [their] patriarchal and solitary confinement to the kitchen into [their] personal shrine of Indianness".⁴⁵ Being a victim of alienation and homelessness, Mrs. Sen feels most confident and empowered in her living room. Within this inner space, the element that symbolizes her self-affirmation is the cutting blade that she brought with her from India. This cutting blade in Bengali is known as "*bonti*".⁴⁶ The narrator reveals why she uses this particular blade, instead of any regular knife, as for Mrs. Sen, the *bonti* is not just a piece of cutlery but it represents her ties with her motherland and recalls memories of her Indian community:

'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 neighbourhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night.'⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 123–24. In *Migrant's Table*, Krishnendu Ray associates fish with diasporic Bengali people, claiming that it is not only a literary image but also a cultural and social issue: fish, along with rice, is the most enduring and potent symbol of "Bengaliness." Krishnendu Ray, *The Migrants Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households*, (2004), 155.

⁴⁵ Pazo, "Diasporic Tastescapes," 115.

⁴⁶ Banerji, "The Bengali Bonti," 23–26. *Bonti*, is a Bengali term for a curved blade used to chop, peel or dice vegetable, fish or fruit. It is a common cooking tool found in both rural and urban parts of Calcutta. Bengali women perform the task of chopping or peeling by sitting on the floor or standing. Chitrita Banerji mentions that this tool is "associated with Bengali women, and the image of a woman seated at her *bonti*, surrounded by baskets of vegetables, is a cultural icon." Chitrita Banerji, "The Bengali Bonti" *Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies* (2013): 23–26.

⁴⁷ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 115.

In the unfamiliar surroundings in the US, the *bonti* signifies a sense of belonging, reassuring Mrs. Sen of her connection with India. By literally and metaphorically holding onto this tool, she acquires an identity of her own,⁴⁸ re-establishing her lost self which is connected to India.

Mrs. Sen's domesticity is also foregrounded by her very name. The fact that she is only referred to as someone's wife proves her dependence. Similar to typical Indian women, who are either known as someone's daughter, wife or mother, the narrative does not provide the protagonist with a first name. Therefore, in order to subvert the patriarchal confinement, she takes refuge in her culinary art:

Each afternoon Mrs. Sen lifted the blade and locked it into a place, so that it met the base at an angle. Facing the sharp edge without ever touching it, she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices, and shreds. She could peel a potato in seconds...While she worked she kept an eye on the television and an eye on Eliot, but never seemed to keep an eye on the blade.⁴⁹

Cooking is, therefore, an empowering act for Mrs. Sen. Eliot is amazed by her efficiency and skills. He observes minute details of her culinary act as she prepares elaborate meals either for her husband or a variety of snacks for Eliot and his mother. The American child is especially fascinated by the special blade that the protagonist uses, which reminds him of "the prow of a Viking ship".⁵⁰ Even though for the American child this is simply a strange and unique tool, as Angelo Monaco claims, the *bonti* acts as a "metonymic vehicle of ambivalence"⁵¹ in the narrative, through which Mrs. Sen longs to transport herself from America to her homeland.

In contrast to the extensive efforts that Mrs. Sen puts into preparing her meals, Eliot's mother opts for readymade food. The narrator reveals that after reaching home from her office, the first thing that Eliot's mother does is to pour a glass of wine and eat bread and cheese, and later order pizza. The reference to the wine and cheese, and the manner she consumes them in a rush evokes the world she lives in: a hassle-free life where less energy is required to prepare food. After the day's work at her office, however, it is understandable

⁴⁸ Pazo, "Diasporic Tastescapes," 115.

⁴⁹ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 114.

⁵⁰ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 114.

⁵¹ Angelo Monaco, "Neurosis as Resilience in Jhumpa Lahiri's Diasporic Short Fictions" *Transcript Verlag* (2018): 167.

why Eliot's mother has no energy to prepare meals. The narrator also reveals that the only occasion when she took the effort to prepare something was the time when "she'd invited a man from her office to dinner – a man who'd spent the night in his mother's bedroom, but whom Eliot never saw again".⁵² Eliot also recognises that the type of food that these two female characters prefer varies widely, as his mother discloses her dislike for Mrs. Sen's concoctions. Thus, from Eliot's point of view, food represents human bonding: the labour that Mrs. Sen puts in preparing a meal can be read as a loving gesture of an Indian mother, which clearly shows the difference between her and Eliot's emotionally unavailable mother.

7. Vehicular Cosmopolitanism: A Transformative Perspective

Vehicles, such as cars and buses, play a significant role in Lahiri's short story. For Mrs. Sen, who is oscillating between two contrasting worlds, her home and the host country, the car and the act of driving, have a significant meaning. Due to her displacement, Lahiri's protagonist is no longer only an Indian but she has become a "citizen of the world".⁵³ To explore the significance of commodified life of object, such as the car, which vitally establishes radical transnational modes of belonging,⁵⁴ Hengameh Saroukhani coined the term "vehicular cosmopolitanism" in her analysis of Bernardine Evaristo's *Soul Tourists* (2005).⁵⁵ In Lahiri's narrative, as I intend to show, the car, on the one hand, represents an enormous challenge for the female protagonist, as she has always disliked it: "I hate it. I hate driving. I won't go on,"⁵⁶ while on the other hand, the inner space of the car becomes a transformative space in the short story, a "micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion".⁵⁷ For critics such as Paul Gilroy and Homi Bhabha, motility, as a cultural condition, is a state that aims to combat the state of pathology of borders, belligerent nationalisms and the rationale of racism.⁵⁸ As it is evident in the inner space of the car, where Eliot is a constant companion to Mrs. Sen, the constant cultural exchange with the American boy transforms the female protagonist's identity. The car signifies a promise in Lahiri's short story: "Mr. Sen says that

⁵² Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 123.

⁵³ Hengameh Saroukhani, "Vehicular Cosmopolitanism: The Car in Bernardine Evaristo's *Soul Tourists*" *Études anglaises* 70, (2017): 12.

⁵⁴ Saroukhani, "Vehicular Cosmopolitanism," 13.

⁵⁵ Saroukhani, "Vehicular Cosmopolitanism," 12. In Evaristo's *Soul Tourists*, the car represents a *poesis* [emphasis in the original], that unsettles the humanistic assumptions of vernacular cosmopolitanism. Saroukhani, "Vehicular Cosmopolitanism," 11.

⁵⁶ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 131.

⁵⁷ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 4.

⁵⁸ Saroukhani, "Vehicular Cosmopolitanism," 14.

once I receive my license, everything will improve. What do you think, Eliot? Will things improve?' 'You could go places,' Eliot suggested. 'You could go anywhere.' 'Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot?'"⁵⁹ Eliot realises that Mrs. Sen has never been able to consider the land of America as her own country. As perceived through the child's eyes, Mrs. Sen's fear of driving exposes her lack of desire to integrate into the new culture, as she is often ashamed of American habits, for instance, she criticises Eliot's mother for being away from her son for most of the day.

One of the major differences that exists between the two female characters is their attitudes towards driving. It is through Eliot's experiences that this difference is revealed: "It seemed so simple when he sat beside his mother, gliding in the evenings back to the beach house. Then the road was just a road, the other cars merely part of the scenery. But when he sat with Mrs. Sen, under an autumn sun that glowed without warmth through the trees, he saw that same stream of cars made her knuckles pale, her wrists tremble, and her English falter".⁶⁰ Though driving is quite common in the US, this is a new experience for Mrs. Sen, as in India her family had drivers. As she boasts, "[a]t home, you know, we have a driver".⁶¹ Mrs. Sen's fear of driving at the beginning of the narrative is gradually reduced because of her craving for fish, which is related to her home culture. Thus, her cultural association enables the protagonist to transform her personality.

The craving for fresh fish from the market, which instigates Mrs. Sen to drive, is associated with her native culture. The transitory space of the car also becomes a medium which connects the domestic space to the more open spaces. In other words, with the help of her car, Mrs. Sen makes the journey from her home to the fish market. Although it has to be acknowledged that the car journey has not been a successful one for her: she meets with an accident and eventually gives up driving. The accident highlights her struggle between her living in the past, as she used to have a driver back in India, and her efforts to adapt to the new present. The unavailability of her husband and her fear of driving compel Mrs. Sen to take the town bus to go to the seaside to buy fish. However, after encountering minor racial discrimination on the bus, she takes the risk of driving alone, without Mr. Sen's assistance. Hence, vehicles become mediums through which, on the one hand, she attempts to fulfil her homing desire, but which, on the other hand, participate in the transformation of her identity.

⁵⁹ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 119.

⁶⁰ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 120–21.

⁶¹ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 113.

8. Transformation of Identities

Throughout the course of Lahiri's narrative, both protagonist and the child redefine their notion of home. Eliot has been a constant companion to Mrs. Sen: he has been a witness to her obsession with her home culture, cooking, and also her difficulties with driving. Having spent a lot of time at Mrs. Sen's apartment, the child is exposed to a new culture which is rather different from his own. However, he does not share this new experience with his mother. Even though Eliot is able to recognize Mrs. Sen's innermost feelings, he prefers to hide this knowledge:

When, eventually, his mother asked him in the car if he'd noticed a change in Mrs. Sen's behaviour, he said he hadn't. He didn't tell her that Mrs. Sen paced the apartment, staring at the plastic-covered lampshades as if noticing them for the first time. He didn't tell her she switched on the television but never watched it, or that she made herself tea but let it grow cold on the coffee table.⁶²

Although the American boy is not familiar with Mrs. Sen's cultural background, he can grasp her emotional turmoil. However, his choice of not revealing his experiences to his mother hints that he knows intuitively that his mother will not be able to understand the vulnerable position of the Indian woman, so far away from her homeland. Gradually, Eliot begins to identify himself with Mrs. Sen. He becomes aware of his own needs and feelings: "[T]he first day, just as he was taking off his coat, the phone rang. It was his mother calling from her office. 'You're a big boy now, Eliot,' she told him. 'You okay?' Eliot looked out the kitchen window, at gray waves receding from the shore, and said he was fine".⁶³ It is not only Mrs. Sen who suffers from loneliness and depression, then, but Eliot is also in need of physical and emotional companionship.

9. Impact of Places on Human Emotion

Unfortunately, the cultural exchange between Mrs. Sen and Eliot does not last long. The relationship of the protagonist and the American boy has not only been limited to the domestic space but they have also become close companions through their car journeys.

⁶² Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 128.

⁶³ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 135.

On the one hand, the car becomes a site of cultural exchange between Mrs. Sen and Eliot, and on the other hand, it participates in the *Bildung* of the protagonist. During one of their trips to the fish market, which is their only solo trip without Mr. Sen, Mrs. Sen causes a car accident in which both of them are injured. After the accident, Eliot's mother refuses to send her son to Mrs. Sen's place and decides that he will stay alone at home during her office hours. Although Eliot's mother calls him as soon as he gets home from school, she fails to understand that he still needs affection, love and tenderness, and, more importantly, her company.

Transformation of emotional experiences is also reflected by the colours associated with the physical places: when Eliot is at Mrs. Sen's apartment, he is exposed to a vibrant atmosphere, evident from the bright colours reminiscent of India, the food she makes, the smell of her food, such as the combination of all the spices and the colour of her vermilion.⁶⁴ "Mrs. Sen's slippers, each a different color," "pimpled yellow fat off chicken parts," "crushed vermilion," "bright pink yogurt".⁶⁵ Contrary to these vibrant colours, which suggest a lively surrounding, at the end of the story, Eliot is portrayed looking out at the "gray waves receding from the shore"⁶⁶ in the beach house, which reveals a gloomy state of affairs as the child suffers from homelessness, melancholy and isolation. It is ironic that his mother, in the beginning of the narrative, had been looking for someone to take care of him and in the end, it is Eliot who longs for human contact and, perhaps, learns to take care of himself. It is also important to note that even though Mrs. Sen babysits Eliot, gradually it turns out that it is Eliot who looks after her. Each afternoon, Eliot has been a constant companion to her. Mrs. Sen, who yearns to have company as most of the time she is alone at home because her husband is busy at the university, shares her innermost feelings and emotions with Eliot, making him a part of her alienation, rootlessness and melancholia. Through the medium of her letters, recorded cassettes or stories about her homeland, Mrs. Sen metaphorically takes Eliot with her on her oscillating journey between both worlds, her homeland and the host nation.

Therefore, though at first sight, Lahiri's short story, "Mrs. Sen's," appears to be a simple tale of a female immigrant's journey from her home country to the US, with the help of the American boy, Eliot's focalisation, the multi-layered symbolisms of the text come to the surface. The narrative intricately deals with issues such as displacement, desire for homeland

⁶⁴ Vermillion: In Bengali it is known as *sindoor*, which is worn by married women along the parting of their hair. It is usually red or orange-red coloured cosmetic powder from the Indian subcontinent. In Hindu communities *sindoor* symbolises matrimony and loyalty of a wife towards her husband. Vermillion represents the female energy and is worn by women to ensure the longevity of the husband.

⁶⁵ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 114–18.

⁶⁶ Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's," 135.

and the sense of belonging as related to particular geographical locations. Even though the protagonist of the narrative is an Indian woman, an American child's vision reveals a cultural hybridity that challenges Mrs. Sen's sense of home and fixed cultural origins. My article has explored the differences that exist between the two female characters, Mrs. Sen and Eliot's mother, as perceived by the narrative's focalizer, Eliot. While the American woman is less connected to her home and her child, Mrs. Sen satiates her homing desire by remembering her family members through recorded cassettes. Receiving letters from her relatives is also a manifestation of her ties with her home country, the memory that she cherishes being so far away from her home and family members. Her obsession with cooking, and her craving for fresh fish enable her to remain grounded in her ethnic culture. Yet again, it is her desire for fish, a common Bengali food, that compels Mrs. Sen to overcome her fear of driving, thereby becoming more open to the culture of the host country. However, the text remains ambiguous as to whether Mrs. Sen can be considered a successful immigrant or not. Through her preservation of native culture she seems to reject assimilation but at other times, such as when dealing with her gastro-accomplishments, she tries to adapt to the new present.

The narrative also reveals that it is not only Mrs. Sen who desires to recreate a home of her own: Eliot, and perhaps his mother as well, suffer from a sense of homelessness and crave to establish meaningful human relationships. This suggests that home is not a fixed place of origin in this story but is rather an unsteady emotional attachment. It is the presence of certain human beings within the geographical locations that make the real meaning of "home". Thus, through the conflict between "home" and "homelessness" the narrative explores the development of the South Asian diasporic female protagonist.

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