

## Liminal Phases, Domestic Spaces: Home in *Interpreter of Maladies*

Naveera Ahmed\*

**Abstract:** A liminal space / phase is a dimension of 'in-betweens' where two identities can co-exist. Objects and traditions brought from home countries into foreign domesticities strengthen cultural identities; however, they are also symptomatic of the mourning process that is a part of the re-homing process. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri's characters grow more accustomed to living in foreign dwellings, and learn to negotiate between the culture, food and traditions of their home and 'host' country. Lahiri also explores the effects that personal conflicts have on hybrid domesticities.

According to Nikos Papastergiadis, "The homeland is, for a diasporic sensibility, both absent and present" (xi). As immigrants encounter conflicts in learning the nuances of a new culture, while still holding on to the home, values and traditions of the subcontinent, they invariably create an interculture, or a liminal<sup>1</sup> way of life. In this liminal phase and space, characters straddle the mother land, as well as their home in a foreign land. Lan Dong notes that "...the dwelling space in the U.S that one creates does not simply mimic that of one's original homeland or of one's adopted American life, but rather a sense of being 'in-between'" (69). This idea of a hybrid identity often acts as a catalyst for conflict. The acculturation process starts in one's own dwelling space. The home structures, therefore, reflect the cultural and personal struggles they face.

In five of the narratives in *Interpreter of Maladies*, "A Temporary Matter," "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," "Mrs. Sen's," "This Blessed House" and "The Third and Final Continent," Jhumpa Lahiri's characters struggle to create new lives and identities through a "homing process"<sup>2</sup> in an intercultural space. The liminal experience is not always cultural, as is the case for Shoba and Shukumar in "A Temporary Matter," for example. These characters also live in an in-betweenness of marriage and separation. For Mala and the narrator of "The Third and Final Continent" as well, the liminal phase is also both cultural and personal, as they create a home and learn to negotiate between being strangers and to becoming husband and wife. Similarly, Twinkle and Sanjeev in "This Blessed House," also learn to adjust to each other as they move into their new home. Mr. Pirzada, on the other hand, who knows that his stay in America is temporary, is a guest at Lilia's home. His adaptation to America is thus limited,

---

\* Naveera Ahmed, Lecturer, Department of English, East West University, Dhaka

but his identity crisis is compounded as his motherland is going through a rebirth. Lahiri illustrates the re-homing process in domestic structures in several ways; she applies cuisine and material objects brought back from the home country and the practices of subcontinental traditions and American rituals to portray liminal living. She also demonstrates how domestic roles are often reversed, or changed, as a result of a drastic personal change or emotional conflict.

Lahiri also uses food to differentiate between stable and unstable domesticities. For example in "A Temporary Matter," Shoba and Shukumar's American kitchen consists of Indian ingredients and dishes. Before their baby's death, their domestic structure was stable, and Shoba would take pride in home making. For example, she would freeze, marinate, bottle and label her preparations so that she could easily "throw together meals" when unexpected guests dropped by (Lahiri 7).

Lahiri illustrates her characters enjoying other Indian dishes such as *rogan josh* and rice (10) and shrimp *malai* (20). Shoba and Shukumar's American existence has, therefore, not succumbed to typical American convenience or fast foods. The characters strengthen and hold on to their Indian identities through the food they consume.

In "This Blessed House," Sanjeev and Twinkle also consume Indian food and also serve it in a mixed social gathering. In his bachelor days, he would order "Mughlai chicken with spinach" from an Indian restaurant (138). Twinkle, on the other hand, who is "not terribly ambitious in the kitchen" (143) surprises Sanjeev one day by cooking an aromatic fish stew, with vinegar she finds in the house. Lahiri again uses food to highlight the differences between the husband and wife. While Twinkle prefers to buy store bought, pre-prepared ingredients, and thinks Indian cooking is a "bother" (144), Sanjeev enjoys cooking elaborate Indian meals. When the couple decides to have a party for a mixed crowd of Indians and Americans, their menu is predominantly Indian, with *samosas* from an Indian restaurant, and a rice and chicken dish that he prepares (150). For Sanjeev, food is a source of the maternal comfort of his motherland. Twinkle, however, prefers convenience over tradition as she is more accepting of change. Her Americanization is therefore more significant than Sanjeev's.

In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" Lahiri exemplifies Indian food as used in a subcontinental social setting in America. Even though Mr. Pirzada is an East Pakistani and Lilia's parents are Indians, they share common preferences in terms of cuisine. During Pirzada's visits, Lilia's mother would serve items such as mango pickle with meals consisting of "...lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in a yogurt sauce....a plate of lemon wedges, and the chili peppers...which they like to snap open and crush into their

food" (30). Besides helping to assert a subcontinental identity, and providing a sense of comfort, Indian food, therefore, helps to establish cultural solidarity between the Indian hosts and the East Pakistani Mr. Pirzada.

Similarly, in "Mrs. Sen's," the title character attempts to recreate India in her American domesticity. She pines for the freshest fish she can find to replicate, as closely as possible, the taste of the home she left behind. However, the fish that is available to her in America "tasted nothing like the fish in India" (123). Eliot observes Mrs. Sen cooking and preparing ingredients for her Indian meals, using "a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship" (114). Even though she is in America, she still refuses to make American food. Mrs. Sen spends her time cooking Indian meals not simply for sustenance, but because she uses this process as a way of forming her identity as Mrs. Sen, an Indian wife and an Indian homemaker. Because she is wedged between her two homes, America and India are both 'ghostly locations'<sup>iii</sup> for her. "The home country is not 'real' in its own terms and yet it is real enough to impede Americanization, and the 'present home' is materially real and yet not real enough to feel authentic" (Radhakrishnan 207).

In "The Third and Final Continent," Lahiri relates food, mainly corn flakes and egg curry, to illustrate the differences between temporary and permanent domesticities. In England, when the narrator shares accommodations with other bachelors, they "took turns cooking pots of egg curry, which we ate with our hands on a table covered with newspapers" (173). Later in the story, in America, when Mala arrives, he prepares the same meal for her and she eats as she peels off the potato skins. To the narrator, egg curry is a product of a comfortable, although temporary, home.

When the narrator arrives in America, before his wife joins him, he stays at the YMCA. Because he is on a budget and has no access to cooking facilities, his daily meals consist of corn flakes and milk, sometimes with bananas. With Mala's arrival, however, the narrator finds freshly cooked rice and chicken curry (193). Lahiri, therefore, equates food with different stages of the narrator's homing process.

Narratives in *The Interpreter of Maladies* are peppered with details of Indian objects and traditions (both American and Indian) in hybrid domesticities. Benzi Zhang posits that "Diasporic consciousness is hence predicated on a paradoxical process of home-haunting and home-hunting, in which diasporans may experience a radical discontinuity but, at the same time, they develop a desire for cultural reconnection—a kind of nostalgia for retrieving a home that has been lost in the past" (110). The objects in the characters' homes serve as agents of nostalgia<sup>iv</sup>, and also indicate the solidity of their existence, and identity, in that space. For example, in "A Temporary Matter," because Shoba and Shukumar are in a problematic phase in their marriage, Shoba's home is disheveled. "The fact

that the yellow chintz armchair in the living room clashed with the blue-and-maroon Turkish carpet no longer bothered her. ...a crisp white bag still sat on the wicker chaise, filled with lace she had once planned to turn into curtains" (6).

The author indicates that the arrangement in her living room once did bother Shoba. She also had plans to make her own curtains, a plan she has since abandoned. Also, the bag of lace now lies forgotten and neglected on the porch, a place where it shouldn't be. Lahiri illustrates how instability in the characters' relationship creates disorder in their home.

Moreover, the Jesus paraphernalia that Twinkle and Sanjeev find trigger conflict between the couple. When Twinkle insists on decorating her home with these objects, Sanjeev's religious sensibilities are threatened and he resents Twinkle and her childish behaviour.

Mr. Pirzada, on the other hand, uses objects from 'Dacca' to link himself to his home, while he is in a new place. His watch is always set on Dacca time (30), and the picture of his daughters (23) helps him remember his family while they are still in their war-ravaged homeland. The television set at Lilia's home also connects him to news of home.

Besides being nostalgic about his home and family in Dacca, Mr. Pirzada also learns about American customs and rituals. For instance, he is intrigued by Halloween and the rituals of trick-or-treating and pumpkin carving. Alternatively, his interactions with Lilia's parents provide him the opportunity to practice subcontinental rituals. Lilia also observes the adults' shared sentiments; their American home lacks certain aspects of their subcontinental homes. "The supermarket did not carry mustard oil, doctors did not make house calls, neighbours never dropped by without an invitation, and of these things, every so often, my parents complained" (24). Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents therefore bond over their shared subcontinental identity. For Mr. Pirzada, his temporary existence is a process of adjusting, while for Lilia's parents, it is a process of re-homing. In both these liminal phases, their home culture is a strong presence and includes traditions such as eating with their hands, dipping biscuits into their tea and chewing fennel seeds after their meals (25).

In contrast to Mr. Pirzada who has only a few artifacts from home, Mrs. Sen, who attempts to build a permanent and stable home in America, has filled her domesticity with Indian objects and maintains an Indian way of life. She decorates her home with typical Indian objects, for example, a "bedcover printed with rows of elephants bearing palanquins on their backs" (115). She daubs crimson paste in the middle parting of her hair, and hangs, in her closet, saris that taunt her with a life she will not have. To remember her family, she keeps newspaper clippings from the day she left, letters and voice recordings of her loved ones. For Mrs. Sen, the objects that surround her affirm her Indian identity in a place where she is not only fighting for a cultural connection, but also for a

purpose in her life. According to Ramón Soto-Crespo, "Mourning the homeland is one way ...to maintain a connection with it" (342). Mrs. Sen also rejects the idea of driving, a necessary and typical part of American living. "At home, you know, we have a driver," she complains (113). Mrs. Sen's acculturation process is, then, hampered as she continuously mourns her homeland.

For the narrator in "The Third and Final Continent," the inclusion of certain objects indicate stability and permanence. When he is a bachelor in England, his dwelling space is kept simple, with the most basic household objects. As the narrator reflects, the bachelors "took turns cooking pots of egg curry, which we ate with our hands on a table covered with newspapers" (173).

In the space he shares with his fellow subcontinentals, the tradition of eating with hands is practiced. The liminal phase/space also includes disorder, as the narrator and the other bachelors wash their dishes in the bathtub (174). The disorder stems from the fact that the narrator and his friends are aware of the temporariness of their existence in England. Their aim is not to acculturate or adapt, but only to adjust. In this period of adjustment, convenience takes precedence over decorum. At the YMCA in America, he owns only a plastic bowl, a spoon and a thermos. His next home in America is also temporary, yet more comfortable. The room he rents from Mrs. Croft provides him cooking provisions and fresh towels and sheets, and is thus a more stable domesticity than the YMCA.

When Mala arrives, he rents a small apartment that is to be their first real home. To make the house a home, Mala brings back objects that are a part of daily Indian life, such as drawstring pajamas, Darjeeling tea and cakes of Pears soap. She also brings her husband a letter from his brother (191). She eventually creates a stable domesticity by buying proper kitchen utensils, and using a proper table cloth for their dining table, a far cry from the narrator's days in England, when he and his bachelor friends would lay newspapers on the dining table (193).

The narrator and Mala are also in a liminal phase as they learn to live with each other in a foreign land:

I was still 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, our two toothbrushes lying side by side, a cake of Pears soap from India resting in the soap dish. I was not used to the fragrance of the coconut oil she rubbed every other night into her scalp, or the delicate sound her bracelets made as she moved about the apartment. (192)

The narrator therefore encounters many liminal homes and phases before he finally settles and has a family in America.

In her narratives, Lahiri demonstrates how conflict can affect the characters' domestic involvements. In "A Temporary Matter," Shoba and Shukumar experience a 'reversal of roles' symptomatic of living in liminal phase, between

marriage and separation. Shoba who would once take pride in meticulously caring for her home is now almost completely disconnected from it. Shukumar, on the other hand, takes over household duties such as cooking and cleaning, partly because he knows Shoba will not do these things, and partly because "it was the one thing that made him feel productive. If it weren't for him, he knew, Shoba would eat a bowl of cereal for her dinner" (8).

Shukumar thus takes over as the caretaker after Shoba refuses to be the homemaker she once was, before the death of her baby. Paula E. Geyh interprets a connection between maternity and domesticity:

The house in modern society has generally been conceived of as female, domestic space, and its close associations with the maternal can be seen in much of the literature of the house. A marked conflation of the house with the body of the mother can be seen throughout the works of Freud, particularly in "The Uncanny" and in his analyses of house imagery in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard makes frequent reference (both direct and indirect) to... "the maternal features of the house"... which similarly conflates the house with the figure and body of the nurturing mother: "Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house." (106)

Shoba's loss of the baby leads her to reject the idea of any domestic responsibility. Her disconnection, therefore, causes the domestic structure to fall apart. Twinkle and Sanjeev deal with a different kind of conflict. Sanjeev's resentments stem from the fact that he believes household work is woman's work. Yet because of her inactivity and his organized nature, he tidies, cooks and cleans while she clutters their home with the Christian paraphernalia. He is also surprised when one day she does decide to cook. Unlike Shoba and Shukumar, whose domestic roles were once clear and specific, Twinkle and Sanjeev are in the beginning of their conjugal life and their roles are yet to be defined within their home.

Defining their roles in their liminal phase is less problematic for Mala and the narrator in "The Third and Final Continent." Almost immediately after she arrives, Mala begins her duties as homemaker and tries to build a stable home. She takes over the household chores her husband is accustomed to doing by himself, for example, cooking and shopping. The narrator's role also changes and he is able to free himself from household duties and concentrate on his work outside the home. The domestic structure, then, becomes Mala's domain. In a country where everything is new to her, Mala's involvement in her home is a way of "acquiring power" (Dong).

Mrs. Sen's role changes, even if temporarily, as a result of a strong emotional reaction. Under usual circumstances, Mrs. Sen is involved in looking after Eliot and cooking. After the accident, she discards the work she was doing in the

kitchen and retreats to her room. Mr. Sen talks to Eliot's mother as she comes to take him home. He is also the one to serve snacks, consisting of crackers and peanut butter, to Eliot. The accident therefore causes her to feel a deep sense of loss and mourn for her life in India. As she becomes passive in her household duties, Mr. Sen compensates by taking over her role.

Lilia's parents also experience a 'reversal of roles' with Mr. Pirzada's introduction into their lives. In the host country, Lilia's parents can now play host to Mr. Pirzada as they entertain him. The dinners they serve him, and the stories and histories of home they share give them an opportunity to connect to their original home. As they teach and help Mr. Pirzada, their American identity is also reinforced.

Lahiri illustrates that domesticities in hybrid spaces reflect the struggles of the people who live in those spaces. When immigrants arrive in their 'host' country, the domestic space acts as a buffer between the original home and the new home. The domestic space is often a refuge for the immigrant, while for some who have already been acculturated to the host country, the domestic space can even be a domain riddled with conflict. To assign a fixed definition to the word 'home' is therefore problematic. As Zhang observes, "...the earlier conceptualizations of home based on a singular location are no longer adequate to describe the new dimensions and transformations of home, which has been re-versed in diaspora not as a 'felicitous space' of living, but rather a process of (be-)coming" (118).

For Mala and the narrator of "The Third and Final Continent," Mrs. Sen and Lilia's parents, the domestic space is filled with Indian objects and Indian food. Shoba and Shukumar, and Lilia's parents also celebrate Indian traditions along with American and Christian traditions, such as Christmas or Halloween. Sanjeev and Twinkle are also in the process of recreating their cultural identity and also their individual identities within their marriage.

Zhang, in reference to Sara Ahmed, states:

The notion of home, as a result, has to be redefined in the liminal spaces between two or more cultural dwellings. The conventional association of home with a place of residence is no longer stable, since home has 'become separated from the particular worldly space of living'; and the space which is most like home, which is most comfortable and familiar, is not the space of inhabitation—I am here—but the very space in which one finds the self as almost, but not quite, at home. (104)

The liminal domesticity, can therefore be thought of as a "thirdspace," and a third phase, a dimension when/where immigrants learn, struggle, adopt and ultimately come to terms with their hyphenated selves. For each diasporic, the time spent in this liminal phase / space will vary, as they learn to move from mourning, to 'home haunting' to 'home hunting' and finally learn to re-home.

- <sup>i</sup> 'Liminality' was coined by Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner. This refers to a transitional and hybrid stage. I will use this concept to signify a cultural and personal hybrid of space and time. (Brooker)
- <sup>ii</sup> I will use the term "re-homing process" to denote the re-creation of a domestic space, in a 'host' country, and also a process of cultural assimilation, when in the end, diasporics finally consider the host country to be their home.
- <sup>iii</sup> Benzi Zhang explains R. Radhakrishnan's 'ghostly locations' as both the motherland and the host country from which diasporics are disconnected.
- <sup>iv</sup> Brooker quotes bell hooks' definition as: "that longing for something to be as once it was, a kind of useless act"
- <sup>v</sup> According to Turner, liminality involves a "renunciation of roles, the demolition of structures" (*New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racism and Multiculture in Young Lives*, 244)

### Works Cited

- Back, Les. *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racism and Multiculture in Young Lives*. London: UCL Press Ltd., 1996.
- Brooker, Peter. *A Glossary of Cultural Theory*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Arnold, 2003.
- Dong, Lan. "Gendered Home and Space for the Diaspora: Gish Jen's *Typical American*." *thirdspace*. 4/1 (November 2004): 66-86 (print), 40 pars. (web). <[http://www.thirdspace.ca/vol4/4\\_1\\_Dong.htm](http://www.thirdspace.ca/vol4/4_1_Dong.htm)>.
- Geyh, Paula E. "Burning Down the House? Domestic Space and Feminine Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring, 1993): pp. 103-122. Web. 13 Mar. 2009. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208504>>
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. India: HarperCollins, 1999.
- Papastergiadis, Nikos. *Dialogues in the Diasporas: Essays and Conversations on Cultural Identity*. London: Rivers Oram, 1998.
- Radhakrishnan, R. *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Soto-Crespo, Ramón E. "Death and the Diaspora Writer: Hybridity and Mourning in the work of Jamaica Kincaid." *Contemporary Literatures*. Vol. 43, No. 2 (Summer, 2002): pp. 342-376. Web. 17 Mar. 2009. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1209076>>
- Zhang, Benzi. "The Politics of Re-homing: Asian Diaspora Poetry in Canada." *College Literature*. 31.3 (Winter, 2004): pp. 103-125. Web. 17 Mar. 2009. <[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/college\\_literature/v031/31.1.zhang.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/college_literature/v031/31.1.zhang.html)>