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The Search for Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Work
Bachelor Thesis

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V Olomouci dne:

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1. Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri, born in London in 1967, was raised in Rhode Island, USA, where she became recognized as a representative of the second generation of Asian Indian immigrants. In her work she has managed to depict the lifestyle of Asian Indian families living in America and draw attention to the issue of incomplete identity, as well as profoundly describe her experience of falling in love with a language.

This paper is an attempt to explore the struggle of Lahiri's characters, as well as her own, for finding their identity in divergent cultural backgrounds. Despite the fact that the author does not consider her books autobiographical¹, many of her characters share certain characteristics with her, as they try to find their voice in a country where they do not feel complete. Although the problem of identity is a popular topic in postcolonial literature, Lahiri's unusual love affair with a language, described in her memoir that I will analyze, illustrates how her journey towards literary expression has gone far beyond the boundaries of what is considered ordinary.

Regarding Lahiri's background, the fact that her parents were born in India before its independence from The British Empire in 1947 and the theme of cultural displacement in her work, the author is a subject of the postcolonial studies, which M. H. Abrams defines as a critical analysis of the history, culture, literature, and modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, France, and other European imperial powers run-on sentence.² As Abrams writes, there is an increasingly successful movement in the United States and Britain "to include the brilliant and innovative novels, poems, and plays by such postcolonial writers in the English language." According to the authors Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, the term "postcolonialism" has been originally used after the Second World War in terms such as the post-colonial state but from the late 1970s the term has been used by literary critics to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization."³ As a postcolonial writer, Lahiri participates on the disestablishment of Eurocentric norms of literary and artistic values and on the expansion of the literary canon, together with other

¹ Jhumpa Lahiri, *In Other Words*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 217.

² M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), 237.

³ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: Key Concepts in Postcolonial Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 168, <http://staff.uny.ac.id/sites/default/files/pendidikan/else-liliani-ssmhum/postcolonialstudiesthekeyconceptsrouledgekeyguides.pdf>.

relevant postcolonial writers, such as the Africans Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, the Caribbean islanders V. S. Naipaul and Derek Walcott, or G. V. Desani and Salman Rushdie⁴, also from the Indian subcontinent. Lahiri has been successful in her writing approach and positively received since her first collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), which won Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Fiction in 2000, and in 2015, the author was awarded a National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama.⁵

In the following section, Chapter 2, I will give an overview of other Indian-American female writers and briefly introduce their literary approach and similarities with Lahiri. Then I will describe Lahiri's background, such as her parent's migration and habits, since these are central for understanding the author's initial motivation to write. In the fourth chapter, I will introduce Lahiri's work that I will use for my analysis, respectively a book of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*, a novel *The Namesake* and a memoir *In Other Words*.

In Chapter 5, I will focus on the themes involved in the formation of one's identity and which are inspired by a list in Madhulika S. Khandelwal's book *Becoming American, Being Indian*. Khandelwal emphasizes several key Indian cultural "elements", which I will call "themes" in this thesis, and which are originally as follows: food, dress, language, art, entertainment, media, festivals, and celebrations.⁶ I have adjusted the list according to the frequency in which the themes appear in Lahiri's work and added the themes of relationships, religion, education, names, traveling abroad, appearance and society. In every section, I will investigate how relevant the given theme was for the self-definition of the author's characters, as well as Lahiri herself.

To clarify, the word "Indian" in this thesis will refer to a native of the country of India.

⁴ Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 237.

⁵ Greg Clinton, *Reading and Interpreting the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri* (New York: Enslow Publishing, 2017), 98.

⁶ Madhulika S. Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian: An Immigrant Community in New York City* (New Delhi: India Research Press, 2004), 35.

2. Other Indian-American Female Writers

In this section, I will introduce other female Indian American authors writing about the clash of Indian and Anglophone cultures, among them Vandana Singh, Samina Ali, Anita Felicelli, Bharati Mukherjee, Kashmira Sheth, Meena Alexander, Mindy Kaling, Neesha Meminger and Tanuja Desai Hidier. All of them, to a certain extent, address the problem of identity and searching for one's voice, perhaps except Vandana Singh who is known for her work of science-fiction concerned with the universe (*Visions, Ventures, Escape Velocities: A Collection of Space Futures*), conception of space (*Distances: Volume 23 in the Conversation Pieces Series*), climate change (*Entanglement*) and extraordinary abilities of the mind (*Of Love and Other Monsters: Volume 18 in the Conversation Pieces Series*).

Identity is the main topic of Anita Felicelli's short story collection *Love Songs for a Lost Continent*. Born in India and currently living in California, Felicelli writes about the fate of characters who move from one culture to another. The topic of identity is also frequent in the work of Bharati Mukherjee, a Calcutta-born author who moved to Iowa in her twenties to study a master's and a doctoral degree. Mukherjee is most known for her novel *Jasmine* that tells the story of a young Indian woman trying to adapt to the American way of life. Her collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* is concerned with a cultural fusion in the United States, where the characters are not only Indian, but also Vietnamese and Iraqi. Similarly, the author Kashmira Seth was born in India and moved to Iowa during her adolescence. Her novel *Blue Jasmine* is a story of a family who moves from a small Indian town to their new home in Iowa city. In the novel, Seth describes the differences of language and traditions from the point of view of a twelve-year old girl.

One of the most significant Indian-American poets was Meena Alexander. Born in India and living in New York in her adulthood, Alexander published a collection *Indian Love Poems* that focuses on the Indian's cultural heritage, from the Kama Sutra to poets of the Indian diaspora. Besides this successful book, she also wrote a collection of essays and poetry *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* where she deals with the immigrant identity and adapting to new cultural backgrounds.

As an activist for Muslim women rights, Samina Ali highlights the Indian religious pluralism and reminds the audience that although the majority of Indians are Hindus, there

are also Muslims, precisely 11.3 percent in 1980.⁷ As opposed to other immigrant groups, Indians are very unlikely to convert to different religions and focus on transplanting their religion to new settings,⁸ as Khandelwal writes, whether it is Hinduism, Christianity, or Islam, as in the case of Ali, who is known for her novel *Madras on Rainy Days*.

A younger representative of Indian-American literature is Mindy Kaling, known not only as a memorialist who discusses identity in a humorous way, but also as an actress, producer and director. Unlike the previously mentioned authors, Kaling was born in the USA and appeals mainly to younger audiences. That is also the case of Neesha Meminger, whose novel *Shine, Coconut Moon* tells the story of a young girl born in the United States to an Indian mother who decided to cut ties with her old-fashioned family. In this book, Meminger describes the girl's search for her roots and her attempt to find the reason why her mother refused to embrace her Indian roots. Another author for young adults who is worth mentioning is Tanuja Desai Hidier, who became known for her novel *Born Confused*. In a humorous way, Hidier presents the life of a young Indian girl who attempts to find her voice, friends, and love in America.

On the whole, Lahiri shares some similarities with these authors, such as the theme of identity and transmission of traditions, however, she shows a different approach for two reasons: she describes the lives of not one, but two generations from several perspectives, using the first-person as well as third-person narrative mode, and moreover, she decides to abandon English and write in another language in her later career, and it is thus justifiable to consider Lahiri an innovative and experimental author.

⁷ Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian*, 67.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

3. Jhumpa Lahiri's Background

3.1. Parent's Migration

In terms of migrating out of India, Lahiri's family was not an exception. Since the British colonized the country in the eighteenth century, the residents have been moving out of India in large numbers. British government needed workers for sugar and rubber plantations spread around the globe and Indian immigrants were wanted for these positions. It was a few decades later when Indians began to migrate with the expectations of advanced training in the Western universities and higher-waged jobs.⁹ Lahiri's father, Amar, who took the opportunity and brought his wife to the United Kingdom, is an example of the latter wave of immigration. He, as well as many other Indian immigrants, hoped to assure a better life for his family. Although the Indian economy started to develop significantly after the Indian Independence Act in 1947, the country still confronted problems of poverty, unemployment, and inequality.¹⁰ In her short story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," Lahiri mentions the conflict between India and Pakistan, that arose after the declaration of independence in 1947, and the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971. When Lahiri was born in 1967, her father worked as a librarian at the London School of Economics.

The US Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 allowed Indians to travel more freely. Lahiri's family did not hesitate and in 1969 moved to the United States where her father found a job at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and later at the University of Rhode Island.¹¹ The career of Lahiri's father has largely influenced her work, since many of her stories take place in an academic environment and her characters often work or study at a university. For example, Gogol's father in *The Namesake* is a professor, and his mother later finds a job at the library; Shukumar in "A Temporary Matter" is a thirty-five-year-old student working on a dissertation; an old lady in "The Third and Final Continent" rents only

⁹ Daniel Naujoks, "Emigration, Immigration, and Diaspora Relations in India," *Migration Policy Institute*, October 15, 2009, accessed February 15, 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/emigration-immigration-and-diaspora-relations-india#2>.

¹⁰ Bipin Chandra, "Characteristics of Communalism," in *India Since Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2008), 435, <https://upscandgateportal.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/india-since-independence-by-bipin-chandra.pdf>.

¹¹ Clinton, *Reading and Interpreting the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri*, 12.

to the graduates of Harvard or MIT. One of the characters who is not properly educated in Lahiri's work is an abandoned Indian woman Boori Ma who works as a sweeper, lives on a rooftop, and in the end becomes homeless, by which the author implies the importance of both education and family ties for the Indian immigrants. Lahiri herself has received degrees in English, comparative literature, creative writing, and Renaissance studies at Boston University.¹²

3.2.Indian Culture

For Indian immigrants, culture symbolizes both group identity and survival.¹³ Moreover, Madhulica S. Khandelwal in her book "Becoming American, Being Indian" states: "Indians have made major efforts to celebrate their cultural traditions in the United States and to transmit them to the next generation... Their own children are often included in the category "others" because, to many adult immigrants, they do not seem to embrace Indian culture as their parents do." She adds: "Similar concerns are found in most immigrant groups, but their intensity in the Indian community is remarkable." Given this fact, if Lahiri fully embraced the American culture and abstained from the Indian habits, she would disappoint her entire family. It was important for her to find balance between these two cultures, to assimilate to her peers at school and at the same time, to show respect to her family. Using a metaphor in her memoir *In Other Words*, she describes the Bengali language as a mother and English as a stepmother.¹⁴ In her article "My Two Lives", Lahiri states that she does feel Indian because of her parents' steadfast presence in her life¹⁵ – the fact that they would speak Bengali together, eat rice and dal with their fingers, listen to Indian songs, wear clothes that was almost impossible to purchase in any store in the USA, and occasionally went to visit their family members in India. These are all cultural factors that influence one's identity and which I will examine in the fifth chapter.

¹² Clinton, *Reading and Interpreting the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri*, 12.

¹³ Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian*, 35.

¹⁴ Lahiri, *In Other Words*, 147.

¹⁵ Jhumpa Lahiri, "My Two Lives," *Newsweek*, March 6, 2006, <https://www.newsweek.com/my-two-lives-106355>.

3.3. Becoming American

Jhumpa Lahiri began her life in the USA with a British birth certificate and a family loyal to their Indian roots. The author admits that when she visited London later in a childhood, she was fascinated with its foreign glamour. As she writes in “My Two Lives”, she is convinced that the British attitude towards India differs from the American one, due to its colonial past and collective consciousness, and she suggests that maybe it would be easier to fit in the British culture as an Indian than in the American culture.¹⁶ The character of Moushumi in *The Namesake* reflects that “her parents feared America much more than England, [...] perhaps because in their minds it had less of a link to India.”¹⁷ Despite of her enchantment with London, Lahiri would identify herself rather as Indian than British, given the fact that she was only two years old when her parents migrated to the USA.

Lahiri was fully immersed in the American culture when she started to attend American schools. Since American education emphasizes the values of individualism, as opposed to the Indian education, which transmits a collective conception of self, Lahiri was urged to create her own persona. American individualism originates in New England Puritanism and the ideas of the Founding Fathers. In 1782, in the essay “Information to Those Who Would Remove to America,”¹⁸ Benjamin Franklin informed former Europeans about the standards of America and stated that to survive in that society, one must be self-sufficient, industrious and practical, referring not only men, but also women. As Khandelwal writes in *Becoming American, Being Indian*, homemaking remains a primary responsibility of Indian women, as opposed to the United States, where women’s employment is perceived as a necessity.¹⁹ Although Lahiri’s father fulfilled the previously mentioned conditions – he was self-sufficient, industrious, and practical – her mother remained devoted to her husband for most of the time in America.

Another Founding Father, Thomas Jefferson, wanted to ensure that the government does not violate the rights of every individual and stated that the government should not have

¹⁶ Christopher Taylor, “Change and Loss,” *The Guardian*, June 21, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/21/saturdayreviewsfeatres.guardianreview5>.

¹⁷ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 212.

¹⁸ Benjamin Franklin, “Information to Those Who Would Remove to America,” accessed March 3, 2019, <http://americainclass.org/sources/makingrevolution/independence/text8/franklininfoamerica.pdf>.

¹⁹ Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian*, 127.

the right to take from a man that which he or she has rightfully earned.²⁰ An American philosopher E. W. Emerson, also called “the champion of individualism”, published several essays, among them “Nature,” “Self-Reliance” and “American Scholar,” where he expresses his conviction that only individual searching is enlightening,²¹ by which he even further demonstrates the importance of this philosophy in the United States. The fact that students still analyze the works of such men as R. W. Emerson and T. D. Thoreau, as well as poems by Walt Whitman, who is considered one of the first truly American poets, proves that their ideology left a strong impact on the country. It might even explain why there is still not Universal Health Care in the United States, a system that works in all other developed countries. Instead of supporting an equal distribution of wealth, which would help the weaker, many Americans prefer to choose their own insurance. Another example of American individualism is the fact that American children are not expected to take care of their elderly parents, as opposed to India, where it is the children’s responsibility.²²

Growing up in an American society influenced by the philosophy of individualism, Lahiri naturally began to examine herself and contemplate whether she was equal to her classmates. Speaking American English without marks of a foreign accent, she has realized that this ability is not enough to feel as part of the culture, neither growing up on the American territory and attending its institutions. In the article “My Two Lives”, she mentions: “In addition to my distinguishing name and looks, I did not attend Sunday school, did not know how to ice-skate, and disappeared to India for months at a time.” That suggests that fitting in the American culture would be easier for Lahiri if she was of the Christian religion, practicing certain types of sports and having a different name and looks.

Looking back at the history of the USA, there might be an explanation of Lahiri’s concern with her name and physical appearance. In the 18th century, John Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur wondered, together with other new inhabitants of the land, how to identify their country. In his letter called “What is an American,” based on his own experience of a

²⁰ Andrew Sears, “Individualism and the Founding Fathers, Part 1: Liberty and Limited Government,” Center for Individualism, September 3, 2017, accessed February 18, 2019, <https://centerforindividualism.org/individualism-founding-fathers-part-1-liberty-limited-government/>.

²¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: The Library of America, 1983) 53–71.

²² Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian*, 140.

European-born American farmer, Crèvecoeur reflects that “the new man is either an European, or a descendant of an European,” and “the Americans were once scattered all over Europe.”²³ Although stated almost three hundred years ago, today, after many immigrant flows from other continents, the large majority of American citizens are indeed of European origin and to a great extent it was them who shaped the country to its present form. All the Founding Fathers were men of European origin, as well as the people represented on current American banknotes, although the country is inhabited by people from all the other continents. For Native Americans and Afro-Americans, it must be particularly difficult to feel accepted in the United States, considered that some of the men on the American banknotes supported the Native Indian removal and in many cases owned slaves. Jhumpa Lahiri is an example of how Indo-Americans, as well as other non-European immigrants, may feel excluded from the American culture, even if it is the land where they are born, raised and educated.

Indo-American professor Sharmila Rudrappa in her book *Ethnic Routes to Becoming American: Indian Immigrants and the Cultures of Citizenship* writes: “National identity in the United States is a curious thing... Becoming American is premised on achieving a modern, abstract individualism, consciously leaving behind the past to make oneself anew.”²⁴ Lahiri felt the pressure to identify herself, during which she tried to assimilate, but due to the influence of her family, it was not an easy task. She develops this kind of disunity more profoundly in her novel *The Namesake*.

Unlike her parents, Lahiri has learned English without an Indian accent and with rich vocabulary, which suggests that when necessary, she translated for her parents and served as their guide. This experience might have sharpened her sense for responsibility, but also caused her alienation, since she had to take a parental role much earlier than her American peers. Growing up, Lahiri has also observed that while Indian families work as a unit and strive to establish very strong bonds, American families are composed of individual members

²³ J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, “What is an American,” in *Letters from an American farmer* (New York: E. P. Dutton & CO., 1957).

²⁴ Sharmila Rudrappa, *Ethnic Routes to Becoming American: Indian Immigrants and the Cultures of Citizenship* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 148, Google Books.

who are expected to create and pursue their own ambitions. In her work, Lahiri frequently depicts the second generation's fluctuation between these two cultural stereotypes.

3.4.Linguistic Journey to Italy

As Lahiri writes in her memoir *In Other Words*, she visited Italy for the first time with her sister in 1994. It was a short trip to Florence during which she bought a small dictionary for a case of emergency. When she returned to Boston, she kept hearing echoes from Italy and as she felt the desire to understand their meanings, she started to attend Italian classes. Interestingly, she felt attracted to the language, although she did not need it for practical reasons, as she did not live in Italy and did not have any Italian friends.²⁵ It is quite a mystery to determine what Lahiri found familiar about Italian, but her motivation is described in the article “Teach Yourself Italian” that Lahiri published in *The New Yorker* before the official English translation of *In Other Words*. She explains that the language has enabled her to escape her failures regarding English and offered her a new literary path.²⁶ It is interesting that the author considers her mother tongue Bengali, the language of her parents, although in the article she admits that Bengali is foreign for her. She explains: “When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign, you feel a continuous sense of estrangement”.²⁷ Lahiri describes that she “felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen”, and her perception as a young girl was that she “fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another.”²⁸ Growing up with a sense of uncertainty, she was ready to deal with the discomfort that comes with entering “uncharted waters”, or learning a new language. It was Italian itself that has mesmerized her and fulfilled her with hope and desire to invent a new voice.

When she returned to Italy six years later, this time to Venice, she could barely ask for directions or make an order in a restaurant, and she still felt exiled from the language.²⁹

²⁵ Lahiri, *In Other Words*, 7.

²⁶ Jhumpa Lahiri, “Teach Yourself Italian,” *The New Yorker*, December 7, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/12/07/teach-yourself-italian>.

²⁷ Lahiri, *In Other Words*, 19.

²⁸ Lahiri, “My Two Lives.”

²⁹ Lahiri, “Teach Yourself Italian.”

In 2004, she went to Rome with the excuse to attend a literary festival, when in fact she returned to improve her language skills. At that time, she was able to exchange few simple sentences, despite of the fact that her fascination with Italian had already lasted for ten years. Since she knew the grammar, she was very self-critical, aware of the mistakes she made, and striving to change it. When she went to Milan in 2008 and attempted to speak, she felt “more discouraged than ever.”³⁰ After her return to the USA, she continued to have private lessons and in 2011 she began her geographical experiment, when she decided, together with her husband and children, to move to Rome.

In 2015, she successfully published a memoir *In altre parole*, written entirely in Italian and translated to English as “In Other Words”. With this piece of work, Lahiri has not only significantly distinguished herself from other Indian-American authors, but also presented an innovative approach in writing and acquiring a language, as well as managed to gain attention in the country that has fascinated her since her first visit in 1994. Nowadays, she lives in Italy and continues to write in Italian.

³⁰ Lahiri, “Teach Yourself Italian.”

4. Jhumpa Lahiri's Selected Work

For the analysis, I chose three of Lahiri's books, two of which are fictional, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *The Namesake* (2003), and one non-fictional, *In Other Words* (2016), and besides, I draw from her articles "My Two Lives" (2006) and "Teach Yourself Italian" (2015). Apart from the previously mentioned books, the author has also published a short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* in 2008, a novel *The Lowland* in 2013, and *Dove mi trovo* in 2018, her first novel written in Italian which has not been published in English yet but may be literally translated as "where I find myself."

Interpreter of Maladies is a collection of nine short stories about the lives of both first and second generations of American Indians, with which Lahiri announces herself, as Michiko writes in his review, as "a wonderfully distinctive new voice" and makes a "precocious debut."³¹ Michiko further writes that in the book the author "chronicles her characters' lives with both objectivity and compassion while charting the emotional temperature of their lives with tactile precision." The characters that I focus on in my analysis are Shukumar and Shoba, a married couple experiencing a crisis, Mr. Pirzada and Lilia, the Das family going for a trip in India and their driver Mr. Kapasi, abandoned woman Boori Ma, a babysitter Mrs. Sen and an American boy Eliot, Sanjeev and Twinkle, sick woman Bibi Haldar, and the nameless protagonist of "The Third and Final Continent" whose fate resembles that of Lahiri's father. Throughout the book, Lahiri mentions most of the Indian key elements, or themes, that are listed in the Introduction, particularly those of food, relationships, and traditions.

The Namesake spans the first three decades of a young man's life who staggers between his parents' life of "saris, sandals and doggedly maintained Bengali ritual"³² and the American life of his peers. As Meyerson writes in her review, the novel explores "the concepts of cultural identity, of rootlessness, of tradition and familial expectation - as well as the way that names [...] alter our perceptions of ourselves." The relevant characters that I focus on in my analysis are Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, their son Gogol, his American

³¹ Michiko Kakutani, "Book of the Times: Liking America, but Longing for India," *The New York Times*, August 6, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/08/06/books/books-of-the-times-liking-america-but-longing-for-india.html>.

³² Julie Myerson, "What's in a name?" *The Guardian*, January 17, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/jan/17/featuresreviews.guardianreview23>.

girlfriend Maxine, and Moushumi, who becomes his wife. Besides the theme of name, the novel is concerned with the transmission of Indian traditions in the United States, relationships and the influence of traveling abroad.

In the memoir *In Other Words*, which Lahiri managed to write in Italian and which was published as “In altre parole” one year before the English translation, the author is concerned with the theme of language and its influence on her persona. She illustrates that learning a new language might become a way of adopting a new identity, and for those who struggle to find their voice or express certain things, it may represent a hopeful solution. Joseph Luzzi in his review writes that the fact that it is an Italian autobiography of an American author translated by someone else’s hand is a bit surreal, but appropriate, because “all the personal experiences are connected to linguistic ones and all the linguistic issues refracted through the author’s life.”³³ The main theme of the book is obviously language, but furthermore the reader encounters the theme of appearance and the influence of society in which a person lives. With her new writing approach depicted in this book and later in *Dove mi trovo*, Lahiri becomes labeled as an Indian-American author, born in England, writing about the life in three continents, and both in English and Italian, which makes her a unique voice of the modern literary canon.

³³ Joseph Luzzi, “‘In Other Words,’ by Jhumpa Lahiri,” *The New York Times*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/books/review/in-other-words-by-jhumpa-lahiri.html>.

5. Themes in Jhumpa Lahiri's Work

In this chapter, I will investigate the themes that appear in Lahiri's work and that are partly based on Khandelwal's list of Indian cultural elements. Although Lahiri's novels and stories are not always written in the first-person narrative mode, there is often a mark of an autobiographical element. For example, in *The Namesake*, the author shares certain similarities with the male protagonist, Gogol, and in the story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" with a ten-year old Lilia; on the other hand, "The Third and Final Continent" is told from her father's point of view. In this manner, Lahiri introduces identity issues experienced not only by her, but also by her previous generation. While reading her books, the reader encounters various topics characteristic for the Indian identity and their preservation in the United States, such as food, relationships, traditions, celebrations, and contact with India, as well as those aspects that have contributed to the formation of her own personal identity, such as the language.

5.1. Food

Lahiri in her books describes the process of cooking in detail and often in a very sensorial and precise way. For example, she writes: "He ran the water in the sink, soaking the knife and the cutting board, and rubbed a lemon half along his fingertips to get rid of the garlic smell."³⁴ In this matter, she highlights the importance of the traditional way of cooking for Indians, which persists in their households even after many years of living in a foreign country. Indeed, Indian immigrants brought their food-related traditions to the United States, and as Khandelwal states, they generally prefer home-cooked meals prepared by women,³⁵ as they believe that it is the basis of Indian culture.³⁶ Lahiri confirms this fact in her books and often contrasts the Indian way of cooking and eating with that of the Americans'.

In some of Lahiri's stories, food is symbolic and denotes a higher truth. For instance, puffed rice in "The Interpreter of Maladies" symbolizes Mrs. Das's ignorant behavior, carelessness and a damaged bond in her family. While the woman scatters rice along the trail during their trip in India, she attracts dangerous monkeys and threatens the safety of her

³⁴ Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian*, 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

children.³⁷ Lahiri suggests that food represents healthy family ties, and once Indians cease to appreciate food, the family bond breaks. Another instance where food unites people is in the story “A Temporary Matter” where an emotionally distant couple is forced to have dinners together because of a blackout that occurs at eight PM for five days due to a snowstorm. In the story, the one who takes charge of cooking is not the wife, but the husband, and the deeply integrated Indian tradition is thus absent. Lahiri adds: “If it weren’t for him [Shukumar]... Shobe would eat a bowl of cereal for her dinner,”³⁸ which suggests that something unusual is happening in the couple’s life, and indeed, the reader later discovers that the two characters became distant after a death of their new-born child. As the couple starts eating together due to the electricity cut, they find the courage to communicate with each other again and share their secrets. Food also plays an important role in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, where the dinner serves as an occasion for a family to meet their Pakistani friend and to comfort each other, as they watch the conflict between Pakistan and India on the television. In one moment, Mr. Pirzada gives Lilia a candy, which adds an element of a ritual to the act of sharing food. To Lilia, the act symbolizes both their shared experiences and essential connections, and their basic differences,³⁹ and Lilia herself thinks that it is inappropriate to consume the candies from him in a casual matter.⁴⁰ On one occasion, Lilia puts chocolate from Mr. Pirzada in her mouth and starts to pray that his family is safe, although she has never been told to do so.⁴¹ Food in Lahiri’s work and in the Indian culture thus symbolizes means of unification, communication and support.

Americans, unlike Indians, are used to eating away from home, sometimes while walking or driving, since there is often a limited time for a meal. Indian women, on the other hand, spend many hours in the kitchen cooking, even when they prepare a mere dinner for two, as described in the story “Mrs. Sen’s”.⁴² When there is a great celebration like wedding, Indian women may spend the whole night slicing several kilos of vegetable.⁴³ The American

³⁷ Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 66.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁹ Clinton, *Reading and Interpreting the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri*, 33.

⁴⁰ Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 29.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 117.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 115.

mother in the same story prefers to spend her free time in a different way and rather orders a pizza or simply takes bread and cheese.⁴⁴

Lahiri stresses that American way of cooking is generally simpler and often influenced by the European cuisine, which may sometimes appeal to the U.S.-reared Indians. For example, for American Indian woman called Twinkle in “The Blessed House”, Indian food is a bother and she rather prepares Italian bread with lettuce and carrots in a simple dressing. Traditionally, Indians also use exact measurement while cooking, Twinkle’s husband is thus annoyed when she does not know the precise amount of vinegar that she put into the salad.

Cooking is often preceded by buying a large quantity of ingredients in a grocery store. In “A Temporary Matter”, Lahiri writes: “When she [Shoba] used to do the shopping, the pantry was always stocked with extra bottles of olive oil and corn oil,” and that the couple “invariably marveled at how much food they’d bought”.⁴⁵ Shukumar even met Shoba while she was making a grocery list, which is another incident that underlines this tradition.

One of the Indian traditions is to eat with hands, which many of Lahiri’s characters keep doing in America. Interestingly, Mrs. Das also eats rice with her hands, although she has been considerably Americanized. As for the case of Sanjeev in “The Blessed House”, when he enters an empty kitchen during a party and eats a piece of chicken with his fingers, he hopes that his American colleges do not see him. It is quite interesting because on one hand, he feels ashamed for having Christian items in his house, but on the other hand, he would be embarrassed if Americans saw him eat with his hands; Sanjeev is thus torn between the two traditions in America and does not fully embrace none of them.

Gogol in *The Namesake* represents a clash between the Indian and American way of catering. While growing up, he eats both with his hands and a fork,⁴⁶ and as a grown-up he eats out far more frequently than his parents, who reserve eating away from home only for special occasions. When Gogol accepts an invitation for dinner by his American girlfriend Maxine, he notices her family’s admiration for Europe, particularly Greece, France, and Italy, not only in the style of their household, but also in their eating habits. As opposed to his

⁴⁴ Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 118.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁶ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 75.

family where cooking may take several hours, the food at Maxine's is prepared in small portions, ready within a few minutes, and served with wine.⁴⁷ Lahiri in her work frequently demonstrates that while Americans enjoy drinking wine during or after dinner, which is an European-based tradition, Indians are loyal to their ritual of drinking tea.

Although Khandelwal states that large part of Indians are vegetarians, and some live their entire lives without tasting animal products,⁴⁸ Lahiri's characters prepare meat frequently, except beef. For example, Shukumar in "A Temporary Matter" prepares the lamb, Mrs. Sen in another story thaws chicken legs, Lilia's mother cooks mincemeat kebabs, and Boori Ma in "A Real Durwan" recounts that in her house back in India they used to eat goat twice a week. Only the protagonist of "The Third and Final Continent" prefers to eat cornflakes to hamburgers upon his arrival to the United States, because he "had yet to consume any beef,"⁴⁹ since cows are deeply respected animals in India. While Lahiri does not consider the consumption of meat a radical difference between America and India, she stresses that Indians consume more rice, spices and vegetable, and the fact that these items are less accessible and less affordable in the United States.

In the opening chapter of *The Namesake* dating back to 1968, Lahiri depicts the struggle of the first wave of immigrants after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 to find proper ingredients in the United States. It was not until 1970 when the first Indian grocery opened in Queens, the part of New York City with the densest Indian population.⁵⁰ For example, in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", a story that dates back to 1971, Lahiri notes that "the supermarket did not carry mustard oil",⁵¹ a popular ingredient in the Indian cuisine. These gastronomic limitations may have increased the first generation's feelings of alienation in the new continent.

5.2. Relationships

As for family relationships, Indian parents belonging to the first generation were afraid that their children would refuse to follow their traditions, therefore, they often tried to

⁴⁷ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁸ Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian*, 38.

⁴⁹ Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 175.

⁵⁰ Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian*, 39.

⁵¹ Ibid., 24.

regulate their activities in an authoritative way, as Khandelwal writes, and their children often believed that their parents were “paranoid” that they would become Americans.⁵² In Lahiri’s stories, it seems that the more pressure the parents exert on a child, the more rebellious the child becomes, as in the case of Moushumi in *The Namesake*, who was forbidden to date during her adolescence and felt lonely for most of the time. As a protest, she made a pact with her friends, before the age of twelve, never to marry a Bengali man,⁵³ and during her college years, she began to “fall effortlessly into affairs,”⁵⁴ sometimes with men much older than herself. Gogol in the same novel reflects this reality when, at the age of twenty-six, he wants to distance himself from his parents so that he can live as freely as possible.

U.S.-reared Indians usually chose a more American style of parenting, as depicted in Lahiri’s short story “Interpreter of Maladies” on the Das family, which is of Indian origin but considerably Americanized. Although they come to visit Mr. Das’s parents in India, the country is a foreign concept for them; for example, Mr. Das takes pictures of whatever he sees and throughout the drive, he continuously reads a tourist book. Lahiri describes the family in a rather bitter way, as superficial, irresponsible and selfish, as if she felt ashamed for their behavior, and so does the Indian driver, Mr. Kapasi, who takes them on a trip. The reader finds that according to Mr. Kapasi, Mr. and Mrs. Das behave rather like an older brother and sister, and not as parents,⁵⁵ since they do not treat their children as an authority and do not show them certain values, such as respect for one another. Mr. Kapasi, who carries certain similarities with the author (the reason explained in Chapter 5.9.), perceives the family as a representation of the decline of Indian traditions. In this manner, Lahiri seems to suggest the importance of fidelity, not only to one another, but also to one’s cultural background.

Lahiri also compares the difference between the American and Indian parent-child relationship in *The Namesake*. When Gogol comes for dinner at Maxine’s and meets her American family, he is relieved that they behave casually and as if he was their regular guest. He observes that Maxine’s parents treat their daughter as equal to themselves, do not interfere

⁵² Ibid., 159.

⁵³ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 213.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 215.

⁵⁵ Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 49.

with her, nor his, privacy, and automatically suppose that he will feel comfortable with them. He is worried to introduce Maxine to his own family because they are quite the opposite: his parents would become nervous, take their relationship too seriously and overwhelm them both with questions. Unlike Maxine's parents, Gogol's would immediately imagine them having a wedding and children, by which the U.S.-reared protagonist is greatly bothered.

There is another significant difference in the American and Indian parent-child relationship, which is that in India, children are expected to become responsible for their elderly parents, as oppose to America, where there is the option of contacting a senior center. American parents do not take their children's presence for granted and live with the awareness that they may become alone one day. In "Mrs. Sen's", the Indian woman asks the American boy (Eliot) if he will put her mother in a nursing home when she gets old, to which he replies "maybe".⁵⁶ During her life in America, the woman, who was raised in India, is struggling to accept this reality. When an Indian woman in another story, "The Third and Final Continent," learns that her husband's lessee was a hundred-year-old woman living alone, it is hard for her to grasp the information.⁵⁷ Indian mothers raising their children in America were thus worried that they would become abandoned. Khandelwal writes: "[They] overall viewed American society as poorly suited to aged persons... [T]he mere consideration of sending parents to retirement or nursing homes was socially taboo, and in fact was an image evoked by Indians to convey disapproval of American individualization."⁵⁸

As far as love affairs are concerned, Lahiri emphasizes Gogol's different attitudes when dating an American and Indian girl. During his affair with Maxine, he has an opportunity to live as a true American and see life through their eyes for the first time. Although their relationship lasts for less than one year, Gogol learns many new things and therefore, it becomes an essential part of his life. The problem is that Gogol cannot possibly offer Maxine the same, and there is also a fundamental difference between them: while she accepts her life and her family as they are, he must fluctuate between his old and new self, and when he thinks of his parents, he feels like a traitor.⁵⁹ Gogol does not want to talk about

⁵⁶ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 193.

⁵⁸ Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian*, 140.

⁵⁹ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 141.

his past with Maxine⁶⁰ because he was a different person back then, and for this reason, he feels inadequate with her. On the other hand, when he dates an Indian girl Moushumi, he realizes that in her presence, he feels more comfortable in his own skin,⁶¹ although she knows both his old and new self. It is important to note that Lahiri decided to end Gogol's relationship with Maxine not because she would think that it is an impossible combination (she herself married an American man, two years before the publication of *The Namesake*), but to demonstrate the importance of one's roots, which Gogol intended to forget during his American adventures.

The relationship between a married couple may also differ in an Indian and American household. For example, in "Interpreter of Maladies", Mr. Kapasi admits that he has never seen his wife fully naked, which for many American men would be unacceptable and might lead to a divorce. Mr. Kapasi, despite of the fact that he fantasizes about Mrs. Das, is faithful to his wife, since Hindu marriage is regarded as sacred, unbreakable and permanent. In India, the couple may divorce only under the following conditions: the husband is missing, or impotent, or degraded from the caste, or ascetic, or dead.⁶² Divorcement in India is therefore almost a taboo, as opposed to America, where hundreds of thousands of people divorce every year (precisely, 787,251 in 2017)⁶³. For U.S.-reared Indians, it is significantly harder to maintain the Indian tradition, as demonstrated in *The Namesake* where Gogol divorces with Moushumi after just a few months of their marriage. In Lahiri's short story "Sexy", a Bengali man living in America announces to his Indian wife via telephone that he has found another woman, as if it was an ordinary thing. Lahiri highlights that the U.S.-reared generation is more individualistic and self-centered than their parents who learned to live together despite of their deficiencies. For example, Sanjeev in "The Blessed House" in a certain moment regrets that he has married his wife,⁶⁴ but instead of giving up, he tries to focus on the good side of her, because the thought of a divorce is a taboo for him.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 135.

⁶¹ Ibid, 211.

⁶² Puja Mondal, "Comprehensive Essay on Divorce in India," *Your Article Library*, accessed February 18, 2019, <http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/marriage/comprehensive-essay-on-divorce-in-india/4370>.

⁶³ "US Divorce Statistics and Divorce Rates (2000 – 2017)," *Divorce Magazine*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.divorcemag.com/articles/us-divorce-statistics-and-divorce-rate-2000-2017/>.

⁶⁴ Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 146.

Indian married couples may also seem to be cold toward each other, as depicted in “Mrs. Sen’s” when Eliot observes that Mr. Sen does not kiss his wife upon arrival. Furthermore, the couple does not move closer together when the boy is taking a picture of them, and when they sit in a car, Mr. Sen puts his arm across the top of the front seat, so it looks like as if his arm is around Mrs. Sen’s, which is probably the closest contact between them that the boy has experienced. Lahiri explains in *The Namesake* that a kiss or caress, as well as pronouncing a husband’s name, is something intimate for the Hindus, and Ashima and Ashoke’s twenty-six-year old son (Gogol) realizes that he has never witnessed physical affection between them.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the author depicts an interesting contrast when she describes Ashima’s observation in the hospital that Americans, in spite of their public declarations of affection, hand-holding and revealing clothes, generally value their privacy.⁶⁶

Lahiri demonstrates that a tragedy in a family, such as a death, may reunite its members and make the U.S.-reared generation more aware of their Indian heritage. After the passing of his father, Gogol returns to his Indian roots, no longer wishes to date Maxine and starts to embrace different values in his life. It is after this event that Gogol finally decides to read the book that his father gave him for his 18th birthday.⁶⁷ Although it is a tragic event, it is also an important milestone in Gogol’s life that makes him accept and appreciate his origin. Similarly, Shukumar in “A Temporary Matter” becomes interested in India only in his adulthood after his father dies.⁶⁸

In her story “Mrs. Sen’s”, Lahiri depicts the difference between relationships within a neighborhood in the United States and India. The protagonist complains about the silence in her neighborhood and the ignorance of her American neighbors. She tells Eliot, whom she watches during the afternoons, that if she started to scream in India, all the neighbors would come to ask her if she was alright. In America, the boy tells her, people may complain that she is making too much noise, like his mother, who called to her neighbors to calm the music down when they celebrated Labor Day, without having invited her. In this way, Lahiri contrasts the American individualism and the Indian sense of unity in a neighborhood and

⁶⁵ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 138.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁶⁸ Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 12.

demonstrates that this difference was one of the reasons why it was difficult for Indian women to adapt in America.

In “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar,” Lahiri depicts an ill, desperate woman who luckily receives help by her neighbors, and thus is able to survive (although they are thankful that she is not their relative).⁶⁹ On the other hand, the protagonist of “A Real Durwan,” who has much in common with Bibi Haldar as she is abandoned and uneducated, becomes homeless when her neighbors discard her. In these stories, the author also demonstrates the essence of an Indian family and of the interaction within a neighborhood.

5.3. Religion

In the short story “The Blessed House,” Lahiri touches the topic of religion in a household. When Twinkle, an American Indian woman raised in California, demonstrates her passion for Christian art and wants to put a statue of the Virgin in the yard, her Indian husband Sanjeev is worried about the opinion of others, although it is hard for him to explain the reason. He considers the Christian items non-sacred and would feel ashamed if the public saw them on his property. As he starts living with his wife, he describes her as impractical and simple, which is the same way in which he perceives the Christian items. On the other hand, Sanjeev is fond of classical music, particularly Mahler and Bach, which originates in the European Christian tradition, but in a certain moment, he is surprised by the interpretation of the music, when he finds out that Mahler’s symphony with elements of tragedy and struggle was principally music of love and happiness. Moreover, when he goes to a movie theatre to watch a German movie that is one of his wife’s favorites, he finds the plot unnecessarily depressing. In this way, Lahiri shows that when Indians embrace European culture, they may find their interpretation exaggerated or unreasonable. Something similar happens in “The Third and Final Continent” where the protagonist observes a woman who is praying upon hearing that Americans landed on the moon.⁷⁰ What seems exciting for Americans might be of a little importance for the Indians.

Since Sanjeev is more tied to India than his American Indian wife Twinkle, whose parents live in California, it is harder for him to accept the Christian elements. As Khandelwal

⁶⁹ Ibid., 167.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 174.

writes: “The younger generation of Indian Americans reared in the United States inevitably viewed religion differently from their parents,” and “parents did fear that their children might lose interest in their religion.”⁷¹ For this reason, Sanjeev may fear that he would disappoint his family, if they knew that his wife adores Christian elements, and it may arouse a feeling of treachery inside him.

Some of Lahiri’s characters accept Christian elements, as in *The Namesake*, where the author writes that Gogol’s father Ashoke has always liked “The Perry Como Christmas Album.” It is true that Ashima avoids angels or nativity scenes when she writes Christmas cards and prefers to write “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas,”⁷² but as other Americans, the family installs a Christmas tree⁷³ and exchanges gifts on that occasion, although Gogol’s younger sister refused it once after having taken a Hinduism class.⁷⁴ The author denotes that in many cases, Indians got accustomed to the Christian traditions and began to participate in them, although they generally prefer the Hindu traditions in regard to important ceremonies, such as weddings. Lahiri herself got married in Calcutta in the Hindu tradition, although her husband is American.⁷⁵

Despite of the fact that India is a religiously diverse country, many Americans consider “Indian” a religion itself, as demonstrated in “The Blessed House” where an American guest says: “[A]re you guys Christians? I thought you were Indians.”⁷⁶ What the guest probably meant was not “Indian”, but “Hindu”, whose representants form the majority of the Indian population (82.6 percent in 1980).⁷⁷ Similarly, Indians often suppose that all Americans are Christians and celebrate Christmas, as Ashima does in *The Namesake*,⁷⁸ even though there are other minor religious groups. In her work, Lahiri almost never mentions Islam, whose representants form 11.3 percent of the Indian population, apart from the story “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” where the main protagonist is a Muslim Bengali and where she mentions the fact that during the Indo-Pakistani conflict Muslims and Christians

⁷¹ Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian*, 79.

⁷² Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 160.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁷⁵ Clinton, *Reading and Interpreting the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri*, 57.

⁷⁶ Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 151.

⁷⁷ Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian*, 67.

⁷⁸ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 41.

had to split up and live in separate territories. In “A Temporary Matter,” Lahiri also mentions that Shoba bought meat from Muslim butchers, by which she highlights the growing cultural diversity in the United States.

5.4.Education

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri often contrasts the American culture of individualism with the Indian sense for collectivism. She highlights the fact that American children are taught to think for their own needs and that a child’s opinion matters at a very young age. Gogol’s teacher refuses to call him by the name Nikhil, which differs from the name in his birth certificate, not only because it is not the norm in American schools, but also because little Gogol apparently does not like the name. What this passage of the book demonstrates is that American teachers may estimate the pupils’ preferences more than those of their parents’. Gogol’s family find these manners disrespectful but cannot possibly do anything about it in America.

There are other aspects that differ regarding the educational system. Since Americans teach subject as History from a different perspective than Indians, that means with a greater emphasis on their own territory, the second generation of Indian immigrants might have disappointed their parents for not knowing certain historical facts about India. Lahiri demonstrates this issue in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” where Lilia’s father becomes mad at the fact that his ten-year-old daughter does not learn about the Indo-Pakistani conflict at school. Moreover, Lilia is reproved by her teacher at school when the girl shows interest in Pakistan instead of the surrender at Yorktown. The U.S.-reared Indians may have thus experienced a sense of disunion and perhaps guilt, since the two authorities expected them to have different basic knowledge.

Lahiri also mentions that certain aspects of the American education system may appear as brutal to the Indians. For instance, when Gogol is eleven years old, his school organizes a historical field trip that includes a visit of a graveyard,⁷⁹ where the pupils are expected to rub stones to clear their inscriptions. Upon hearing this, Ashima is horrified because in India, the cemeteries are almost forbidden places (Lahiri explains that in an Indian

⁷⁹ Ibid., 70.

cemetery, it is possible to encounter bodies swallowed by flames). During this trip, eleven-year old Gogol realizes that after his own death, he will probably be cremated, as opposed to his American classmates, who will be buried in the earth. Although his mother considers the trip horrifying, for Gogol it is a fascinating experience after which he becomes more and more open-minded about the American life-style.

5.5. Traditions

In addition to cooking, religion and education, Lahiri contrasts other Indian and American traditions throughout her books, such as the choice of clothing, daily habits as removing shoes in home, predicting future from a palm, the practice of marriage, different expectations at institutions, but also the selection of a child's name, as portrayed in *The Namesake*.

The scene in the hospital, where Gogol's parents are forced to choose a name for their son, is an example of different expectations in American and Indian hospitals, as well as different expectations from family members, since in India the parents are not supposed to decide upon the name of their child, whereas in the USA it is the parents' duty. It is a Bengali tradition to give a child a pet name, by which the person is called, and a good name, which is formal and used in the outside world.⁸⁰ Ashima is waiting for a letter in which her grandmother states the good name for the baby, but when the letter fails to arrive, the hospital staff urges the parents to name the child, as in the United States it is not possible to release a baby from the hospital without a birth certificate which includes a name.⁸¹ Although the parents find it unreasonable, they are forced to adapt to the American system and decide upon the name themselves.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri describes a rice ceremony, which is a Hindu tradition similar to the Christian practice of baptism. The ceremony begins when Gogol is six months old and ready to eat solid food for the first time.⁸² Interestingly, he is also supposed to predict his future path in life: he is offered a plate holding a clump of cold Cambridge soil, a pen and a dollar bill, to see if he will be a landowner, scholar or businessman. It suggests that the destiny

⁸⁰ Ibid., 26.

⁸¹ Ibid., 27.

⁸² Ibid., 38.

of Indian children is set very early in their life and their options are quite limited, whereas American children learn to make their own choices out of numerous possibilities in the course of their life, and they are less expected to follow one given journey. Little Gogol refuses to choose anything and begins to cry, by which Lahiri suggests that the protagonist will become indecisive, rebellious and disapproving the traditional practices.

Another instance where Lahiri finds an American equivalent for an Indian tradition is in “Mrs. Sen’s” where Eliot observes his Indian babysitter making a mark in her hairline with vermilion. She explains to him that every married woman does it in India, and the young boy concludes that it is similar to wearing a wedding ring, as Americans do.⁸³ In *The Namesake*, Ashima explains to her American neighbor that the Bengali tradition Durga Puja is similar to Christmas.⁸⁴ By comparing the vermilion practice to wearing a wedding ring, the rice ceremony to baptism, and Durga Puja to Christmas, Lahiri suggests that both cultures tend to celebrate similar things, but in a different way.⁸⁵

As described in *The Namesake*, U.S.-reared Indians grew up experiencing both Durga Puja and Christmas, since many immigrant families with children decided to participate in certain American traditions. For example, they would install a Christmas tree in their house, the children learned to color boiled eggs for Easter and hide them around the house and ate roasted turkey for the Thanksgiving.⁸⁶ The second generation often complied traditions of both cultures, and therefore, they could compare them and decide whether they preferred the Indian or the American style.

Since Halloween does not exist in India, the generation of Lahiri’s parents may have considered it pointless, as demonstrated by Mr. Pirzada when he admits not knowing the name of the vegetable so typical for the American season of fall (pumpkin).⁸⁷ On that, U.S.-reared Indian girl Lilia reacts as a typical American child, when she grins with a surprise and tells him what the vegetable is used for. In that specific story, Lahiri describes how Lilia celebrates Halloween and mentions that some people told her that they had never seen an Indian girl dressed as a witch before, which is not that surprising considered that the story

⁸³ Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 117.

⁸⁴ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 41.

⁸⁵ Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 167.

⁸⁶ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 64.

⁸⁷ Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 35.

takes place in the beginning of the 1970s. According to the *Yearbook Immigration Statistics*, there were only 18,638 Indians obtaining legal permanent resident status in the United States in the 1960s, but 147,997 in the 1970s, and in the 1980s, it was already 231,649.⁸⁸ Lahiri stresses this reality in *The Namesake*, when the Gangulis move outside Boston in 1971 and are apparently the only Bengali residents in the area. American Indian children born before 1970s, as Lahiri herself, may have thus felt stranger in the United States than those who were growing up in the same country a decade later.

The author also depicts how Indians differ from Americans in the way they tend to spend their leisure time. Lilia tells the reader that she sees her parents drinking tea, listening to cassettes of Indian musicians, arguing about the spellings of English words, and watching the news about the Indo-Pakistani conflict on the television.⁸⁹ Her American friend Dora's father, on the other hand, is depicted as drinking a glass of wine and listening to saxophone music. While Lilia experiences tension at home, her friend's family spends rather quiet evenings, and the ten-year-old girl realizes that her American friends may not understand certain issues related to her background.

In a few stories, Lahiri denotes that Americans often show politeness or compassion in a way that may seem as unnecessary, or even inappropriate, to the Indians, particularly the choice of a smile. When a U.S.-reared Indian woman smiles at Mr. Kapasi in "Interpreter of Maladies," the act is described as dutiful and showing no marks of interest, Mr. Kapasi thus wonders why the woman smiles at all. When Shukumar's son died in the hospital, the doctor smiled at the man "in the kindest way it was possible to smile at people known only professionally," which suggests that for Americans, smile is a sign of politeness and consolation to which the Indians had to get accustomed, even though the act often seemed unreasonable to them.

Interestingly, Lahiri in her books describes not only Indians blending with the American culture, but also Americans learning about the Indian culture. In the short story "Sexy," an American woman Miranda begins an affair with a Bengali man and becomes so

⁸⁸ Office of Immigration Statistics, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security, 2008), 8, accessed March 20, 2019.

https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Yearbook_Immigration_Statistics_2008.pdf.

⁸⁹ Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 34.

fascinated by him that she starts to study the Bengali alphabet.⁹⁰ In “Mrs. Sen’s,” the Indian woman takes care of eleven-year-old Eliot who, during the time spent with her, observes the way she wears saris, prepares tea, cooks, and soon he becomes used to her habits and starts to remove his shoes at the entrance. Eliot does not seem to judge Mrs. Sen’s habits, he rather observes and compares them with his mother’s behavior. Eliot’s mother, on the other hand, shows a dismissive attitude toward Mrs. Sen, hardly ever accepts her invitation to sit down in her living room or taste her food, since she has no need to learn more about her background and become closer with her.

5.6. Marriage

In the novel *The Namesake*, Lahiri contrasts Ashima and Ashoke’s marriage in India with Gogol’s affairs in America. Ashima and Ashoke’s meeting is arranged by their parents and they agree upon the marriage in a matter of minutes. They become engaged so quickly that Ashima does not even know her future husband’s name.⁹¹ Gogol, on the other hand, embraces an American way of courting and begins to date several girls, among them Ruth, Maxine, Bridget, and Moushumi. In America, Gogol is free to choose a girl of any origin, marry and divorce how many times he wishes, or even remain single for the rest of his life, since it is not uncommon in the country. Having Indian parents, however, he would have to live with the knowledge that he did not fulfill their expectations. As Khandelwal states: “They [younger Indian Americans] found themselves caught between American values, which stereotyped and derided arranged marriage as a restrictive social practice, and the values of their own parents, for whom arranged marriage, including in most cases their own, was the central mechanism for maintaining stable family life.”⁹² Gogol ultimately marries an Indian girl, which was recommended to him by his mother, but since both of them are influenced by their previous life experience, their relationship weakens and leads to a divorce.

Lahiri mentions that when an Indian woman does not marry before the age of thirty, she is expected to have a difficult life, especially if she is not educated. It is the case of Boori Ma in the story “A Real Durwan,” who eventually becomes homeless, and Bibi Haldar in

⁹⁰ Ibid., 97.

⁹¹ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 9.

⁹² Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian*, 152.

another story, who is unmarried, uneducated and besides, ill. The only relatives that live close to Bibi are her cousin and his wife who both depreciate her and do not give her much hope. The wife does not believe that Bibi will ever find a husband, because she is almost thirty and impractical, while Indian men prefer women that are young, healthy, wise, artistically inclined, skilled in the kitchen,⁹³ and having a “fair complexion,” as mentioned in “The Third and Final Continent” where several men had refused the protagonist’s wife for this particular reason before he himself married her.⁹⁴

5.7.Names

Indian immigrants generally give their children an Indian name and their origin is thus reflected both in their first name and surname, except the case when a woman marries a foreigner. Even in those cases, many U.S.-reared Indian women keep their Indian surname, as in the case of Lahiri due to her literary career, as well as in the case of her character Moushumi when she marries Gogol. Because of the unfamiliarity of the Indian names, an American reader might not always be immediately sure who the female and who the male is, as in the case of Shukuma and Shoba in “A Temporary Matter”, or Twinkle and Sanjeev in “The Blessed House.” Interestingly, the same may occur when Indians see an English name, as in *The Namesake* when Gogol’s mother notes that “Max”, shorter version of Maxine, could refer to a boy.⁹⁵

American names tend to be shorter than the Indian’s, and Lahiri herself has experienced the struggle of living with a name that is too long and unfamiliar to others; born as Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, her professors and classmates would call her by her nickname “Jhumpa,” since it was easier for them to remember.⁹⁶ None of Lahiri’s characters seems to worry about their names in America, except the protagonist of the *The Namesake*. The truth is that his name is not even Indian, which makes the case even more puzzling.

With the character of Gogol in *The Namesake*, Lahiri demonstrates how a name may shape one’s identity. In the hospital, Ashoke suggests to his wife Ashima that they use the

⁹³ Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 165.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁹⁵ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 145.

⁹⁶ Tayler, “Change and Loss.”

pet name “Gogol” for their newborn son. This name is peculiar because it is not Indian, but Russian, and moreover, it does not derive from a first name, but a surname of the novelist Nicolai Gogol. Ashoke chooses this name from a certain reason but does not share this fact with his son for many years. Lahiri makes Gogol’s case more extreme and ludicrous than her personal experience, since she aims to highlight the scope in which the name may influence one’s life. The parents eventually choose the name “Nikhil” as his good name and suppose that it will be used in the outside world. Ironically, the name “Nikhil” means “he who is entire,”⁹⁷ although Gogol feels incomplete most of the time in the course of the story.

Since Gogol refuses the name Nikhil as a child, his teacher calls him by his pet name, Gogol, despite of his parents’ preference. To avoid dealing with the same problem in the future, Gogol’s parents decided to adapt to the American tradition and give their second child, Gogol’s sister, only one name. As Lahiri notes, many of their Bengali friends had acted in the same way to prevent similar misunderstandings.⁹⁸ In this way, Indian immigrants have gradually abandoned the tradition of a pet name and good name in America.

Gogol becomes less comfortable with his name during his adolescence, when he realizes that it makes him different not only from Americans, but everyone in the world. He detests to use it as a signature, explain its meaning to other people, and later it even restrains him from courting girls, as he feels embarrassed by it.⁹⁹ When one of his teachers reads a piece of Nicolai Gogol’s tragical biography during a class, Gogol automatically associates the author’s life with his own and refuses to accept such a fate. Gogol does not think that the name defines who he is and until his adulthood, he does not even know that he got the name because a book written by Nikolai Gogol saved his father’s life after a train accident back in India. His father compared his survival to being born again, and Gogol would have possibly viewed his name in a different way if his father told him the truth earlier. Unaware of it, Gogol decides to officially change his name and right before this decision accuses his parents of naming him in this way.¹⁰⁰ The conversation is crucial because it makes the reader realize that the only person to whom the name affects negatively is Gogol. Lahiri suggests that a

⁹⁷ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 56.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

name does not define a person to such an extent as he or she believes and that sometimes the right solution is to change a perspective and set different values.

It is true that the new name helps Gogol to flee from his past, adopt a new persona and fully embrace the American life style, while ignoring his parents' opinions. He is finally able to introduce himself to American girls, like Ruth, with a feeling of pride and honesty, and later he begins a serious relationship with an American girl Maxine who represents a symbol of the American spirit. As Gogol tries to adapt to her living style, he gradually limits the contact with his family to a minimum. Interestingly, in certain moments, he realizes that although he has a new name, he feels incomplete in the new environment, often inadequate and confused by his own double life.

It is in the moment of his father's sudden death, that Gogol changes his perspective and ceases to be obsessed with his name. The event has such a strong impact on him that he breaks up with Maxine and finds it necessary to re-establish the bond with his family. He realizes that one's identity is not shaped solely by a name. Lahiri emphasizes the irrelevance of one's name by the fact that she continues to refer to the protagonist as Gogol throughout the book. The author stresses that people who care about Gogol continue to perceive him in the same way as they did before the change of his name, and that with a new name, Gogol faces even more serious identity issues due to his double life.

5.8.Traveling Abroad

As Khandelwal writes, many U.S.-reared Indians enjoyed their visits to India but were certain that they could not live there, because their lifestyles fixed them in the United States.¹⁰¹ Such is the case of Gogol in *The Namesake* who, at the age of fourteen, dreads to lose a contact with his friends in India, as well as his privacy, an important American value that he fully adopts. He is worried that in India, he will have to surrender things that he takes for granted in America, like running, listening to his favorite bands, or eating hamburgers.¹⁰² Lahiri's characters visit their relatives in India approximately every five years, because of the geographical distance and travel cost. In Lahiri's books, Indian relatives do not travel to the United States, nor consider moving there, the reason may be that later immigrants could

¹⁰¹ Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian*, 149.

¹⁰² Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 84.

not find suitable employment in America, regardless their education,¹⁰³ compared to the Indians who emigrated during the 1960s and 1970s.

Lahiri herself admits that “[h]er family's regular trips to Calcutta earned her pitying looks from teachers and schoolfriends,”¹⁰⁴ indicating that she had mixed feelings about this experience during her childhood and adolescence. Gogol in *The Namesake*, with whom she identifies, feels relief when he comes back to the United States after eight months in India, as opposed to his parents who are deeply sad. At the age of twenty-six, the protagonist feels no nostalgia for the vacations in India and considers them too overwhelming, disorienting, and detached from his persona.¹⁰⁵ Lahiri also notes that when Gogol returns from India to America during his adolescence, the parents of his friends pities him¹⁰⁶ and suppose that it was a bad experience for him,¹⁰⁷ which must have influenced him to a certain extent.

Despite of Gogol's aversion toward India, the trips have also influenced him in a positive way. During his third visit in Calcutta when he is around the age of ten, he notices the frequency of the surname “Gangulis” in a phone book and realizes that what is considered strange in the USA may be very common in India. For this reason, he is able to accept his surname Ganguli, as opposed to his first name, which is not common anywhere in the world. When he visits Taj Mahal at the age of fourteen, Gogol is sure that “no other building has affected him so powerfully”¹⁰⁸ and realizes that his parents' home country fascinates people from other places of the world (at one point during their trip, the Gangulis seem to be the only Indians visiting Taj Mahal). Lahiri manages to emphasize the influence of art on the person's identity and how its splendor may change one's perspective in a long term. Her own passion was Renaissance, which she studied at the university and which has brought her to Italy, the country that became her future home. In the case of Gogol, it may have been the architectural experience from India that has inspired him to start a career of an architect several years later.

¹⁰³ Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian*, 100.

¹⁰⁴ Tayler, “Change and Loss.”

¹⁰⁵ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 155.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

Trips to India also strengthen Gogol's ties with his family, as well as with his sister, who is his "only ally"¹⁰⁹ during the time, although at the age of fourteen, he does not give much importance to the family bond. Leaving India, Gogol knows that his relatives will watch them until the airplane drifts away, and he describes them as "those with whom he shares a name if not his life."¹¹⁰ This passage reflects that the stay in India became an important part of his identity, which he may first not take into account, but which will emerge as time passes by.

Apart from India, Gogol travels to France with his wife, Moushumi, at the age of thirty, and that is the first time he visits Europe. He admires the architecture, just like he did in India, and begins to understand that France is the place where his wife "reinvented" herself when she came there several years ago.¹¹¹ While Gogol adopted a new persona with a change of name, his wife did so when she began to live in France, both have thus created a double identity, but in a different way. The author, Lahiri, did so when she embraced a new language, Italian, which I discuss more profoundly in Chapter 5.9. As for the stay in France, it helps Gogol to understand his parents' situation in the United States, when he imagines himself starting a life in a country that he barely knows. Lahiri herself has experienced something similar when she discovered Italy, and through the characters, she stresses the influence of the environment on one's persona. In the end, Moushumi's feeling of incompleteness in the United States and her inability to balance her old self (studious and obedient) and new self (unrestrained and rebellious) greatly contribute to the fact that the couple separates.

As for the author's fascination with traveling abroad and Italy, she uses Italian elements in her stories long before she publishes *In Other Words* in 2016. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Lahiri started to learn Italian in the middle of the 1990s after her trip to Florence. In the short story "Interpreter of Maladies", published in 1999, the reader finds that Laxmi's "sentences pepper every now and then with an Italian word,"¹¹² Miranda's hair is "as dark and glossy as an espresso bean,"¹¹³ Twinkle prefers a simple loaf of Italian bread over a

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 84.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 86.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 233.

¹¹² Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 85

¹¹³ Ibid., 87.

complex Indian meal,¹¹⁴ and the protagonist of “The Third and Final Continent” sails on the SS Roma, an Italian cargo vessel.¹¹⁵ These are the first pieces of evidence of the Italian influence on the author’s life. She mentions Italian elements as much frequently in *The Namesake*, published in 2003. For example, when Gogol dines with Maxine’s family and mentions the Indian architecture, Maxine’s father notes that it sounds like Venice,¹¹⁶ an idea that has never occurred to Gogol but probably changed his perception of India. Moreover, Maxine’s family prepares meals such as polenta, risotto, and ossobuco, all of which originate in northern Italy, and when Gogol goes for a date with his future wife Moushumi, he takes her to an Italian restaurant where she orders “porcini ravioli”. One year later, Moushumi drinks prosecco in another Italian restaurant, this time with her lover, while Gogol secretly imagines himself and Moushumi going to Venice. Lahiri’s characters thus fluctuate between these three continents, America, Asia, and Europe, and many of them show elements that she herself has experienced at a certain point in her life.

5.9. Language

Learn a new language and get a new soul. – Czech proverb

In the short story “Interpreter of Maladies”, Lahiri denotes that a successful interpretation of another language presents an accomplishment and reassurance for her, and she projects it on the character of Mr. Kapasi. When he mastered to translate from French and Italian, he believed that “all struggles were rewarded, that all of life’s mistakes made sense in the end.”¹¹⁷ Similarly, Lahiri describes her experience profoundly in the memoir *In Other Words* in a following way: “When I discover a different way to express something, I feel a kind of ecstasy.”¹¹⁸ She denotes that the acquisition of a new language may symbolize hope and bring both feelings of uneasiness, when the interpretation fails, and relief, when it is successful, since she considers language not a mere means of communication but a new chance. In *The Namesake*, Moushumi “reinvents” herself with the help of a new language,

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 143.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 173.

¹¹⁶ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 135.

¹¹⁷ Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, 56.

¹¹⁸ Lahiri, *In Other Words*, 45.

French, and Lahiri herself manages to do something similar with Italian. It is in the memoir *In Other Words* where Lahiri describes the influence of language more than in any other book of hers, and in this case, she becomes the character herself, since it is autobiographical. Given the fact that the book has significantly reshaped her literary path, it is relevant to describe her approach towards language more profoundly.

Lahiri constantly personifies the language, as in “[i]t’s like a person met one day by chance, with whom I immediately feel a connection,”¹¹⁹ and becomes attached to it as if it was a human. Interestingly, she does not personify only Italian, but also her other two languages, when she compares Bengali to a mother and English to a stepmother. While she describes the beginning of her relationship with Italian as romantic and passionate, later it feels rather like the one between a mother and a child.¹²⁰ She also marks a difference between her relationship with Italian and the one with a person, as she writes: “I’m in love, but what I love remains indifferent. The language will never need me.”¹²¹ She attempts to have a long-distance relationship with Italian but admits that it is difficult, similarly as long-distanced relationships between people, since the language is tied to a specific geographical territory.

Apart from personifications, Lahiri also frequently uses simile, for example, she compares her dictionary to a map, a compass, a parent, and later to an older brother. When she learns new words, she feels like a beggar who finds a bag of jewels.¹²² She compares the concept of word to a human because both can have many dimensions, many nuances and great complexity, and because the meaning of a word is boundless, like that of a person.¹²³ In addition, she notes that an unfinished book is like a person, because it remains imperfect and incomplete during its entire creation.¹²⁴ She writes that learning the language in the United States, far from Italy, is like studying a musical instrument without ever playing it¹²⁵ and like a light switch that turns on only occasionally.¹²⁶ While visiting Venice, the author realizes that her writing in Italian is like crossing a bridge, and compares her disorientation

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 119.

¹²¹ Ibid., 17.

¹²² Ibid., 47.

¹²³ Ibid., 87.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 113.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 35.

in the city to the feeling that she has during the process of writing.¹²⁷ In addition, she compares language to a locked gate¹²⁸ when she cannot fully express herself, and Italian particularly to an unexplored land¹²⁹ that enables her to reinvent herself and find a new voice. Lahiri remarks that identity is like a metamorphosis, because it expresses the meaning of being two things at the same time.¹³⁰

With the abundant use of metaphors, personifications and comparisons, Lahiri demonstrates that both language and literature may become an important part of one's identity, or a tool for finding it. In her case, it was not only Italian, but also English, as she writes: "The more I read and learned in English, the more, as a girl, I identified with it."¹³¹ Although the author mentions this phenomena also in her fictional work, such as Moushumi's passion for French in *The Namesake*, these remarks are very brief compared to her confession in the memoir *In Other Words* where language becomes the main theme.

5.10. Appearance and Society

Lahiri realizes that language is not a sufficient criterium for becoming part of a new culture, as she describes her experience in Italy during shopping with her American husband, whose name, Alberto, as well as looks, incidentally resemble those of Italians.¹³² In the shop, Lahiri speaks to the saleswoman for a longer period of time, while her husband pronounces only a few words in Italian with a Spanish accent. The saleswoman then asks Lahiri where she is from, and after being told that from the United States, she concludes: "But your husband must be Italian." Although Lahiri's competence in Italian is far better than her husband's, the saleswoman judges them by their appearance, after which Lahiri experiences feelings of humiliation and envy.¹³³ She realizes that also these seemingly superficial traits, such as appearance, contribute to one's formation of identity, since it is the first noticeable feature by which people judge, whether consciously or not. A person generally feels more

¹²⁷ Ibid., 101.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 23.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 37.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 165.

¹³¹ Ibid., 151.

¹³² Ibid., 135.

¹³³ Ibid., 137.

integrated in a culture that accepts him or her, and less in a culture that considers him or her as different.

Interestingly, when Gogol comes back to America after eight months in India, some people pity him for having got darker. That might explain the fact that the story takes place in 1982, time when darker people were still partly discriminated in the United States. The fact is that these regretful notions by his friends' parents may have also estranged Gogol from his homeland. Despite of that, Lahiri in *The Namesake* suggests that one's appearance, as well as the opinion of the society, becomes less important as the person matures and experiences serious life changes. After a death in his family, several relationships, marriage, and divorce, Gogol no longer considers names and opinions of others important,¹³⁴ and no longer negates his Indian roots but accepts them, together with his background where he finds support and understanding.

¹³⁴ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 245.

6. Conclusion

The aim of the thesis was to find and examine crucial themes that appear in Jhumpa Lahiri's three books, *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, and *In Other Words*, that are related to the formation of identity and contribute to one's feeling of integration or alienation from an American and Indian culture. Concurrently, I tried to determine how strongly each theme has affected the characters' and the author's life.

Lahiri's literary work considerably reflects her personal life experience as many of her characters share similarities with her, such as the case of Lilia, Gogol and Mr. Kapasi. Other characters apparently portray her parents, such as Shukumar and Shoba, Ashoke and Ashima, or the nameless protagonist of "The Third and Final Continent," and even when the character is fully invented, the story remains highly realistic. The reason why I have listed other Indian-American female authors in Chapter 2 was to put Lahiri in context and indicate that despite some similarities, the author adopts her own attitude and substantially differs from others in the way she describes lives of not one, but several generations, and from different points of view, and later publishes a bilingual memoir where she analyzes a language. Chapter 3 provided an overview of Lahiri's background, from her parent's migration, her childhood in America and her feelings about traveling to India, to her later-acquired passions, by which I have demonstrated that her work considerably reflects her personal experience.

Although it is not an easy task to determine which themes have the strongest influence on the life of Lahiri's characters and her own, certain themes seem to have a more lasting impact than others. For example, Gogol is greatly concerned about his name during his adolescence, and it is the major source of his frustration at that time, but as he grows up, his values change, and eventually he does not consider one's name important, and for this reason, it is safe to claim that a name does not influence one's identity to such an extent as other factors. Similarly, although one's appearance may contribute to a person's feeling of estrangement when it is marked as different in a specific environment, this issue is mentioned only briefly in Lahiri's work, that is in a chapter in her memoir and in a paragraph in *The Namesake*, suggesting that the impact of one's appearance is transitory and not as relevant as other factors.

The themes that appear most frequently in Lahiri's work are food, traditions and relationships, and interestingly, these themes are closely related, since food is tightly integrated in the Indian culture, brings people together and strengthens relations. As demonstrated in the stories "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "This Blessed House," even religion may become irrelevant when the characters develop strong relationships with one another. As for traditions, the story of Gogol indicates that it is possible to withdraw from one's background, but it leads him to feelings of guilt and estrangement, by which Lahiri implies that the impact of family traditions is substantial and lasting. This fact is also demonstrated on the characters of the first generation who struggle to adopt in the United States and often feel nostalgic about India, as in the case of Ashima, Boori Ma, and Mrs. Sen. The theme of traveling abroad is closely related to the theme of language and traditions, and as demonstrated in *The Namesake*, a shared passion for a specific culture and language may strengthen a relationship. Since Gogol and Moushumi do not share this passion and their divorce is partly based on this fact, I believe that the themes of traveling abroad and language are strongly influential in Lahiri's work, and it is possible to deduce that even the author's marriage could be endangered if her husband did not accompany her in Italy and did not understand her passion for the Italian language.

What is important to mention before I conclude, Lahiri in her work implies that one's identity is not formed by a simple step, whether it is a change of name, a short trip abroad, or mastering a simple phrase in another language, but progressively by a mix of many factors, experiences, habits, and events, which may be joyous and successful, such as graduation, finding love in a family and outside it, or exploring new life styles, but also unfortunate and imperfect, such as living with an undesirable name, enduring an unpleasant journey, or accepting the departure of a loved one.

7. Resumé

Cílem této bakalářské práce bylo prozkoumat stěžejní témata, která se vyskytují v dílech *Interpreter of Maladies (Tlumočnick nemocí)*, *The Namesake (Jmenovec)* a *In Other Words* autorky Jhumpy Lahiriové a která se týkají utváření identity a podílejí se na pocitu integrace nebo odcizení z americké a indické kultury. Vybraná témata se částečně zakládají na seznamu prvků indické kultury z knihy „Becoming American, Being Indian“ autorky Madhuliky S. Khandelwal, přičemž jsem doplnila ta, která hrají v díle Lahiriové důležitou roli. Ve výsledku se jedná o stravování, vztahy, náboženství, systém vzdělávání, tradice, manželství, jména, cestování do zahraničí, vzhled, společnost a jazyk. Zároveň jsem se snažila stanovit, v jakém měřítku tato témata ovlivnila život Lahiriových postav i její vlastní.

Tvorba Jhumpy Lahiriové značně reflektuje její životní zkušenosti, neboť s mnoha postavami sdílí podobné znaky, jako například se sedmiletou dívkou jménem Lilia z povídky „Když pan Pirzada přišel na večeři“, protagonistou románu *Jmenovec* jménem Gogol, nebo panem Kapasim z povídky „Tlumočnick nemocí“. Jiné postavy zjevně ztvárňují její rodiče, jako například Shukumar a Shoba v povídce „Dočasná záležitost“, rodiče Gogola Ashoke a Ashima nebo protagonista povídky „Třetí a poslední kontinent“, a dokonce i když jsou postavy zcela smyšlené, děj zůstává realistický. V druhé kapitole jsem zmínila další indicko-americké autorky z toho důvodu, abych Lahiriovou zařadila do kontextu a prokázala, že i přes jisté podobnosti s těmito autorkami si zvolila svůj vlastní styl a podstatně se od ostatních odlišila tím, že popsal život ne jedné, ale hned několika generací a z několika různých perspektiv, a později také tím, že vydala dvojjazyčný memoár, ve kterém analyzuje jazyk.

Třetí kapitola popisuje autorčino zázemí od migrace jejich rodičů z Indie do Londýna a států Nové Anglie až po záliby, které si osvojila v pozdějších letech. Součástí této kapitoly je zmínka o důležitosti dodržování indických tradic pro imigranty indického původu a o americkém individualismu, který značně ovlivnil autorčino sebepojetí a její pohled na kulturu Indie a Spojených států. Vlivem těchto vnějších vlivů se autorka vnitřně „rozdvajila“ a vyrostla s pocitem nenaplnění, neboť si připadala nesvá jak v Indii, tak v Americe, a seznámení se s italským jazykem pro ni tudíž bylo nadějí poznat lépe sama sebe. Díky třetí kapitole je patrné, že tvorba autorky do velké míry reflektuje její vlastní život.

Stanovit, která témata ovlivnila život Lahiriových postav a jí samotné není snadné, nicméně je zřejmé, že některá z nich však mají dlouhodobější dopad než jiná. Gogol se

například během dospívání velmi zaobírá svým jménem, ale v průběhu života se jeho hodnoty mění, a nakonec jménu nepřikládá téměř žádnou důležitost. Z tohoto důvodu je možné usoudit, že jméno člověka neovlivňuje do takové míry jako například rodinné zázemí a vztahy. Podobně je na tom fyzický vzhled, který v člověku může vzbudit pocit odcizení, pokud se v jistém prostředí liší od ostatních, ale tím, že autorka tuto problematiku zmiňuje ve svých dílech pouze stručně, naznačuje, že se jedná pouze o pomíjivý faktor v porovnání s jinými.

Témata, která se v dílech Lahiriové vyskytují nejčastěji, jsou stravování, tradice a vztahy včetně manželství, a zajímavé je, že spolu všechna úzce souvisí, neboť jídlo představuje důležitou součást indické kultury, sbližuje členy komunity a posiluje vztahy, jak je vyobrazeno téměř ve veškeré autorčině tvorbě. V povídce „Když pan Pirzada přišel na večeri“, kde dochází ke střetu hinduismu a islámu, a „Požehnaný dům“, která popisuje skloubení hinduismu s křesťanstvím, je naznačeno, že dokonce i náboženství může být naprosto irelevantní, pokud se lidé respektují a mají mezi sebou silné vazby. Ačkoli Sanjeev nedokáže pochopit obdiv své ženy ke křesťanským dekoracím, neboť vyrostl v obklopení hinduistů, a jedná se tedy o vliv rodinného zázemí, nakonec svou manželku akceptuje takovou, jaká je, protože přikládá větší důležitost jejich manželství než náboženskému vyznání a tuší, že by svoji rodinu zklamal více, kdyby požádal o rozvod, než kdyby se přiznal, že má na zahradě na přání své ženy sošku panenky Marie.

Dopad vlivu rodinného zázemí je dále znázorněn v knize *Jmenovec*, kde je Gogol příkladem toho, že je sice možné fyzicky i citově opustit zázemí, ve kterém vyrostl, nicméně to s sebou nese pocit viny a odcizení, čímž autorka nastiňuje, že dopad rodiny bývá silný a dlouhodobý. Tato skutečnost je znát i na postavách první generace indických žen žijících v Americe, jako je Ashima, Boori Ma a paní Senová, kterým dělá potíže přizpůsobit se životu v Americe a často na Indii nostalgicky vzpomínají. Pro mnohé z nich je těžké pochopit americké hodnoty, jako je například skutečnost, že učitelé ne vždy respektují přání rodičů, nebo že se Američané často vřele objímají na veřejnosti, ale ve skutečnosti si více cenní svého soukromí, a ne vždy se zajímají o své sousedy, nebo že tamější děti nemají povinnost postarat se o své stárnoucí rodiče. V díle Lahiriové je patrné, že tradice, a s nimi i hodnoty, které si člověk osvojí v prvních letech svého života, mohou mít na jeho život zásadní vliv.

Téma cestování do zahraničí v autorčině díle úzce souvisí s tradicemi, jazykem a vzděláním; příkladem je studium Mushimi ve Francii a její následná láska ke francouzštině, cesta samotné autorky do Itálie a nový vztah k italštině, ale také pobyt Gogola v Indii, během kterého získal zálibu v architektuře, kterou později studoval, a poprvé si uvědomil, že pro jeho rodiče muselo být těžké žít v zemi, kde lidé hovoří cizím jazykem, což mimo jiné rozvinulo jeho empatii. V románu *Jmenovec* je vyobrazeno, že sdílená vášeň pro jistou kulturu a jazyk mohou posílit milostný vztah, Gogol a Moushumi však tuto vášeň nesdílí, a to, že se jejich rozvod zčásti zakládá na této skutečnosti, je důkazem, že má cestování a jazyk na jedince silný dopad. Dokonce je možné usoudit, že i vztah samotné autorky by byl ohrožen, kdyby ji manžel nedoprovázel na cestách do Itálie a nesnažil se porozumět její vášni pro italštinu.

Dílo Jhumpy Lahiriové dokazuje především to, že se identita člověka neutváří jediným krokem, jako je změna jména, krátký pobyt v zahraničí nebo naučení se jednoduché věty v cizím jazyce, ale postupně a na základě početných faktorů, zkušeností, zvyků a událostí. Ty mohou být jak radostné a úspěšné, jako je absolvování studia, nacházení lásky v rodině a mimo ni nebo objevování nových životních stylů, tak nešťastné a nedokonalé, jako je žít s nežádoucím jménem, podrobit se nepříjemnému cestování do zahraničí nebo smířit se s odchodem milované osoby. To, jak jednotlivé faktory ovlivňují člověka, je patrně individuální, neboť každý jedinec uznává jiné hodnoty, nicméně lze v závěru této práce usoudit, že se jedná právě o vliv rodinného zázemí, tradic, vztahů, cestování, vzdělání a jazyka, které mají na život postav Jhumpy Lahiriové i její vlastní nejsilnější a nejdéletrvající dopad.

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Annotation

Name: Tamara Pagáčová

Faculty: Faculty of Arts of Palacký University in Olomouc

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Title of the thesis: The Search for Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Work

Supervisor: Mgr. David Livingstone, Ph.D.

Number of pages: 47

Key words: Jhumpa Lahiri, Identity, Immigrant Literature, Postcolonial Literature, Indian Americans, American Literature

This bachelor thesis is concerned with the analysis of themes that appear in Jhumpa Lahiri's three pieces of work, respectively *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake* and *In Other Words*, and their influence on her characters and the author herself. In Lahiri's work, the themes are interrelated, but described from several points of view, by which the author adds to the diversity and complexity of her work. The aim of this thesis is to detect these relevant themes and determine their importance in the development of Lahiri's characters from two fictional books, as well as in her own life with respect to her background, two autobiographical essays "My Two Lives" and "Teach Yourself Italian", and her memoir *In Other Words*.

Anotace

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Katedra: Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Název práce: Hledání identity v díle Jhumpy Lahiriové

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Klíčová slova: Jhumpa Lahiri, identita, imigrantská literatura, postkoloniální literatura, Američané indického původu, americká literatura

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá rozbořem témat, která se vyskytují ve třech dílech autorky Jhumpy Lahiriové, respektive *Interpreter of Maladies (Tlumočnick nemocí)*, *The Namesake (Jmenovec)* a *In Other Words*, a jejich vlivem na postavy i samotnou autorku. Témata jsou v knihách Lahiriové propojena, ale popsána z několika různých úhlů pohledu, čímž autorka dodává svým dílům rozmanitost a spletitost. Cílem práce je odhalit v dílech Lahiriové relevantní témata a určit, do jaké míry ovlivnila vývoj postav ze dvou fiktivních knih, ale také její vlastní život s ohledem na její zázemí, dvě autobiografické eseje „My Two Lives“ a „Teach Yourself Italian“ a memoár *In Other Words*.