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ADAPTABLE AND CHANGE-RESISTANT CULTURAL VALUES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE NAMESAKE

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Abstract: *The paper discusses the relation between time and processes of cultural negotiations as illustrated by the evolution of an Indian female immigrant (Ashima) in the novel The Namesake. The character's exposure to America illustrates a range of cultural selection scenarios during the interval she spends abroad. Initially rejecting Western norms, Ashima takes over certain American (individualist) principles during her residence in America. The Western values are modified in the process of their adoption, being filtered through collectivistic cultural grids. The paper focuses on the content of this cultural selection establishing the gradual modification of Indian values via their contact with the American norms. The conclusions will discuss the status of the temporal borders between Indian and American cultural patterns, by highlighting the partiality of cultural translations.*

Theoretical background

The paper investigates the temporal dimensions of cultural dialogues from a transcultural perspective. This theoretical outlook assumes that cultures are open systems that interact and operate processes of transfer and translation. By adding the prefix "trans-" to the notion of culture, critics point out the dynamic nature of culture, emphasizing its potential for change (Alexander 143).

Transcultural writings involve the intersection of different cultural assumptions. This type of literary works deals with spatial and temporal border crossings. These transgressions are rendered as processes of transcultural transitions "marked by an ongoing negotiation of identity and change" (Alexander 141).

A recent conceptualization of transcultural transitions is rendered by the analogy between the dynamics of metaphorical displacement and cultural translation: "The process of metaphoric displacement of the literal into the figurative is analogous to the semiosis inherent in the process of cultural translation" (Longinovic 9). Since migration itself is a form of movement, it can be paralleled to the mechanisms of cultural translation. Hence, while migration entails physical dislocation from a source language and culture into a target language and culture, cultural translation involves a symbolic shift from one system of beliefs to another (Cronin 42).

Considering the link between transculturalism and cultural translation, the paper discusses the partiality of cultural negotiations, as illustrated by Ashima's interaction with American culture. The discussion will point out the selections operated in the process of cultural transfers, identifying change-resistant cultural values as well as flexible identity patterns. The conclusions will seek to establish the status of temporal borders in terms of their linking vs. divisive functions. The concept of temporal border is employed to suggest the enhancement of cultural differences between long-lasting Indian traditions and novel American outlooks, on account of their uneven different chronologies.

Motherhood: the trigger for cultural translation

The novel deals with the life on an immigrant Indian family in the United States. A considerable part of it presents the wife's reactions to a new cultural environment. The present section focuses on the relationship between the performance of the immigrant mother role and the necessity to gradually process different cultural values. The condition of motherhood entails the transmission of native customs, activating the gender convention that views women as "cultural custodians" (Kurien 152). Considering the immigrant mother's duty

to pass on Indian cultural values, the mother-children conflict voices a more general clash between Indian and American conceptions of identity.

For example, the notion of mixed relationships/marriages clashes with Ashima's expectations. Hence, she initially does not understand Gogol's preference for dating American girls. Both she and Ashoke have strong prejudices against the possibility of a successful Indian – American marital communion: "They've even gone so far as to point out examples of Bengali men they know who've married Americans, marriages that have ended in divorce" (Lahiri 117). Ashima does not support Gogol's relationship with Maxine, disliking the American girl for several reasons. For example, she considers it disrespectful that Maxine calls her and Ashoke by their first names. Gogol's mother is also disappointed by her son's desire to spend more time with Maxine's parents than with his own family:

By now, Ashima knows that Gogol spends his nights with Maxine, sleeping under the same roof as her parents, a thing Ashima *refuses to admit to her Bengali friends* (Lahiri 166) (my emphasis).

The fact that Ashima hides this aspect from her acquaintances proves that relationships between Indians and foreigners are not accepted at a group level. Ashima's concern for her friends' opinion illustrates the importance of community involved in collectivistic norms of identity. Consequently, Ashima's rejection of mixed relationships echoes a deeper cultural conflict between individualistic and communitarian patterns. Research has pointed out that individualism is intensified by cultural pluralism: the existence of a variety of cultural norms compels individuals to operate their own selections. By contrast, collectivistic systems rely on a certain cultural homogeneity. In this context, group members adhere to community norms and the harmony of the collectivity is not disturbed by other possible cultural scenarios. (Triandis 158-159). Thus, Ashima's initial repudiation of mixed marriages may be interpreted as a communitarian rejection of otherness.

Ashima supports the practice of arranged marriage, a marker of South Asian cultural identity (Barot 126). This type of union promotes group interests and not individual choices. Ashima realizes that her relationship with Ashoke is culturally different from the American marriages. At the beginning of her stay, she acknowledges the Americans' unreserved expressions of feelings, but she denies the possibility of adhering to them. For example, "sweetheart" and "love" are "words Ashima has neither heard *nor expects to hear* from her own husband; *this is not how they are*" (Lahiri 3) (my emphasis). The fact Ashima contrasts American directness with Indian restraint, suggests that she regards this difference as an important cultural boundary. Since Ashima does not expect her husband to change this traditional conduit, she appears as a carrier of a static conception of culture. This closed vision initially prevents her from taking part in a transcultural dialogue. Consequently, she maintains an apparent formal relationship with Ashoke. For example, when she writes Christmas cards for him, Ashima does not end them with the word "love" as she does for her children.

Nevertheless, Ashima's evolution suggests that the passing of time may erode cultural prejudices. Hence, she eventually changes some of her beliefs regarding mixed relationships/marriages. For example, at the end of her stay in America, Ashima acknowledges the necessity to approve of her son's girlfriend: "she knows the relationship is something she must be willing to accept. Sonia has told her this, and so have her American friends at the library" (Lahiri 166). This quotation highlights the role of communication in the process of re-shaping one's inherited beliefs. By exchanging ideas with her American colleagues, Ashima slightly modifies her outlook on relationships. Similarly, she approves of Sonia's decision to marry Ben, who is "half-Jewish, half-Chinese" (Lahiri 170), realizing that he is able to make her daughter happy. This modified approach to marriage suggests that a cultural transfer has been produced, fact that illustrates the cancellation of temporal borders. Ashima's ability to comprehend her children's options reflects her acknowledgement that striving for self-fulfillment is better than obeying community rules. This attitude suggests that, in the long run, Ashima sustains individualistic norms of identity. This new awareness helps her evaluate the positive aspects of Gogol's divorce from Moushumi:

But *fortunately* they have not considered it their *duty* to stay married, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima's

generation do. They are not willing to accept, to adjust, to settle for something less than *their ideal of happiness*. The *pressure* has given way, in the case of subsequent generation, to *American common sense* (Lahiri 276) (my emphasis).

Ashima admits that marriage as a duty clashes with the principle of self-fulfillment. Consequently, she considers divorce as a reasonable option that expresses a personal preference. The American principle of individual free choice is contrasted to the Indian system that compels people to stay married. Ashima's reflections suggest that she appreciates the American model for its lack of constraints. The fact that she can understand her children's options suggests the erasure of the temporal border that separates generations. At the same time, her crossing this time-distance is partial since Ashima cannot imagine herself actually upholding this standard:

She no longer wonders what it might have been like to do what her children have done, to fall in love first rather than years later, to deliberate over a period of months or years and not a single afternoon, which was the time it had taken for her and Ashoke to agree to wed (Lahiri 280) (my emphasis).

The fact that Ashima has envisaged the possibility of a Western marriage scenario for herself illustrates the character's questioning of the Indian duty-based marriage. At the same time, her faithful upholding of this marital standard exemplifies the partiality of cultural transfers. Hence, while taking over the value of self-contentment, Ashima cannot relinquish the idea of community based alliance. Thus, the collectivist notion of attachment appears as a stable cultural value, since it stands the test of time. This fragmentary cultural exchange can be accounted for by the notion of incomplete cultural translatability:

[...] the concept of translation involves the transposition of one set of "foreign" cultural codes into a new, "domestic" set of cultural meanings, while the referential universe remains peculiarly suspended in the process. This suspension of "reality" in the process of translation between languages manifests irreducible differences that are proper to each of the registers placed in an encounter of cultural bridging, which echoes the impossibility of total translation between cultures (Longinovic 10) .

While the concept of love is present in all cultures, cultural discourses on love are diverse. Individualistic cultures are thought to promote romantic love, whose main attribute is passion. By contrast, collectivist ones conceive love as attachment and in-group commitment (Goodwin 61- 17). The cultural value of love as commitment is a lasting cultural norm for Ashima. Consequently, the character translates the idea of self-contentment as family attachment. In Longinovic's terms, the "domestic" Indian family values cannot accommodate the "foreign" passionate manifestation of love. Hence, the value of love is suspended between the opposite principles of group attachment vs. passion.

Another instance that underscores the relationship between motherhood and gradual cultural adjustment is Ashima's attitude to certain American holidays. Actually, both parents learn to celebrate Thanksgiving, Easter and Christmas since these events are more appealing to their children than Indian festivals:

For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati (Lahiri 64).

Although it is the children who are initially attracted to American festivities, this preference is eventually transferred to their mother. In the long run, Ashima regards these occasions as special opportunities for family reunification:

Ashima looks forward to Christmas, the four of them being together. It still bothers her that neither Gogol nor Sonia had come for Thanksgiving this year (Lahiri 166).

The ambivalent manner in which she relates to Christmas illustrates another instance of incomplete cultural translation. Ashima does not take over the religious significance of Christmas, but she adopts the practice of sending Christmas cards. In order to avoid a cultural clash, Ashima eschews greetings that allude to Christianity and picks those with a neutral connotation:

She is careful to choose ones that say 'Happy Holidays' or 'Season's Greetings' as opposed to 'Merry Christmas', to avoid angels and nativity scenes in favour of what she considers *firmly secular images*- a sleigh being pulled through a snow-covered field, or skaters on a pond (Lahiri 160) (my emphasis).

Ashima's formulation of positive thoughts via Christmas cards proves that she has taken over the spirit of the holiday, without focusing on its Christian significance. At some point, she decides to design her own Christmas card. Although the card originally signifies a Western celebration, it displays an Indian image – "an elephant decked with red and green jewels" (Lahiri 160), inspired by one of her father's drawings. Significantly, the drawing talent is something both Ashima and Gogol have inherited from him. This common artistic leaning foregrounds the continuity of pre-emigration traditions in the American context. The use of an Indian symbol to convey a Christian holiday illustrates the process of filtering Western values through a different cultural perspective. This example also proves that the transfer of meanings involved in cultural translation is fragmentary: the hope entailed by the Christ's birth is translated as a spirit of communication and the strengthening of family ties. This instance illustrates that there is no perfect equivalence of cultural meanings, principle also echoed by Lahiri's conviction that all translations are limited (Lahiri quoted in Trivedi 6).

The next section discusses Ashima's wavering between communitarian patterns of identity and individualistic codes of self-definitions. The character's evolution indicates her temporary adherence to principles that promote self-reliance. At the same time, her choices suggest the impossibility to completely relinquish collectivistic identity patterns. These assumptions appear strong cultural premises that are only partially affected by the passing of time. The next section analyzes Ashima's evolution highlighting her wavering between collectivistic and individualist notions of the self.

The change-resistant interdependent self

According to Triandis, individuals in sociocentric cultures define themselves in terms of relationships, rather than as autonomous beings. While in individualist societies relationships serve as a background for the manifestation of the self, in collectivist ones the individual exists via interdependence with similar others (164). This notion of interdependency characterizes Ashima's cultural profile, but her long exposure to an individualist culture triggers certain changes of her conceptions. One of the woman's greatest accomplishments is her learning to manage on her own. At the beginning of her stay in America, Ashima relies on her husband to link her with the exterior world. Later on, when he moves to a different city, Ashima lives alone for the first time in her life. In the absence of family, the woman is able to focus on her own interests. Thus, she reduces the frequency of doing chores and shows less concern for cooking. This fact proves that it is Ashoke and her children that trigger the performance of the traditional Indian woman's role. While living alone, Ashima discovers the need to end her home confinement and therefore she gets a job.

Indian female relegation to the private sphere is deeply rooted in the temporality of the Indian historical context and it illustrates the xenophobia of Hindu elites. Their reactions against Islamic and British conquerors resulted in an overall rejection of foreign cultural influences. Since women were traditionally conceived as repositories of family honor, their isolation from the public space was an attempt to preserve family integrity (Deka quoted in Adler 126). It is this long-lasting cultural conception that accounts for Ashima's home ostracism as an early immigrant. However, her evolution suggests that the contact with an individualistic society leads to the adjustment of this cultural pattern. Hence, at some point, Ashima accepts to work as a part-time employee, this decision being generated by her need to socialize. Working in an American environment enables Ashima to form bonds with her colleagues. This new experience deconstructs her initial bias regarding

American reservation. It proves that communication can be established between individuals from different cultures, as long as they are willing to initiate dialogue. While it is an American who invites Ashima to join the library staff, the Indian woman accepts this suggestion, wishing to make American friends:

She is friendly with the other women who work at the library, most of them also with grown children. A number of them live alone, as Ashima does now, because they are divorced. They are the first American friends she has made in her life (Lahiri 162).

Gradually, Ashima joins her American colleagues in leisure activities and she even invites them to have lunch at her place. These women fulfill Ashima's need for companionship and act as her instructors into the norms of the American society. Ashima's willingness to follow their advice expresses her desire to engage in transcultural transitions. It also highlights the role of communication in negotiating different values. At some point, Ashima mentions the difficulty to accept her children's independence. She regards this tendency as unnatural, but her American colleagues point out the necessity to acknowledge this situation:

She had complained to her friends at the library, and they had told her it was inevitable, that eventually parents had to stop assuming that their children would return faithfully for the holidays (Lahiri 166).

The fact that Ashima shares dilemmas with her colleagues suggests that her openness to American culture has increased over the years. Becoming involved in the American public space, the Indian woman understands that being independent is a condition for survival in a different culture. She thus realizes that life in America has taught her to become more confident. Ashima considers the ability to do things by herself as one of the most important gains of migration. At some point, she refers to living alone as something that she must be instructed upon. Hence, she considers that Ashoke's departure has created the necessary context for her to master the capacity to live by herself: "I know why he went to Cleveland... He was teaching me how to live alone" (Lahiri 183). Her statement expresses the need to acquire the meaning of independence that seems an alien concept to Ashima. Hence, with all her efforts to comprehend this value, Ashima admits that she finds it difficult to take it over:

But Ashima feels too old to learn such a skill. She hates returning in the evenings to a dark, empty house, going to sleep on one side of the bed and waking up on another (Lahiri 161).

Nevertheless, she partially acquires this skill and returns to India as a more assertive woman:

For the first time since her flight to meet her husband in Cambridge, in the winter of 1967, she will make the journey entirely on her own. The prospect no longer terrifies her. *She has learned to do things on her own*, and though she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun, *she is not the same Ashima who once lived in Calcutta* (Lahiri 276) (my emphasis).

At the end of her adventure in America, Ashima realizes that life abroad has tamed her fears of loneliness. Hence, despite her external markers of difference, the character's inner profile has been changed by the contact with a foreign culture. While confronting isolation is a significant accomplishment, there are aspects that point to the limits of Ashima's transformation. The next section further analyzes the idea of incomplete cultural fusion illustrated by other examples of partial cultural exchanges. The idea of fragmentariness signals the presence of change-resistant cultural values. These elements mark the temporal borders between enduring Indian traditions and novel American models of self-assertion.

Incompatible cultural temporalities

Ashima's attitude to driving illustrates the fragmentariness that characterizes cultural transfers. This fact indicates the impossibility to completely cross the temporal borders that separate Indian collectivistic outlooks from American norms of independence. Initially, Ashima "has no interest" (Lahiri 49) in driving, but she eventually learns how to drive around town, without venturing onto the highway. Drawing a parallel between driving and cultural adjustment, one may conclude that Ashima partially finds a niche in America. Her reluctance to drive on the highway suggests the existence of a boundary that she cannot cross. This idea points to the impossibility of complete cultural translation, without denying the achievability of fragmentary negotiations.

Although she learns how to drive and to live alone, there are things Ashima cannot master while living abroad. Paying the bills, raking the lawn and buying gas are reserved for Ashoke. So is the task of depositing her pay-checks into their common bank account. After her husband's sudden death, Ashima needs company again and she lives with her daughter for a while. Ashima's return to India signifies the end of her solitary life since she will stay in her brother's house in Calcutta: "In Calcutta, Ashima will live with her younger brother Rana, and his wife, and their two grown, as yet unmarried daughters, in a spacious flat in Salt Lake" (Lahiri 275). Consequently, the skill of living on her own is portrayed as a necessity restricted to Ashima's existence in the West. Her decision to go back also points to the limits of cultural translation. Ashima is Lahiri's first-generation female character who most successfully adapts. At the same time, she is the only character who goes back to India. Several elements in the novel indicate that it is Ashima's eventual lack of family roles that triggers her departure. First, her husband's death points to the end of wifely responsibilities. Second, Ashima's motherly duties are no longer needed when her children are independent adults. Since the next stage that requires her dedication to the family (being a grandmother) is yet to come, Ashima is no longer motivated to stay in America:

When she is finished, she wipes the steam off the bathroom mirror and studies her face. A *widow's* face. But for most of her life, she reminds herself, *a wife*. And perhaps, one day, *a grandmother*, arriving in America laden with hand-knit sweaters and gifts, leaving, a month or two later, inconsolable, in tears (Lahiri 278) (my emphasis).

Ashima's meditations reveal a self-definition in relation to family roles rather than individual choices. The fact that she can only think of herself as a widow, wife and grandmother suggests that the communitarian norm of identification prevails. Going back entails Ashima's re-entering the home sphere in the company of her relatives. Thus, Ashima's return illustrates her eventual adherence to collectivistic models of identity. It also signifies access to a life devoid of responsibilities:

She will return to a world where she will not single-handedly throw parties for dozens of people. She will not have to go to the trouble of making yoghurt from half-and-half and sandesh from ricotta cheese. She will not have to make her own croquettes (Lahiri 276).

Although she is aware she will miss life in America, Ashima regards her homecoming as a minimizing of tasks. Therefore, Ashima's return to India underscores the incompleteness of transcultural exchanges and the dividing function of the temporal borders between the Indian and American patterns of identity. It illustrates the fact that transcultural dialogues do not have to generate consensus. The endeavor to understand otherness is more important than total adherence to foreign values. In Ashima's case, the communal model of identity is a stronger cultural premise than individualism. While capable to understand the latter, Ashima's choice illustrates that she does not find it entirely compatible with her values.

At the same time, Ashima's homecoming and the envisaged possibility of her traveling back and forth is a celebration of mobility. This fact enables her to be "without borders", faithful to the significance of her name: "True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (Lahiri 276). The idea of unrestricted mobility between different cultural spaces

suggests that borders can also function as linking sites, enabling cultural communication. Ashima's adjustment in America supports this hypothesis as well, since it exemplifies the occurrence of cultural transfers.

Conclusions

The character's evolution exemplifies the partial nature of transcultural encounters, triggered by the impossibility to fully transpose cultural values from one outlook to another. Ashima's selections prove that her collectivistic cultural assumptions stand the test of time. Thus, although she displays self-assertive attitudes, this transfer is incomplete and temporary. Hence, the return scenario leaves the results of cultural translation in suspension: the character seems to resort to individualistic values only in the interval of her stay in America. Consequently, the partiality of Ashima's transcultural understandings reveals the existence of change-resistant traditional values. Nevertheless, these stable cultural norms undergo transitory adjustments triggered by their contact with a different set of conventions.

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