

TRANSCULTURAL FUSION THROUGH NOMADIC TRANSGRESSION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND* AND *IN OTHER WORDS*

Adriana Elena STOICAN¹

Abstract

*The analysis examines the (dis) empowering valences assigned to nomadic mobility by Jhumpa Lahiri. Relying on a cultural studies approach to literature, the paper builds a comparative perspective on nomadic identities and transcultural transformations as illustrated by *The Lowland* and *In Other Words*. The discussion focuses on the interplay between the protagonists' rhizomatic profiles and their search for rooted configurations. In order to enlarge the scope of the analysis, a few references will be made to Kaushik, a character from *Unaccustomed Earth*².*

Keywords: *deracination; groundedness; rhizome; nomadism; transcultural; transgression*

1. Introduction

The present analysis considers the cultural studies premise that culture is expressed by means of symbolic forms, inevitably linked with a specific social context (Ganser, 2009: 20). Accordingly, the literary text is viewed as a repository of cultural experiences in the context of South Asian women's relocation. Hence, this paper aims to establish a dialogue between a fictional work (*The Lowland*) and an autobiographical text (*In Other Words*). Lahiri was born to Bengali immigrant parents in London in 1967 and she grew up in the USA. Her fictional and autobiographical creations revolve around themes related to migrant transplantation, cultural clashes and dialogues between the American and Bengali cultural outlooks. Lahiri's work has been analyzed as ethnic American literature (Brada-Williams, 2004; Song, 2007; Iyer, 2009), as American literature (Caesar, 2005/2007; Chetty, 2006), as diasporic literature (Banerjee, 2010; Bhalla, 2008; Brians, 2003; Saha, 2009; Kemper, 2011; Munos, 2010), as postcolonial literature (Bahmanpour, 2010; Bandyopadhyay, 2009) and from a gender studies perspective (Williams Anh, 2007; Bran, 2014). The present analysis aims to provide a

¹ Adriana Elena Stoican, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, estoican@gmail.com

² Lahiri's collection of short stories that focuses on the cultural dilemmas experienced by members of the second generation South Asian Americans. Kaushik Choudhuri is a second-generation character involved in perpetual travel around the world.

multilayered discussion as it scrutinizes possibilities of transcultural redefinition correlated with patterns of transnational mobility, nomadic transgression and gender identity.

The discussion contrasts Bela's rhizomatic wandering through America (and sometimes Kaushik's incessant travel around the world) with the author's voluntary resettlement to Italy. Bela is the second-generation protagonist of *The Lowland*, a recent novel about Bengali transmigrants, all affected by a traumatic family event. The narrative structure initially places the action in Calcutta, around the late 40's, when the two protagonists, Subhash and Udayan are born. In the late 60-s, Subhash applies for a PhD in the United States, while Udayan becomes attracted to the Naxalbari movement³ and is eventually killed by government forces. At some point, Subhash is informed about Udayan's marriage to a girl named Gauri. After his brother's death, Subhash temporarily returns to India and he is moved by Gauri's isolation from his family. Finding out she is pregnant with Udayan's child, Subhash proposes to Gauri in order to offer her a new life in America. Away from India, Gauri gives birth to a girl, Bela, but her marriage with Subhash does not work. Gauri chooses an academic career over motherhood, secretly leaving for California. Lahiri carefully investigates the evolution of Subhash, Gauri and Bela, foregrounding the effect of Udayan's death across temporal and physical borders. In this paper, I will focus on Bela's adoption of a nomadic lifestyle, as a reaction to her mother's abandonment. At the same time, I will compare her evolution with the author's transnational travel between America and Italy.

In Other Words, a book published in Italian, is Lahiri's first autobiographical work that describes her need for self-reinvention by relocation to Europe. Lahiri's reflections regarding the convoluted path to mastering Italian include plenty of references to her lifetime cultural division between her parents' Bengali background and the American mainstream values. The present evaluation sets out to explore the connotations assigned to nomadism by Lahiri and answer a series of research questions. Is nomadic resettlement, both in America and across the Atlantic, idealized as a freeing condition? Is it preferred to settled/rooted regimes of belonging? What kind of transcultural processes are facilitated by the protagonists' adoption of an intense rhythm of relocation? In order to disentangle the overlapping significance of these themes, the discussion relies on a theoretical framework that refers to transnational migration, transcultural becoming and nomadic itineraries.

³ This leftist political manifestation was ignited by the West Bengal peasant uprising against the landlords' feudal ownership and taxation policies (Mustafi, 2012: no page). Brutally repressed by the police, this insurgency triggered a chain of violent confrontations between the guerrilla revolutionaries and the Indian state.

1.1 Transcultural processes, nomadic transgression and transnational trajectories

The transcultural paradigm has been conceived as a theoretical completion of the multicultural discourse on cultural identity and communication. While promoting a rightful acknowledgment of cultural difference and plurality, multiculturalism also implies a separatist approach to cultural identity. Supporters of transculturalism consider that the American emphasis on difference and pluralism runs the risk of promoting a tolerant difference, since difference becomes a general criterion of acceptance “as if all people were essentially the same”. (Epstein, 1995: 302). Along similar lines, Ulf Hannerz considers that the multiculturalist argument promotes the “right to one’s culture” (2001: 57), while reinforcing the definition of cultures as bounded, separated entities (2001: 57). An implicit coordinate of a transcultural consciousness is one’s intuition that cultures are incomplete systems. In order to fill in the missing spaces, cultures can be enriched by cultural transfers, operated by people who experience an encounter with radical otherness. This venture is motivated by the individuals’ desires to escape the limitations of a singular culture through immersion in others. Therefore, the idea of cultures as self-transcendent entities is an important principle of transculturality. This connotation accounts for the necessity to acknowledge the relevance of other cultural worlds.

Thus, processes of transcultural metamorphosis can be discussed in relation with the physical transgression inherent in transnational mobility. The mechanism of transgression carries geographical connotations, given its literal meaning of “crossing a boundary” (Cresswell, 1996: 21). At the same time, resettlement entails a shift to an “out of place” status that contains potential for resistance (Cresswell, 1996: 21). The notion of transgression serves as a useful tool for examining Bela’s and Lahiri’s strategies of crossing familiar identity roles, in their search for autonomous reinvention. The protagonists’ rebellious stance demonstrates the importance of transgression as an apparatus that reveals “the historical and mutable nature of that which is usually considered ‘the way things are’ ” (Cresswell, 1996: 26). Thus, the double connotation of “transgression” may allow for a fruitful interpretation of the labyrinthine nature of Bela’s and Lahiri’s trespassing acts. Transnationalism denotes “processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch et. al, 2003: 7). The transnational perspective redefines immigrants as transmigrants, i.e. immigrants who build social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders by their engagement in networks of relationships that connect them to two or more nation states simultaneously (Basch et. al, 2003: 7). The concept of “transmigrant” is meant to operate a distinction between transnational multiple belonging and the connotations of uprootedness and permanent settlement abroad associated with the notion of immigrant (Basch et. al, 2003: 4). At the same time, it aims to discard the idea of transient stay inherent in

the migrants' customary scenarios of temporary work migration (Basch et. al, 2003: 4). Considering the fine distinctions between the above concepts (i.e. migrant, immigrant, transmigrant), I will employ the term "transmigrant" when analyzing Lahiri's outlook on nomadic travel.

Nomadism has been conceived as a novel paradigm for interpreting subjectivity with a focus on deterritorialization, movement and connectivity (O'Sullivan, 2000). This outlook is associated with a rhizomatic⁴ manifestation of travel that involves states of discontinuity, rupture and multiplicity" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 16). Feminism has taken over the nomadic vocabulary to highlight the movement's "acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries" (Braidotti, 1994: 36). More specifically, feminist critics uphold "nomadic transgression" as a strategy of trespassing established borders in order to create new subjectivities (Ganser, 2009: 173). In other words, the adoption of nomadic theory by feminism enables the production of "rhizomatic constellations of multiple identities and affiliations, as a transgressive strategy that goes against fixity and limiting structures" (Ganser, 2009: 173). Despite the rich implications of conceptual nomadism, one has to apply it cautiously, paying attention to existent critiques. Thus, several critical voices (Kaplan, 1996; Pratt, 1998; Wolff, 1992) argue that Western feminists, such as Rosi Braidotti and Chantal Mouffe, have overused the nomadic metaphor, turning it into an idealized condition for mobile, transcultural/ hybrid intellectuals (Ganser, 2009: 175). Along similar lines, Sten Pultz Moslund signals that the valorization of transformation, nomadism and fragmentation privileges regimes of mobility over conditions of settlement (2010: 14). While this paper does not represent an exclusive gender approach to cultural transformation, it does aim to establish whether transnational mobility has an empowering effect over the protagonists under scrutiny. A finding of this kind may prove useful in assessing the author's position regarding nomadism as an auspicious/unpromising condition for transmigrant identity negotiation. Considering the overlap between transnational migration, transcultural becoming and nomadic transgression, the paper analyzes Bela's and Lahiri's disruptive paths to self-redefinition, focusing on their ability to reconcile patterns of displacement with the need for anchors. In order to understand the mechanisms of transcultural transformation, the discussion considers the distinction between the value of interdependence promoted by South Asian cultures and the individualism promoted by Western cultural outlooks (Triandis, 1993; Miller, 1994). Considering these remarks, the argument will discuss the

⁴ The rhizome is a special type of pedicle, "a horizontal plant stem with shoots above and roots below serving as a reproductive structure. A type of storage organ in plants which situates itself in a horizontal fashion underground" (*Biology Online Dictionary*). Deleuze and Guattari associate this notion with principles of "transformational multiplicities" (1987: 11), "connection and heterogeneity" (1987: 7), regeneration along lines of flight and deterritorialization (1987: 9). The fluid dynamics of rhizomatic patterns is also correlated within anti-genealogical orientation that differentiates them from ordered "lineages of an arborescent type" (1987: 21).

protagonists' nomadic trajectories and their transcendent outlooks on cultural boundaries and mechanisms of belonging.

2. Drifting selves and transcultural becoming

Notwithstanding Lahiri's own history of displacement and cultural confusion, which are important themes of her creations, the author rejects interpretations of her fictional work that rely on her biographical information: "They say the fact that I am a person of Indian origin, like the majority of my characters, makes my work openly autobiographical. Or they think that any story in the first person must be true" (Lahiri, 2016:217). I agree that interpretations of literature should not be equated with an author's real life as they may reduce the manifold connotations of fictional representations. However, I consider that the cultural dilemmas of Lahiri's imaginary protagonists can be better understood when filtered through the author's reflections regarding the possibilities of (trans)cultural change afforded by transnational mobility. While reading *In Other Words*, I have identified powerful analogies between the troubled destinies of Lahiri's second-generation protagonists and the author's identity crisis. As well as Bela, the author seems haunted by the specters of rootlessness, cultural lack/suspension and individual metamorphosis along lines of "fleeing" and "flight" (Lahiri, 2016: 153). Considering these obvious thematic parallelisms, I think that *In Other Words* can be regarded as a potential clue for deciphering the entangled scenarios of self-transformation upheld by the author's fictional characters. The next section of the paper discusses the different nomadic paths followed by Bela and Lahiri, trying to spot the strategies of self-redefinition enabled by their intensified regime of mobility within and beyond the borders of the American nation-state.

2.1 Nomadic wanderings in America, transnational crossings to Italy

Bela is perhaps the strongest promoter of an unruly path to transcultural redefinition by means of nomadic relocation. She continues her mother's transgressive pattern⁵, as suggested by her evolution after Gauri's abandonment. Bela is severely disturbed by her mother's gesture and the first phase of her transformation is represented by self-isolation. Bela's detachment from her father and her colleagues is gradually dissolved as she undergoes therapy sessions. Proof of her recovery is Bela's involvement in extracurricular activities involving militant actions for environmental protection and social security measures. According to Bran, Bela's dedication to eco-friendly projects reveals her "subordination of individual time to collective time and well-being". (2014: 312) I

⁵ Gauri's rebellious metamorphosis is the focus of a different paper in course of publication, entitled "Diffused Gender Codes and Transcultural Outcomes in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*". This analysis foregrounds the character's abrupt transgression of normative identity roles in correlation with her struggle to erase the traces of a traumatic past.

also suggest that Bela's interest in social welfare may also hint at a sense of continuity with her Bengali background, as it reflects a resemblance with Udayan's leftist political orientation. As well as Lahiri's, Bela's chosen deracination represents a strategy of detachment from a personal history of unresolved identity coordinates. I suggest that their nomadic itineraries may be linked with a quest for transculturality, as they represent liberating acts of transgressing traumatic, familiar settings. While the protagonists' transcendent impulses are powerfully highlighted by their intense nomadic drives, the cultural content of their transcultural metamorphosis is less specific than in Lahiri's other creations. In her previous works, the author builds the transcultural message by highlighting the idea of cultural incompleteness as a trigger of cross-cultural exchanges, eventually produced by means of creative pluralism⁶ (Stoican, 2015).

By contrast, in *The Lowland*, the author seems more concerned with the principle of transgression as an element that enables the characters' redefinition in autonomous terms. In this case, the outcomes of cultural metamorphoses appear less important than the protagonists' actual path to reconstruction, opened by their nomadic fleeing. Similarly, *In Other Words* formulates a transcultural message as a result of Lahiri's intense boundary crossing via relocation between America and Italy. It seems that the author's travels across the Atlantic help her deal with a sense of dissolved cultural roots: "All my life I've tried to get away from the void of my origin. It was the void that distressed me that I was fleeing" (Lahiri, 2016: 169). The implied significance of Bela's and Lahiri's itinerant escapes is their adoption of an individualistic set of norms that privilege the self at the expense of group's expectations. More specifically, Bela's erratic wanderings through America help her fashion her destiny in non-conventional terms, as she chooses to become a single mother without a stable partner. Similarly, Lahiri's transplantation to Italy represents an act of rebellion against being cast in suffocating identity labels. Hence, her strategy of writing in a third language represents a willing detachment from the competing facets of her divided identity that have been tormenting her sense of wholeness. Thus, the protagonists' engagement in different patterns of nomadic travel provides the detachment necessary for self-transformation beyond familiar norms of interdependence. This commonality suggests that nomadic transgression and transnational mobility do open paths to female empowerment, as they offer a neuter dimension where these women can freely select the coordinates of their redefinition.

After graduating from college, Bela refuses to engage in further studies, rejecting her parents' academic career. Instead, Bela opts for a nomadic lifestyle that involves her recurrent drifting through America, depending on temporary jobs related to farming: "She lived without insurance, without heed for her future.

⁶ A detailed discussion of creative pluralism as a mechanism of achieving cultural syntheses is discussed in Chapter five of *Transcultural Encounters in South Asian American Women's Fiction*; Anita Desai, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri.

Without a fixed address” (Lahiri, 2013: 174). As well as Gauri and Kaushik⁷, Bela adopts the strategy of nomadic resettlement as a way to deal with her traumatic past. Bela’s distancing from Rhode Island is meant to help her avoid the context of her abandonment, a painful reminder of her being “unwanted” (Lahiri, 2013: 202). Both she and Kaushik have lost someone dear and consequently they appear unwilling to form new attachments, perceived as sources of additional pain. Therefore, their mobility seems liberating, suggesting their embrace of groundlessness as a necessary condition for an existence beyond the effects of bonding and separation. As well as her fictional counterparts, Lahiri appears haunted by a sense of profound loss that may be compared to Bela’s and Kaushik’s deprivation of a maternal presence. While Bela and Kaushik are traumatized by their mothers’ physical absence, Lahiri’s perceived lack is induced by the impossibility to retrieve a clear sense of cultural origins: “Those who don’t belong to any specific place can’t, in fact, return anywhere. The concepts of exile and return imply a point of origin, a homeland. Without a homeland and without a true mother tongue, I wander the world even at my desk (Lahiri, 2016: 133). The only solution to the identity crisis provoked by the protagonists’ lack of anchors is their embrace of a deterritorialized condition, illustrated by the choice to relocate between countries (Lahiri, Kaushik) or regions of America (Bela). I interpret their nomadic travel as an expression of their intention to overcome distressing non-belonging by detaching from the space/culture associated with the sense of loss (Bela, Kaushik) and the pressure to conform (Lahiri). According to the author’s confessions, her attraction to a different language and a novel cultural space is strongly enhanced by the lack of imposition to approach a new culture: “There was no need to learn that language [Italian]. No family, cultural, social pressure. No necessity” (Lahiri, 2016: 153).

At the same time, the analysis will demonstrate that protagonists’ escapist urge is paralleled by their attempts to develop roots in less familiar spaces (Bela) and remote countries (Lahiri). More specifically, along her wanderings, Bela becomes a mother, which illustrates her desire to form enduring bonds. Similarly, Lahiri is strongly motivated to become fluent in Italian, therefore creating a significant connection with the Italian culture. (During his worldwide travels, Kaushik falls in love with a childhood friend (Hema), but he lacks the strength to preserve this attachment). The following part of this paper refers to the layered nature of the

⁷ Kaushik is a second-generation character from *Unaccustomed Earth*, deeply affected by his parents’ chain of relocations from India to America and by his mother’s premature death. As a photojournalist, Kaushik is free to travel across the world, attempting and failing to avoid the formation of significant bonds with people/places. The traumatic dimension of his transnational experience is detailed in the paper entitled “*Traumatic Effects of Transnational Relocation in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Unaccustomed Earth*”. Although Kaushik is not the focus of this paper, his example has been invoked in order to suggest the intersecting perceptions of transnational mobility and transcultural becoming for members of the second generation South Asians in Lahiri’s work.

transmigrants' profiles that interestingly fuses their attraction to a free, nomadic condition with an equally valid need for belonging/settlement.

2.2 Rhizomatic paths or grounded coordinates?

Subhash witnesses Bela's metamorphosis during the random intervals when she returns to Rhode Island. Subhash notices that Bela prefers to remain isolated even when she visits him and he is worried by the hazardous nature of her life: "She had eschewed the stability he had worked to provide. She'd forged a rootless path, one which seemed precarious to him" (Lahiri, 2013: 176). Subhash refers to Bela as a "nomad" (Lahiri, 2013: 193), which suggests the author's clear intention to offer a model of deterritorialized, rhizomatic identity. Committed to the idea of avoiding painful attachments, Bela adopts an unconventional lifestyle, preferring to share her life with a community of strangers. As well as Gauri and Kaushik, Bela can only experience fleeting friendships along her segmented relocation. Her nomadic condition helps her avoid rooted configurations, such as belonging to a lasting relationship or a family: "She can't imagine being part of a couple, or of any other family. She's never had a romantic relationship that's endured for any length of time" (Lahiri, 2013: 201). Bela's reluctance to be included in stable structures of belonging illustrates her inability to trust the family model offered by her parents, "a family of solitaires" (Lahiri, 2013: 204). Aware of Gauri and Subhash's deficient relationship, Bela also refuses the idea of getting married, that she associates with her parents' compromise. Bela's option to become a single mother aligns with her centrifugal outlook, expressing her repudiation of specific origins. Therefore, the absence of the genetic father is considered less important than the idea of planting a new being into the world. This paternal void reinforces the anti-genealogical nature of rhizomatic identities, suggesting Bela's embrace of an uprooted, deterritorialized outlook. While evaluating her choice, Subhash feels responsible for Bela's rootlessness, considering it a family legacy that reiterates his and Gauri's history: "The coincidence coursed through him, numbing, bewildering. A pregnant woman, a fatherless child. Arriving in Rhode Island, needing him. It was a reenactment of Bela's origins. A version of what had brought Gauri to him, years ago (Lahiri, 2013: 206). While Bela's nomadism is a reaction against her disturbing family's history, her single motherhood is not the consequence of an accident, but the result of a resolute choice. At this point, her history differs from Gauri's, since the latter's destiny is fractured by Udayan's death that leaves her single. Bela's choices indicate her strong adherence to the axis of displacement, whose drifting effects seem to protect Bela from the danger of being abandoned again. However, her rhizomatic profile, obstinately shaped in opposition with centripetal structures cannot function without grounding elements. This apparent contradiction is suggested by Bela's confessed need for a change, after fifteen years of peregrination: "She craves a different pace sometimes, an alternative to what her life has come to be. But she doesn't know what else she might do". (Lahiri, 2017: 202)

While Kaushik and Gauri remain attached to their deracination, Bela's adult options illustrate her willingness to consider the possibility of anchoring her nomadic self. This is why Bela decides to overcome her fear of becoming attached and enters a relationship that contains the promise of stability. Her partner's profile indicates his settled condition, suggested by the fact that Drew has lived on his family's farm all his life. Bela's option to step out of her single motherhood highlights the eventual prevalence of rooting elements meant to ground her drifting life. At the same time, the fact that her daughter will be raised by someone other than her natural father can be considered a replication of the epiphytic pattern⁸ that has shaped Bela's life. Lahiri seems to lay stress on the idea that specific origins are less important than the possibility of individual development by means of suspended roots, supported by hosting structures. The author's personal reflections reinforce the message that being situated beyond precise allegiance may provide a paradoxical form of detached affinity: "I write on the margins, just as I've always lived on the margins of countries, of cultures. A peripheral zone where it's impossible for me to feel rooted, but where I'm comfortable. The only zone where I think that, in some way, I belong". (Lahiri, 2016: 93) It seems that the only possibility to experience inclusion is provided by a regime of deracination, that affords the feeling of simultaneous proximity (but not belonging) to several cultures. This special status reflects the transmigrants' layered hierarchy of affiliation maintained by their participation in transnational networks. However, the nomadic freedom to access various cultural dimensions is paralleled by the protagonists' awareness of a haunting loss of origins that condemns them to indefinite floating above cultural/national boundaries. This particular condition of detached participation is discussed in the following section.

2.2.1 Cultural voids, suspended roots, absent motherhood

According to Lahiri's confessions, the regime of cultural suspension, with its transcending connotations, may provide the necessary freedom for cultural exploration and self-transformation. Despite the connotations of non-belonging, the nomadic condition of liberating detachment seems to generate cultural enrichment. Lahiri's own strategy of approaching a third culture/language seems ironically reinforced by the impossibility to become totally immersed in the mystery of a

⁸ The epiphytic pattern of biological evolution is also displayed by the banyan tree, a rhizomatic plant employed by Lahiri to convey the peculiar affiliation that characterizes Subhash and Bela's relationship. The seeds of the banyan tree are carried and dropped by birds on the top branches of other trees. Hence, the banyan tree begins its life attached to the upper part of a different host, from where it sends aerial roots to the ground. The possible analogy between rhizomatic anti-genealogy and transcultural conceptions of cultures is detailed in the paper entitled "Cultural Dissolution and Re(birth) in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*", to be published in the next issue of *University of Bucharest Review, Literary and Cultural Studies Series*.

foreign universe: "If it were possible to bridge the distance between me and Italian, I would stop writing in that language (Lahiri, 2016: 95). This suggests that on the one hand the specificity of a different culture is perceived as a fluid border meant to be transgressed and generate the enlargement of cultural horizons. On the other hand, cultural otherness is associated with the idea of impassibility that simultaneously stimulates and postpones definite cultural transformations. By adopting this attitude to cultural redefinition, the author seems to foreground the inherent tension between the grounding effect of rootedness and the nomadic urge for cultural exploration that make up the fabric of transmigrant identities. I consider that Lahiri's latest creations strongly promote the message that the individual freedom afforded by deracination is an important trigger of self – transformation. At the same time, the author does not glorify nomadic transgression as an ideal state of cultural fluidity. This fact is suggested by the protagonists' persistent feeling of a cultural void, impossible to cancel by means of incessant relocation.

Bela also experiences the impulse to reject her parents' cultural world, although she needs to retrieve the stability of familiar cultural forces, shattered by the missing maternal presence. Bela's metamorphosis after Gauri's departure can be read as a metaphor regarding her relation with her parents' Bengali background. Bela builds her identity with a constant awareness of a lack, symbolized by Gauri's desertion. To use Habib's words, Bela's perpetual journeys through America may reflect her strategy to engage in a "constant search for completeness" (2015: 32). As well as in Kaushik's case, the mother's absence marks an identity void that refuses to be erased by Bela's nomadism. Following her therapist's instructions, Bela realizes that "her mother's absence would always be present in her thoughts" (Lahiri, 2013: 202). This paradoxical blending of absence and presence perfectly illustrates the ambivalent relationship between Bela and her Bengali background. Although there are few details regarding the Bengali input into Bela's upbringing, she clearly associates this cultural facet with her mother's presence. Even if Gauri is not particularly attached to her native culture, Bela's exposure to Bengali language is conditioned by Gauri's company. As an adult, Bela realizes that she stopped hearing Bengali after her mother left (Lahiri, 2013: 199-200), which clearly illustrates the correlation between motherhood and the transmission, albeit feeble, of Indian values. In this context, the mother's absence signifies the severance of a potential bond between Bela and the culture of her ancestors: "Her mother's absence was like another language she'd had to learn, its full complexity and nuance emerging only after years of study, and even then, because it was foreign, a language never fully absorbed". (Lahiri, 2013: 200) Bela's struggle to accept her mother's abandonment can be read as a fight against her alienation from her parents' cultural roots. Although she plunges into uprootedness, Bela cannot suppress her need for an identity core. This is why she conceptualizes the acceptance of this gap as an alien code that she cannot completely master. Her chosen homelessness parallels Kaushik's dealing with the phantom loss of the

motherland, by means of perpetual dislocation (Banerjee quoted in Stoican, 2014:92). Moreover, the similarity between Bela's and Kaushik's impossibility to connect with the notion of homeland is reinforced by Bela's projected death of her mother: "In her imagination she returned Gauri to India, saying her mother had gone back for a visit and contracted an illness. Over the years Bela had come to believe this herself. She imagined the body being burned under a pile of sticks, ashes floating away". (Lahiri, 2013: 231) The mother's death- real in Kaushik's case and imagined in Bela's-symbolizes the second generation's failed attempt to make sense of an "original source" of identity references. Along similar lines, Lahiri conceptualizes her relationship with Bengali language as a haunting illusion, symbolically rendered in terms of ambivalent (absent and present) motherhood: "And yet my mother tongue remained a *demanding phantom*, still present". (Lahiri, 2016: 149, emphasis added) Hence, Lahiri herself seems haunted by a sense of utter incompleteness, created by her inability to establish a coherent dialogue between her different cultural facets:

*Because of my divided identity, or perhaps by disposition, I consider myself an incomplete person, in some way deficient. Maybe there is a linguistic reason- the lack of a language to identify with. As a girl in America, I tried to speak Bengali perfectly, without a foreign accent, to satisfy my parents, and above all to feel that I was completely their daughter. But it was impossible. On the other hand, I wanted to be considered an American, yet, despite the fact that I speak English perfectly, that was impossible, too. I was suspended, rather than rooted. I had two sides, neither well defined. The anxiety I felt, and still feel comes from a sense of *inadequacy, of being a disappointment* (Lahiri, 2016: 113, my emphasis)*

The author's statement can be certainly correlated with the painful dilemma that characterizes most of her nomadic protagonists. Despite the freeing dimension of their mobile condition, these displaced characters seem haunted by their impossibility to express firm attachment to a particular culture. The author's perceived estrangement from her Bengali roots creates a feeling of deracination that she constantly attempts to overcome. At the same time, her inability to completely identify as American represents another obstacle to full belonging. One way of striking roots is Lahiri's creation of alternative cultural words by means of writing. At the same time, the author's nomadic resettlement between America and Italy coupled with her writing in a new language is another strategy that enables her to feel grounded again: "[...] I am in Italian, a tougher, freer writer, who, taking roots again, grows in a different way". (Lahiri, 2016: 173)

3. Conclusions

The analysis has established that Lahiri's confessions illustrate a striking similarity between her transnational wandering and her characters' efforts to undo a haunting sense of homelessness. In all cases, nomadism appears as an ambivalent state where the crossing of physical borders is paralleled by the transcendence of conventional roles, especially in Bela's and Lahiri's situations. One may say that their nomadic profiles are shaped along Deleuzian lines of flight and deterritorialization that facilitate the adoption of more individualistic values, perceived as lacking from the transmigrants' Bengali background. In a sense, the protagonists undergo transcultural metamorphoses precisely because they learn to detach from the principle of cultural roots. At the same time, their autonomous quest for new identity models also voices their need to fill in a cultural void, illustrated by the metaphorical absence of a maternal presence. Their perpetual awareness of this missing coordinate translates as a difficulty to find themselves "at home" anywhere, despite their intense mobility. This struggle to become detached from bounded cultural traditions acquires more radical contours in Lahiri's latest creations. It seems that the author has become more and more concerned with the mechanism of (physical and symbolical) transgression that signals the urgency to cross boundaries and transcend customary paths. This is why the cultural content of her characters' (and of her own) transcultural enterprise is not insisted upon. This absence of precise cultural references suggests that Lahiri is more concerned with the possibility of intense mobility that facilitates both physical crossings and cultural redefinition. However, this does not mean that the nomadic regime of transnational resettlement is idealized as a desired condition. Although it seems to open the path to empowerment, the protagonists' voluntary deracination does not undo their need for stable structures of attachment. Therefore, their transcendent urge for transcultural becoming is paralleled by an impossible search for roots that can only exist in suspension. The overall message promoted by the evolution of the above protagonists is that trans/immigrant cultural identities are not to be regarded as replications and continuations of native cultural traditions. Rather, they are reconfigured as layered structures of meaning that blend roots and rhizomes into suspended codes of signification.

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The author

Adriana Elena Stoican (PhD, University of Bucharest) has published articles on Indian diasporic fiction in English and comparative approaches to Indian and Romanian women's writing. She is the author of *Transcultural Encounters in South-Asian American Women's Fiction* (2015). Her articles appeared in *American, British and Canadian Studies* (2016), *The University of Bucharest Review. A Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, *Transnational Literature e-journal* (2016), *Synergy* (2017), *Primerjalna književnost* (2017).