MODERNIST DIMENSIONS OF CULTURAL CHANGE IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S IN OTHER WORDS

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Abstract

Relying on a cultural studies approach to literary texts, this paper analyzes Jhumpa Lahiri's recent embrace of the autobiographical form as a radical change, associated with a modernist strategy of innovation. The central theme of the author's fictional work is the process of self-understanding experienced mainly by second-generation members of the Bengali community in New England. This paper starts from the premise that, as well as her characters, the author follows a transcultural path to redefinition via her relocation to a different space (Italy). This argument investigates the significance of Henri Matisse's visual universe in relation to Lahiri's transcultural metamorphosis.

Keywords: abstract art, autobiography, Matisse, modernism, transcultural, transnational

1. Introduction

The paper investigates the conceptual link between Jhumpa Lahiri's transcultural reinvention and Henri Matisse's late artistic phase, invoked by Lahiri in her autobiographical writing, *In Other Words*. In this creation, the author describes her relocation from America to Italy, motivated by the desire to learn Italian and write a book in this new language. *In Other Words* is full of reflections regarding the author's struggle with her double linguistic inheritance, Bengali and American, the difficulties of learning a foreign language and the role played by Italian in this (already) complicated configuration.

The analysis first considers the author's stylistic complexity that simultaneously connects her with realism, modernism and postmodernism. The discussion then presents the evolution of Asian American literature, in several stages, from realism to modernism and postmodernism. This account is followed by an analysis of the link between modernism and transnationalism, with a focus on the need to expand the field of modernist studies along several directions. Afterwards, the discussion registers the importance of transcendence and individualism in modern abstract art that enables its association with transcultural notions of identity. The central part of the paper explores Lahiri's interest in the creative potentialities of her perceived

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cultural void and her fascination with Henry Matisse's *Blue Nudes*. By focusing on this surprising intersection, the argument aims to answer questions like: Why is a modern (abstract) visual creation invoked in a 21st century autobiographical work by a South-Asian American woman writer who expresses herself in Italian? What kind of cultural and stylistic connections are configured in this kind of unexpected encounter? Is the French painter a random choice or does his work enter a transcultural dialogue with the South Asian American writer?

2. Jhumpa Lahiri: at the junction of literary trends

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction[2] focuses on processes of cultural negotiation, experienced by first and second-generation Bengali characters, predominantly women, but also men. The author highlights instances of cultural clashes and transnational migration, also tracing manners in which her characters attempt to engage in meaningful communication, across cultural difference. Consequently, Lahiri's work has been analyzed as ethnic American literature (Brada-Williams 2004, Madhurpana 2006, Iyer 2009), postmodern literature (Anwar 2015, James 2015, Kumar 2011, Song 2007), postcolonial literature (Bahmanpour 2010, Bandyopadhyay 2009), American literature (Caesar 2005/2007, Chetty 2006), diasporic literature (Raj and Jose 2014, Banerjee 2010, Bhalla 2008, Brians 2003, Saha 2009, Kemper 2011, Munos 2010), from a gender studies perspective (Williams Anh, 2007; Bran, 2014, Ranasinha 2016) and from a political angle (Samanta 2014).Most of these interpretations have mainly addressed the author's thematic universe, linking Lahiri with postmodernism, postcolonialism and feminism.

However, several critical voices have also recorded Lahiri's formal leanings to other directions, highlighting her "narrative propensity for realism" (Zhang, 2012:214), her "composed, unadorned, frugal narrative style" (James, 2015:52), "middle class realism and [...] miniaturist prose" (Ranasinha, 2016: 35), or her "patient, polished realism" (Seshagiri, 2016: n.pag.). There seems to be an overall agreement regarding the possibility to associate Lahiri with various trends, since her narrative style can be linked to realism, while her thematic focus corresponds to both modernist and postmodernist concerns. For example, David James situates

[2] Her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), presents interactions between Indian and American characters placed in either Indian or American settings (the East Coast). Her first novel *The Namesake* (2003), presents the evolution of a Bengali immigrant family and their different strategies of navigating multiple traditions. The second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) foregrounds the second-generation characters and their struggle to comprehend their cultural inheritance. A second novel, *The Lowland* (2013) presents the transnational dispersion of a Bengali family across physical and temporal borders; the temporal framework of the narration unfolds from the India of late 60's, in the political context of the Naxalbari movement, up to the 21st century United States.

Lahiri at the "crossroad of form" (2015:48), while Yifan Zhang discusses Lahiri's blending of realist, modernist and postmodernist approaches (2012). Having mentioned Lahiri's multifaceted style, the next subchapter aims to link her peculiar narrative profile with the particularities of Asian American literature, a dynamic field that has integrated multiple literary conventions. Consequently, the following section presents an overview of this literary area, highlighting its specific phases, in terms of multiple allegiances to certain literary trends.

2.1 Asian American literature: from realism to postmodernism

In a very interesting study of Asian - American literature, Yifan Zhang (2012) discusses the evolution of this field from an initial reliance on realism to an adherence to modernism and postmodernism. The critic establishes that the initial stage of Asian American literature is located before 1965[3], when the Asian minorities were mainly interested in survival. Therefore, the literature produced at that time is of a realistic nature, illustrating the minorities' main concerns: assimilation, claiming America (Zhang, 2012: 27-28) and introducing ethnic traditions by realistic details (Zhang, 2012: 11). A second stage is represented by the transformation fiction which both develops and transforms the realist form of Asian American literature. Placed after 1965, this phase focuses on the members of model minorities, who are already assimilated and have the status of middle-class Asian Americans. Therefore, the protagonists' sense of Americanness becomes more important than their Asian inheritance. The transformation fiction captures a sense of tension between Asian American individuals and the larger community and society.

Zhang considers that this element announces the intrusion of modernism into Asian American fiction: "The interference of individuality in the transformation fiction anticipates the disruption of modernism" (Zhang, 2012:28). The third phase of Asian American literature is represented by the "contradiction fiction" (Zhang, 2012:29), which deepens the conflict between individuals and communities, celebrating individuality beyond ethnicity: "Feelings as independent human beings rather than Asian Americans or Asians or Americans are abstracted from the sum of social experience and can be shared outside the Asian American fief" (Zhang, 2012: 29). In this context, modernism is adopted to facilitate the freedom of individual expression that transcends the ties of ethnic allegiance: "It is perhaps in such contradiction and the form of modernism that Asian America disappears and literature succeeds" (Zhang, 2012: 29). Analyzing Jhumpa Lahiri, Zhang considers that *The Namesake* can be read in modernist terms, given its overall ambivalence regarding issues of identity negotiation (2012: 34). As already

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[3] In 1965, the USA immigration laws became more permissive, as stipulated by the Hart-Celler Act that removed the quota system based on national origins, encouraged family reunification, which generated an increase of the immigrant flows (Kammer, 2015).

established, Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction is predominantly concerned with transnational patterns of mobility, transmigrant identities and challenging cultural choices. If one considers these thematic foci along with the modernist overtones of her creations, it follows that an accurate analysis of this writer requires an explanation regarding the conceptual link between transnationalism and modernism. Accordingly, the next section discusses the connection between transnational processes and the evolution of modernist criticism.

2.2 Transnationalism and modernism

From a cultural studies perspective, transnationalism entails a mode of fluid belonging, shaped by the individuals' "multiple identifications, de-centred attachments and simultaneous being here and there" (Vertovec, 2009: 5-6). In this context, literary modernism with its emphasis on fragmented, individual voices is correlated with the transnational condition that foregrounds the dilution of precise cultural allegiance. In her discussion of ethnic modernisms, Delia Caparoso Konzett considers that the transnational condition of contemporary American ethnic writers, shaped by ethnicity and dislocation, is linked with an "aesthetics of nonsynchronicity" that prevents their identification with "clearly defined camps of identity" (2002:12). At the same time, other critical voices signal the necessity to consider the extension of modernist studies in the context of globalization. Thus, S.Friedman Stanford (2015) acknowledges the planetary dimension of modernist studies shaped by the digital, globalized era. Along similar lines, Mao and Walkowitz (2008: 738) consider the importance of a transnational turn in modernist literary studies arguing for a three-fold expansion of the field: temporal, spatial and vertical.

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction abounds in transnational processes, illustrating patterns of South-Asian mobility across generations and national borders, i.e. between India and America, from India via UK to the United States or between America and Europe (Stoican 2012, 2014, 2016). At the same time, the author links the protagonists' migration to America with the emergence of transcultural patterns of identity (Stoican, 2015). Thus, the idea of transcendence appears as a constant element in Lahiri's works, whether in relation to transnational border crossing or implicit in the transgression of cultural norms. Considering the vital link between transcultural changes and transcendence, it is interesting to establish the extent to which Lahiri's transgressive outlook corresponds to modernist assumptions. To this end, the next section presents the link between modernism and the transgressing impulse of transculturality.

2.3 Modernism, transcendence and the individual voice

The distinction between modernity and modernism is an important element, useful in grasping the purpose of modern art. Modernism is considered a reaction to "the malady of modernity", an "anti-technological critique of Western civilization", characterized by: intense mechanization, industrialization and urbanization (Nabhloz, 2007:37, 38), the expansion of markets, the decline of belief in religion, the growth of mass culture (Butler, 2010: 1-2) and "the dominance of reason" (Whitworth, 2007:4). Since the societal transformations introduced by modernity were perceived as disruptive, modern artists sought to transcend this "chaos and confusion" (Williams, 2002:3), reaching a sense of truth associated with a different dimension. Relying on "original techniques and provoking ideas" (Butler, 2010:4), modern artists promoted the idea that the world perceived by humans could not be explained by means of logic; therefore, the purpose of modern art was to represent the truth beyond modernity, which was different from the perceptions of the rational mind (Cohen, n.d.: 6). Hence, the pessimistic effect of modernization was paralleled by the modernist writers' belief that literature could "transcend the disorder of the present" given the orderly structure of art as opposed to the chaos of nature (Whitworth, 2007:12).

Besides its transgressive connotations, modern art (literature included) introduces an emphasis on subjectivity and individuality. In literature, this direction translates as "the freedom to write the self's own voice" (Zhang, 2012:29), and it reflects the "individuated subjects' increasing consciousness of the fragmented world in the late-capitalist era" (Zhang, 2012: 34). Whitworth also notes that the modernist writer is aware of the "complexity of the mind and the self" and "the fluidity of consciousness", focusing on the contrast between individual and the masses (Whitworth, 2007: 13-14). As she operates the transition from fiction to autobiography with *In Other Words*, Lahiri is considered to fully embrace modernist conventions. Urmila Seshagiri considers that *In Other Words* represents Lahiri's transition from a realist to an abstract style, being interpreted as an instance of "modernist revelation and reinvention" (2016: n.pag.). This researcher agrees with this opinion, also arguing that the author's adherence to autobiography reveals the modernist interest in expressing individuality.

Writing autobiography entails the contemplation of individual singularity (Dodd, 1986: 14), the presentation of the self to others (Jones, 2007: 90) in ways that both confirm and contradict canonical expectations of our cultures (Bruner, 2001: 30). Bruner considers that an important feature of Western biography is its focus on expressing "turning points" (2001:32) that define the specificity and anti-canonical nature of individual lives. These instances are conceptualized as moments of liberation, when people define themselves against accepted norms: "Turning points need more study. They represent a way in which people free themselves in their self-consciousness from their history, their banal destiny, their conventionality"

(Bruner, 2001:33). In the light of these observations, *In Other Words* may be considered an autobiographical writing that illustrates a turning point in Lahiri's life, namely her redefinition by voluntary relocation. In this respect, the author can be compared with the modernist writers who chose the condition of uprootedness as a beneficial regime for their creativity. Therefore, besides representing a stylistic change, *In Other Words* can be aligned with modernist expressions from a thematic perspective as well, given the importance of deracination for modernist, expatriate, writers. More specifically, these uprooted personalities associated the experience of non-belonging with a state of beneficial detachment necessary for the expansion of self- knowledge and individual reinvention:

In conventional modernist themes and topoi, the experiences of dislocation, migration, diaspora, and exile typically are rendered race-neutral, productive, and inspiring. This sense that exile is somehow in the end a beneficial experience is expressed in Hemingway's well-known quote about Paris: 'If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast.' (Konzett, 2002: 4)

Along similar lines, Lahiri's relocation to Rome is the result of a personal choice, made in order to generate alternative cultural selves. Her detachment from a familiar space is considered an essential condition for the emergence of the writer's artistic impulse: "from a creative point of view there is nothing so dangerous as security" (Lahiri, 2016: 83). As well as her second-generation characters (Gogol, Moushoumi, Sudha, Hema)[4], the author believes that the contact with a cultural space different from the traditions that have shaped her, is likely to provide a fresh perspective on identity, language and personal development. I would argue that Lahiri's entire work is imbued with a crossing urge, as she permanently links identity negotiation with processes of transcultural crossing. As her characters seek completion by plunging beyond specific cultural traditions, they seem to long for a

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[4] An analysis of these characters' transcultural metamorphosis is found in *Transcultural Encounters in South Asian American Women's Fiction; Anita Desai, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri*, and "European Allegiances in the Context of South Asian American Transnational Migration". In Lahiri's universe, the transcultural paradigm is conceptualized as a transcending dimension of cultures represented by the individuals' urge to step out of their "original" culture. This process of cultural detachment generates cultural creativity, enabling individuals to devise a critical outlook on cultures as complete systems: "A transcultural model begins from the assumption that an individual or a cultural identity is never complete in itself because of its relations in a field of differences. There will always be contradictions within and a constitutive outside identity that undermines the fiction of completeness/autonomy even as it marks the condition of the subject's existence from moment to moment" (Berry, 1999: 134).Along similar lines, Epstein considers that transculture suggests "a progression beyond culture, into the postcultural condition that is technologically shaped by contemporary global communications […] This realm beyond all cultures is located inside transculture" (1999: 25).

dimension devoid of precise cultural context. This peculiar strategy of self-redefinition implies the emergence of abstract/void identities, whose lack of specificity may be linked with the significance of modern abstraction. Considering this interesting overlapping, the next section establishes a link between Jhumpa Lahiri's transcultural focus and modernism, analyzing the implications of modern abstract art as a path to transgression.

2.4 Abstract art, transcendence and the transcultural dimension

Aiming to counterbalance the effects of rational modernity, modern artists believed in the possibility of finding truth beyond the world of appearances (Cohen, no date: 2). Consequently, they assumed the existence of "a permanent and unchanging realm" (Williams, 2002: 98), a container of a profound, genuine reality. Interestingly, in the case of some modernists, this transcendent impulse shaped the belief in the possibility of a universal religion and the existence of an "alternative identity of cultures across space and time" (Williams, 2002: 102). The transcendent connotations of modernism are connected to the emergence of abstract art, which aimed to express a kind of truth different from material contexts. In other words, modernism rejected the idea of a "material, rational, comprehendible universe" and argued for "an abstract truth, a truth that must be realized in the mind" and reveal the "hidden reality of things" (Cohen, no date: 7). The modernist leaning for abstraction is also reflected in the literature associated with this trend, which is characterized by "non-representationalism, abstraction and highly conscious artifice" (Williams, 2002: 1-2, Whithworth, 2007: 14). Interestingly, Lahiri's transcultural focus on crossing physical and cultural boundaries is also paralleled by her tendency for abstraction, first expressed by Gogol, in *The Namesake*. At some point, when asked about the provenance of his name, the character voices his credo that pronouns are better suited for naming, until adulthood: "'I think that human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen', he adds. 'Until then, *pronouns*'" (Lahiri 2004: 245; emphasis mine). His conclusion regarding naming reveals the desire for an abstract, neuter outlook on identity. This unspecific manner of self-identification points to the desire to dissolve cultural references, by plunging into a transcultural, freeing condition, similar to the modernist path to abstraction. Although Lahiri's fictional universe does not abound in abstraction, we do find this tendency for cultural dissolution in her transcultural message, most strongly shaped in *The Lowland*. In this novel, the author focuses on the characters' deterritorialized, nomadic condition, rather than the specific cultural content of their transformation (Stoican, 2017). *In Other Words* continues the author's inclination for abstraction, as its autobiographical flow is interrupted by the insertion of two short-stories "The Exchange" and "Half-Light", whose characters are designated exclusively by pronouns and are placed in unnamed, culturally-neuter settings: "In Italian I'm moving toward *abstraction*. The places are undefined, the characters so far are *nameless,* without a particular cultural identity. The result, I think, is writing that is freed in certain way from the concrete

world" (Lahiri, 2016:221; emphasis mine). Although these fictional chunks are not the topic of the present paper, I have mentioned their stylistic peculiarity in order to underline the author's urge for minimalism, that links her with the modernist quest for transcending reality through abstraction. Starting from the centrality of transgression, as a recurring theme in Lahiri's creations, the next chapter considers the idea of incomplete identity as an important generator of cultural change. Hence, the following discussion analyzes Lahiri's permanent concern with a sense of deficient selfhood that generates a strong impulse for transcultural transformation.

3. Cultural voids as creative urges

As is the case with her fictional characters, Lahiri seems obsessed by a sense of incomplete identity, apparently at odds with the cultural richness of her background. The author repeatedly invokes feelings of loss, alienation, lack and absence, suggesting a profound sense of crisis: "I come from that void, that uncertainty. I think that the void is my origin and also my destiny" (2016: 159). Thus, her confessions foreground the paradoxical sense of alienation, generated by her entangled cultural genealogies. Besides evoking these feelings of estrangement, the author's heterogeneous profile also generates a sense of imprecise identity, a condition that is considered to require improvement: "I identify with the imperfect because a sense of imperfection has marked my life. I've been trying to improve myself forever, correct myself, because I've always felt I was a flawed person" (2016: 112). The element of insufficiency and the imperative of correction are important triggers of Lahiri's desire for metamorphosis. Hence, her fear of cultural vacuity seems paradoxical given that she rejects her association with distinct affiliations, while clinging to a particular, third dimension:

All my life I wanted to see, in the frame, something specific. I wanted a mirror to exist inside the frame that would reflect a precise, sharp image. I wanted to see a whole person, not a fragmented one. But that person wasn't there. Because of my double identity I saw only fluctuation, distortion, dissimulation. I saw something hybrid, out of focus, always jumbled. I think that not being able to see a specific image in the frame is the torment of my life. The absence of the image I was seeking distresses me. I am afraid that the mirror reflects only a void, that it reflects nothing (Lahiri, 2016: 159).

These thoughts suggest that cultural fragmentation is not perceived as the generator of enlarged, beneficial perspectives on identity. On the contrary, Lahiri's self-proclaimed hybridity is interpreted as lack of specificity that creates barriers to proper self-identification. Thus, the author is distressed by her inability to accommodate the layers of her cultural self, feeling caught between the family's pressure to speak Bengali and the mainstream expectation to acquire English: "Those two languages of mine didn't get along. They were incompatible

adversaries, intolerant of each other. I thought they had nothing in common except me, so that I felt like a contradiction in terms myself" (Lahiri, 2016:149). Feeling overwhelmed by her linguistic duality, Lahiri needs to transcend this fragmented condition and achieve a sense of clarity. In a chapter entitled "The Triangle", she aims to reconfigure her Bengali-English facets and shift from this double inheritance to a tripartite structure. In the first place, Bengali is defined as her "mother tongue" (Lahiri, 2016:149), the language spoken until the age of four, when she started nursery school and she had to (reluctantly) switch to English. By the age of six, Bengali was in a sense defeated by English, "the stepmother" (Lahiri, 2016:149), that took over and was spoken by Lahiri outside the family sphere. Caught between the duty to speak the mother tongue at home and English at school, Lahiri felt trapped in an endless conflict, to the point of being unable to get a sense of coherent identity:

I couldn't identify with either. One was always concealed behind the other, but never completely, just as the full moon can hide almost all night behind a mass of clouds and then suddenly emerge, dazzling [...].I realized that I had to speak both languages extremely well: the one to please my parents, the other to survive in America. I remained suspended, torn between the two. The linguistic coming and going confused me; it seemed a contradiction I couldn't resolve (Lahiri, 2016:149).

The task of simultaneously conforming to parallel traditions, each represented by a different language, is perceived as a confusing experience. Interestingly, the author translates her own cultural multiplicity as a condition that cannot provide a sense of specific identity. Moreover, she associates this cultural duality with a sense of void, a gap that needs to be filled with an unequivocal cultural content: "From that void, from all that uncertainty, comes the creative impulse. The impulse to fill the frame" (Lahiri, 2016:159). Therefore, the idea of absence, predominant in Lahiri's work, entails a divided state, as it generates the anxiety of non-belonging as well as the beneficial urge to transcend this condition through art. In this context, Lahiri's drive to learn Italian represents her voluntary shift from a confusing duality to a three-layered configuration of identity:

The arrival of Italian, the third point on my linguistic journey, creates a triangle. It creates a shape rather than a straight line. A triangle is a complex structure, a dynamic figure. The third point changes the dynamic of that quarrelsome old couple. I am the child of those unhappy points, but the third does not come from them. It comes from my desire, my labor. It comes from me (Lahiri, 2016:153).

Although the addition of a third linguistic layer may seem to complicate things, the author perceives this transition as a freeing mechanism. The attempt to acquire and integrate Italian into her composite profile represents a voluntary choice that offers the possibility to detach from assigned cultural frames. The freedom to choose the content of her cultural identity seems the most important element in Lahiri's

strategy of reinvention. I consider that her persistent discussion of the theme of transgression (of borders, norms, conventions, etc.) has to be related with the author's unwillingness to accept any type of culturally imposed roles. At some point, as she compares herself to her mother, Lahiri understands that her parent's reluctance to adopt American norms of identity is a form of rebellion, analogous to, but different from the strategy chosen by the author: "While the refusal to change was my mother's rebellion, the insistence on transforming myself is mine" (Lahiri, 2016: 169). Unlike her parent, Lahiri replaces the strategy of clinging to familiar norms with expressing dissent by means of cultural change. Her feelings of incompleteness, paralleled by a sense of absence and inadequacy, trigger the impulse to adopt Italian, as a redeeming strategy: "I would be unsatisfied, incomplete, if I didn't learn it [Italian]. (Lahiri, 2016: 15). The author seems disturbed by her insufficient condition, which appears to be the ironical result of her multicultural background. Considering Lahiri's struggle to get a sense of coherent self, the following discussion links her need for wholeness with her strategy of redefinition by transcending fixed belonging. More specifically, the analysis aims to explain her appreciation for some late creations by Henri Matisse, in the context of her personal quest for completion.

4. Cultural reassembling and the Blue Nudes

At some point along her journey of cultural reinvention, Lahiri expresses her admiration for Henri Matisse's stylistic change, produced in his final years. Matisse is considered one of the most inventive painters of the 20th century, the creator of a visual universe that entails a spectacular fusion of traditions: Neoclassicism, Realism, Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism (Jacobus, 1983:5). In his early works, Matisse followed the conventions of the 19th century, relying on nature as a starting point for his observations and images. Later on, between 1908-1917, he became interested in manners of achieving symbolic, abstract symbols for the sensations and feelings derived from nature (Flam, 1978:15). In the Early Nice period (1918-1933), Matisse shifted from synthesis to analysis, focusing on the "description of light and space through color" (Flam, 1978: 15). In his mature years, Matisse gradually redirected his interest from analysis to synthesis again, achieving the "ultimate synthesis of light and space through colour" (Flam, 1978:16). After undergoing a cancer surgery in 1941, Matisse could no longer paint in the traditional manner. Hence, he reinvented his art, coming up with the cut-out technique, in the last decade of his life. This method involved the replacement of a paintbrush with a pair of scissors, used to cut out different forms in paper and then collaging them onto the canvas by pins. The finalization of a cut-out project involved processes of re-arranging, recombination, re-cutting and reassembling the pieces as in a giant jigsaw puzzle, until the artist obtained the desired result[5]. This radical change is considered an important

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[5] Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLgSd8ka0Gs

contribution to the 20th century modern art, a groundbreaking artistic manifestation, that promoted the distillation of form and a bold celebration of simplicity.[6]

Although the origins of his art are located in Paris, Matisse's style is characterized by its ability to transcend the "stylistic locale" and become "a major influence on the later culture of the 20th century" (Jacobus, 1983:6). Considering Lahiri's propensity for transcending local contexts, I argue that this is the first important element that stimulates her affinity for the French master. Besides his mobility within the borders of France (relocation from Paris to Southern France), Matisse also experienced forms of travel outside his native country, in Africa (Morocco) and Tahiti (Jacobus, 1983:27). The artist's contact with foreign spaces may represent another instance of connection with Lahiri's transnational itineraries. At this point, it is useful to highlight the fact that Lahiri chooses a quotation from Antonio Tabucchi[7] as a motto for her book: "I needed a different language: a language that was a place of affection and reflection". The idea of identity redefinition by plunge into a different cultural dimension, paralleled by the acquisition of a foreign language, appears to be a common strategy of reinvention for both Lahiri and Tabucchi. At the same time, the fact that Lahiri is particularly attracted by Matisse's latest artistic phase indicates the writer's impulse to break conventions and make significant changes in both her art and her personal choices. Interestingly, the French painter's radical stylistic change seems to serve as a source of inspiration and support for the South-Asian American writer's unusual choice of redefinition in a new language and culture. One may say that Lahiri and Matisse share an urge to reach different versions of artistic truth/coherent identity by a profound change of their art, transcending established canons and prescribed cultural roles. By adopting the cut-out technique, Matisse engages in attempt to "overstep his art, his illness and his old age" (McPhee, 2006:88), searching for the "absolute freedom of expression" (McPhee, 2006:95). Hence, his "will to push forward" (McPhee, 2006:110) finds a correspondent in Lahiri's commitment to extend her Bengali-American duality by adding a different cultural layer:

For Matisse, cutting was not only a new technique but a system for thinking about and expanding the possibilities of shape, color and composition. A rethinking of his artistic strategy [...]Cutting, for Matisse, began as an exercise, an experiment. Without knowing what it meant, he followed an unknown path, exploring on an increasingly vast scale. In spite of the difficulties, this was a period of intense, fertile work. Gradually, he embraced this method completely; it remained, until his death, a definitive step (Lahiri, 2016: 205)

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[6] 1/2 Henri Matisse - A Cut Above the Rest: The Culture Show, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuJKHKEBfmY

[7] An Italian writer passionate about the Portuguese culture, who experienced relocation from Italy to different countries of Europe, e.g. France and Portugal, tracing the itineraries of his favourite literary figures. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/03/antonio-tabucchi

Lahiri's fascination with Matisse's mature stage of abstraction reflects her desire to reduce the complexity of her cultural self by reaching a dimension situated beyond precise cultural loyalties. As well as Matisse's search for "an art of balance, of purity and serenity" (Matisse quoted in McPhee, 2006: 110), Lahiri's adherence to the realm of transculture is associated with limitless possibilities of reinvention, inherent in Matisse's bold venture. While she experiments with literary genres, through the sudden transition to autobiography in a different language, Lahiri is deeply inspired by Matisse's paper designs. More specifically, she associates these innovative creations with the courage to try on different identity roles and hence with a sense of freedom, the enlargement of perspectives and the acceptance of risk and failures. As Lahiri is determined to reconfigure her own cultural coordinates, Matisse's rethinking of his artistic credo and method in his collages, functions as a stimulating enterprise. While Matisse's modernist abstract art aims to reach truth beyond the world of realistic conventions, Lahiri's switch to Italian and autobiography along with her actual relocation to Italy, illustrate her search for a sense of true identity beyond the conventions of unilateral cultural belonging. Interestingly, Matisse's working technique may also serve as a source of inspiration for the writer engaged in transcultural acts of redefinition. More specifically, the painter's method of generating collages involves cutting out different patterns of paper and then pinning them to the canvas in various ways. So we are dealing with a process of selecting different pieces and then reassembling them in different manners, without following precise rules. I think the steps of arranging and reordering separate elements, specific to the cut-out technique strongly appeal to Lahiri:

I was struck by the essential effect of the images on paper. There is nothing superfluous. They show the seams, the cracks. Being literally cut into pieces, the images communicate a sort of deconstruction, an almost violent act of demolition. And yet they are harmonious, balanced. They express a new beginning. Every image, first cut out, then reconstructed, suggests something temporary, suspended, vulnerable. It evokes other permutations, other possibilities (Lahiri, 2016:207).

In analogy with Matisse's metamorphosis, Lahiri's transcultural transformation involves her ability to reassemble her multiple cultural facets. Like Matisse's collage, her itinerary across cultures involves a rebellion against the traditions that have shaped her, which may be regarded as an attempt to undo the pressures to embrace specific cultural spheres. However, Lahiri does not intend a denial of roots, but she rather attempts a fusion of cultural traits: hence, she wishes to reshape her cultural duality into a triangle that links the Bengali source with the American and Italian coordinates. I consider that Lahiri's particular strategy reinforces the idea that she simultaneously experiments with more literary trends; thus, in addition to her realistic prose, she may appear postmodern, in the anti-foundational sense, since she wants to dismantle the idea of fixed origins and firm

loyalties. However, her interest in deconstruction does not generate a postmodern vacuum of identity coordinates, but a sense of balance and harmony, situated in a culture-transcendent dimension, in a manner similar to the abstract truth. In this respect, she is closer to modernist creators, as she wishes to obtain an overall effect of harmony, by means of deconstruction. Hence, she takes over the modernist rebellion against established traditions as well as their experimental drive (Bedecarré, 2012:11). At the same time, Lahiri associates Matisse's cut-out technique with a beneficial condition of impermanence and provisionality. These features are cherished for their fertile potential of transformation, for the open perspectives that they offer to the writer. I argue that Lahiri turns the postmodern urge for deconstruction into a modernist impulse to achieve wholeness beyond the world of cultural limitations. At the same time, the sense of vulnerability and suspension suggested by Matisse's collage are to be related with the transcultural principle that defines cultures as dynamic, fluid sites of innovation, subject to permanent change (Ong, 1999: 4).

In the course of her transcultural transformation, Lahiri feels a particular connection with Matisse's *Blue Nudes,* a collection of abstract female bodies, made through the cut-out technique. The idea of simplified, reconfigured female identity clearly appeals to Lahiri, as illustrated by her decision to write a book about her actual metamorphosis, achieved through movement across borders and beyond cultures:

In this book I am the protagonist for the first time. There is not even a hint of another. I appear on the page in the first person, and speak frankly about myself. A little like Matisse's "Blue Nudes", groups of cutout, reassembled female figures, I feel naked in this book, pasted to a new language, disjointed (Lahiri, 2016:217).

Once again, the idea of collage points to the unlimited possibilities of playing with the pieces of the cultural puzzle inherent in Lahiri's background. The symbolism of the *Blue Nudes* entails connotations of unrestricted female transformation, in a manner that aims to reach the truth by transcending the complexity of form. This effect of minimalism reflects Lahiri's urge to embrace the condition of non-specificity by transgressing her cultural multiplicity through a plunge into freeing, cultural transcendent dimension. At the same time, the author is aware that she cannot actually discard the cultural element that remains an important identity reference. Therefore, her embrace of Italian as a completion of her Bengali-American inheritance illustrates the process of reassembling her faceted self, in a manner similar to Matisse's *Blue Nudes.* In this context, the new language of the collage corresponds to Lahiri's new sense of identity, build up in a transcultural fashion. Along similar lines, the element of nakedness may be correlated with the same lack of distinct content, a free space of abstraction where cultural identities are endlessly reshaped.

5. Conclusions

Is the invocation of Henry Matisse's *Blue Nudes* a bizarre choice or does it represent a strategy in Lahiri's struggle for self-reinvention? This is one of the questions that has intrigued me while trying to understand Lahiri's shift from fiction to autobiography. This paper demonstrates that *In Other Words* delivers the powerful message that artistic representations from different cultural spaces can make sense to individuals beyond their narrow cultural allegiance. An American writer of Bengali origins, Jhumpa Lahiri strives to comprehend her dual identity that creates a sense of contradiction and lack of precise references. Since she perceives her cultural multiplicity as an imprisoning identity void, the author envisages liberation as a plunge into a realm beyond precise cultural rules. Lahiri's impulse to transcend cultural borders results in her actual relocation from America to Italy. Hence, the quest for a more coherent sense of identity involves both a transgression and an extension of her cultural profile, which becomes enriched by the author's acquisition of Italian. At this point, one may argue that Jhumpa Lahiri shares the modernist taste for abstraction that enables her to reach a true sense of identity, situated beyond the world of cultural multiplicity. Therefore, the idea of unilateral belonging to a territorially defined notion of a culture is dissolved into the possibility of adherence to more cultures at once. Thus, by crossing physical and symbolic borders, Lahiri turns her identity void into a fertile sphere of possibilities, by freely combining and reassembling the dimensions of her composite self. In this respect, Henry Matisse's *Blue Nudes* serve as a source of inspiration for the process of female redefinition along abstract, transcultural lines. As she admires Matisse's collage, Lahiri understands that she can manipulate the pieces of her faceted self in an analogous manner, i.e. by freely re-arranging and reshaping them. In this respect, Lahiri's shift from a dual to a three-layered identity pattern is designed as a plunge into a realm beyond strict cultural delineations, that enables the undoing of her traumatic void of identity.

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