

Sofia Cavalcanti

# READING THINGS

Gender and Material  
Culture in Contemporary  
Anglophone Women's  
Writings

**Bologna**  
University Press



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# PREFACE

We are living in an epoch in which the Cartesian vision of reality, based on the presumption of mentality over materiality, needs to be revised from a new symmetric point of view. Never have the effects of nonhuman agency been more evident than in modern times, when it is increasingly clear that material entities are far from being passive matter waiting to be manipulated by humans depending on their needs. On the contrary, things actively shape our way of being in the world and making sense of it by becoming vital matter with action potential. This assumption is confirmed by Bill Brown's «Thing Theory», a recent approach which puts subjects and objects in relational rather than oppositional terms. Brown's theory has opened a new area of investigation in the subject-object debate, but it has not yet been applied as a tool to explore the cognitive dimension of things in relation to gender. Hence, in order to bridge this gap in research and invert the universalizing tendency of material culture studies—which have often undermined the specific experiences and exchanges between the object world and humans as gendered subjects—I inject feminism into the discourse around things in the literary field. Indeed, the dualism subject/object has dominated literary imagination, especially throughout the twentieth century, not only in the western world but also in the Asian continent. However, over the last twenty years, an ontological shift in focus can be observed in the narratives produced by Indian women authors, in which the material object world, from being merely the background, becomes the structural framework of the story. Through their special interest in the domestic, contemporary Indian women authors rehabilitate the small objects and invest them with metonymic power to such an extent that they become symbols of women's lives. Hence, this work aims at demonstrating that an object-oriented close reading of contemporary narratives by Indian women writers offers new insights into Indian women's condition, not only from the point of view of gender discrimination but also of identity formation, both in postcolonial India and in the diaspora.

The corpus of writings I have selected includes Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), Anita Nair's novel *Ladies' Coupé* (2001), Jhumpa Lahiri's

short stories “Mrs. Sen’s” and “The Third and Final Continent” (1999), and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997). After an introductory chapter in which I discuss the main points of Thing Theory and the methodological strategy I follow, I dedicate one chapter to each work. In the chapter «Big and Small Things», I examine how, by focusing on the small things of the everyday, Roy enacts a reification of human relations—namely, between oppressors and subalterns—which are the result of cultural and gender ideals. In the chapter «(Un)Homely Things», I show that the objectified women characters portrayed by Nair enact processes of re-objectification that result from a kind of misuse of ordinary things. In this way, the places in which they used to experience dis-ease eventually become homely locations. In the chapter «Diasporic Things», focused on Lahiri’s short stories, I argue that things are containers of memory and emotional anchors for displaced subjects. In particular, they embody the difficult process of integration undergone by women in a new land as well as the strong emotional bond they maintain with their homeland. Finally, in the chapter «Trans-formative Things», I highlight how the circulation of things (and of characters around things) lie at the heart of Divakaruni’s novelistic enterprise. In her book, things represent women’s capacity to take on multiple identities and express their multifaceted nature by breaking categories and stereotypes.

In conclusion, my critical analyses demonstrate that gender is no less physical than an object. It can be materialized either through the externalization of thoughts and ideologies or through the internalization of the physical object world. The specific field of contemporary Indian women’s writings provides a significant demonstration of the meaningful link between gender, literature, and the material world, but the scope of this work goes beyond the geographical limits of the fiction analyzed herein. My object-oriented readings of a particular kind of fiction represent a relevant case study laying the groundwork for new research perspectives in literary criticism as well as women’s studies and demonstrate that as long as the semiotic apparatus tells stories of objectification and marginalization, it constitutes significant reading matter.

# GENDER AND LITERARY THINGS

## Meaning, affection, and fantasy in things: introduction to «Thing Theory»

At present, we are living in the epoch of the Anthropocene, which is the era in which inconceivably vast environmental forces shape the world and affect substantially our daily lives, and we are called upon to develop a deeper awareness of the agency that humans share with nonhumans. Not only have «humans . . . become geological agents», changing the most basic physical processes of the earth, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued in his essay *The Climate of History* (2009, p. 207), but the opposite is also true. More specifically, people and their surrounding material world shape each other to the extent that they can be considered what the philosopher Anthony Chemero has defined as «one nondecomposable system» (2009, p. 36). Hence, the Anthropocene presents a challenge not only to our common understanding of the world, but also to the arts and humanities, which have remained stuck to a Cartesian vision of reality for a long time. In other words, the practices and assumptions that have guided modern thought—according to which the subject prevails over the object—need to be revised from a new symmetric point of view. As Timothy Morton says, we have entered the age of «hyperobjects», i.e. things which «seem to force something on us, something that affects some core ideas of what it means to exist, . . . what society is» (2013, p. 20). Thinking in these terms means displacing the human from the center of meaning-making, not only at the ecological level (on which Morton's argument is mainly based), but especially at the ontological level. Indeed, never have the effects of nonhuman agency been more evident than in modern times, when new technologies have displaced the role of humans by asserting their presence as active and vital matter. However, as Amitav Ghosh points out in his book, *The Great Derangement* (2016, pp. 64–65), over the last couple of centuries, the cultural landscape has paradoxically suppressed this thought.

In this respect, literary forms have certainly played an important role in the process of silencing the nonhuman. Indeed, despite the fact that traditions of narrative have never denied the power of action and expression of non-living entities, the literary imagination which characterized particularly the twentieth century shifted progressively from the nonhuman towards the human, from the figurative towards the abstract. As a result, literature has become a self-reflexive form of art. This tendency is rooted in the mind/body dualism which has dominated modern thought since Descartes, who contributed to the affirmation of the presumption of mentality over materiality, not only throughout the Western world, but also in the Asian continent (Ghosh 2016, p. 120). The apparent trajectory of modernity is, thus, that of producing the illusion that human beings do not depend upon any material circumstance to the extent that «they have become floating personalities “decoupled from a body”» (p. 161).

However, such a dual vision of reality based on an artificial distinction between people and things, the mind and the world, is a mere historical convention which can be defied simply by reflecting on the way human beings inhabit the world. Lambros Malafouris, one of the main living experts of the archeology of the mind, philosophy, and semiotics of material culture, has underlined the extent to which humans, more than any other species, “make things and things, in return, make humans who or what they are” (2013, p. 8). Moreover, being a symbolic species, human beings tend to read the material world as a system of signs which they invest with meaning and significance. Hence, considering people and things as two separate entities would mean misreading the very basic principle on which human thought is based, that is, the «constitutive intertwining of cognition with material culture» (p. 17). Not only do things affect people’s intellectual lives, but they also act powerfully at the emotional level. This is shown, for instance, in the collection of autobiographical stories *Evocative Objects*, by Sherry Turkle (2007), in which the author highlights the power of everyday objects to become emotional companions in our daily life. In the same vein, the book *The Comfort of Things* published by Daniel Miller (2008) demonstrates to what extent everyday objects help people construct a material order of emotions and feelings. Similarly, Hannah Arendt, as a Jewish intellectual in exile, argued that objects grant human identity, and thanks to the affective response they elicit, even a stateless person can find his or her own source of identity in the surrounding material world.

According to this non-anthropocentric approach, nonhuman entities are far from being passive matter waiting to be manipulated by humans depending on

their needs. On the contrary, they actively shape our way of making sense of the world by becoming «vital materiality», to use Malafouris' expression (2013, p. 43), with action potential. The interdependence of minds and things suggests that it is about time to replace the categorical division of modernity with a new, more balanced way of reading reality. The real world is not the exclusive reign of humans, but the location where processes between brains, bodies, and things take place. A fundamental contribution in this sense has been given by Bill Brown who elaborated what he called «Thing Theory» (Brown 2001), that is, a new approach that puts subjects and objects in relational rather than oppositional terms.

As Brown frequently remarks, «Thing Theory» might sound like an oxymoron as it relates two apparently opposite entities: the physical world of things and the metaphysical domain of theory. However, the two aspects are deeply connected because, as Brown points out at the very beginning of his book, *A Sense of Things*, «things [are] the necessary condition for ideas, [so] ideas and things should . . . merge» (2013, p. 3). Such an argument is supported by the distinction he makes—following Heidegger's etymological analysis illustrated in his essay *The Thing* ([1971] 2001)—between objects and things. On the one hand, “object” comes from the Latin noun *obiectum*, which means obstacle, impediment, «that which stands before, over against, opposite us . . . what stands forth» (p. 166). It is also related to the Latin verb *obicere*, meaning «to oppose, to put something before», in the sense of disapproval and objection. Philosophical usage of the word “object” has, within the Western tradition, been aligned with a thing which is perceived external from the apprehending subject. Because of this broad meaning, the category “object” does not convincingly divide the natural from the artificial, the material from the immaterial, the animate from the inanimate, the human from the nonhuman.

On the other hand, “thing” refers to what the Romans called *res*, that is, «that which concerns somebody, an affair, a contested matter» (p. 173). The Romans also used the word *causa*, meaning the case, or in Remo Bodei's terms, «that which we deem so important and involving that we take action in its defence» (2014, loc. 169, my translation). The original meaning of the English word “thing”, coming from the Old German word *thing* or *dinc*, has preserved the full semantic power of the Latin words conveying the idea of gathering for the purpose of dealing with a matter or a case. Hence, as this brief etymological outline points out, the word “thing” implies a social dimension which is linked to the idea of gathering, debating, and deliberating. As a result, the thing, unlike the object, relates to a web of relationships involving people. The social meaning of things

is also evident when we project affection, symbols, concepts into them, thus going beyond their mere commodity value. As Lydia Flem has argued,

[t]hings are not just things, they bear human traces, they are our extension. The objects that have kept us company for a long time are faithful, in their modest and loyal way. Each has a history and meaning mixed with those of the people who have used and loved them. Together they form, objects and people, a sort of unity that lets itself be dismembered with difficulty. (2004, loc. 497, my translation)

In the same vein, Lucy Larcom maintains that «inanimate objects *gather* into themselves something of the character of those who live among them, through association» ([1889] 1986, p. 149). Hence, in more general terms, the object that transforms itself into a thing manifests traces of the natural and social processes that produced it as well as the ideas, inclinations, and tastes of a whole society. Moreover, as the last quotation by Larcom suggests, the idea of gathering implied in the original use of the word “thing” is reinforced, as if material objects, when they enter into contact with people, become containers of meaning, symbols, and emotions.

In order to clarify the transformation of objects into things, Brown uses two eloquent examples taken from literature and art. The former examines a scene from the novel *The Biographer's Tale* by Antonia Susan Byatt, in which the protagonist, a doctoral student, looks up at a filthy window and thinks: «I must have *things*. A real very dirty window, shutting out the sun. A thing» (2001, p. 2). At the very moment in which the man realizes that the window has lost its transparency and, thus, its functionality, he appreciates it in its thingness. It can be deduced, then, that objects are elevated to things when they stop being «things-for-us» and become «things-in-themselves» (Aristarkhova loc. 942), which present themselves to us in their independence and catch our interpretative attention. In this respect, Brown argues that we begin to «confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested . . . » (2001, p. 4). When we stop taking advantage of the functional use of an object, then, our relationship with it changes and we start perceiving it as a thing that «names less an object than a particular subject-object relation» (p. 4). In other words, it is the relationship between subjects and objects which gives birth to things. From this perspective, the assumption suggested at the beginning of this section—that is,

the intimate connection between things and ideas—can be confirmed: while objects belong to the physical domain of reality, things are metaphysical presences which transcend their mere material use.

The second example Brown uses in order to illustrate his own interpretation of the complex notion of thing is included in his book, *A Sense of Things* (2003), and is taken from *Principles of Psychology* by William James ([1890] 1983). In the chapter on the perception of things, James claims to appreciate the essence—or thingness—of a painting by turning it bottom-up because «the colors grow richer and more varied, we don't understand the meaning of the painting, but, to compensate for the loss, we feel more freshly the value of the mere tints and shadings» (p. 727). Brown aims at pointing out that when an object is taken out of its habitual role, the physical object world confronts us with its alterity and calls us to a different kind of attention. Hence, the mere perception of an object turns into an experience of a thing. This decentralized manner of observing reality is particularly useful when dealing with art and, more specifically, with fiction. Indeed, despite the modern tendency of separating the life of the subject from that of the object, fiction has never failed to demonstrate that the human investment in the physical world is important and the mutual constitution of human subjects and inanimate objects exceeds commodity relations. As Ghosh claims, «[n]owhere is the awareness of nonhuman agency more evident than in traditions of narrative», where «there is a completely matter-of-fact acceptance of the agency of nonhuman beings of many kinds» (2016, p. 64). What is necessary, then, is to recalibrate the position of human beings within the space in which they live and study them, as Brown suggests, as «thing[s] among things» (2015, p. 76). This new approach will help us understand «why and how we use objects to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies» (Brown 2003, p. 4). Brown's thought opens up a new perspective on material culture studies and critical theory since, unlike modern philosophy, he lays strong emphasis on the thing in itself, «outside the order of objects» (2001, p. 5) as well as on its dialectical relationship with the subject.

## Literary things from a gender perspective

From the 1990s and well into the twenty-first century, four areas of intense object study have been anthropology and material culture studies, science and



technology studies, technoculture and digital media, and critical theory and philosophy. Books have been published on the social life of things, the sex of things, the evolution of things, the ideas in things, and the prose of things<sup>1</sup>. The multidisciplinary interest in things—which has intensified across the arts, humanities, and social sciences—is also evident in the collection of essays edited by Bill Brown entitled *Things* (2004), which includes contributions related to several fields, such as photography, cinema, the new media, poetry, museum studies, eco-politics, etc. The academic world has also dedicated great attention to the study of objects by organizing conferences and issuing journal series or special editions focused on objects<sup>2</sup>. These recent volumes, articles, conferences, and art exhibitions centered on the study of objects mainly focus on the way value is created through specific social formations and exchanges as well as how people turn matter into meaning. However, the current research on object culture is questioning and reframing issues of materiality from very general perspectives, through what Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins have defined «ahistorical and apolitical analyses» (2009, p. 7). I would also add that implications of the study of things have not yet been addressed with a critical force that matches the debate about gender and gender studies. Nor have things yet been read as signifiers of thoughts and emotions from a gender perspective, especially in the literary field. Even Thing Theory, which has opened a new area of investigation in the subject-object debate, has not yet been applied as a tool to explore the cognitive dimension of things in relation to gender. This gap in research needs to be addressed in order to invert the universalizing tendency of material culture studies, which have often undermined the specific experiences and exchanges between the

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the most popular books on things are *The Social Life of Things* (Appadurai 1986), *History from Things* (Lubar & Kingery 1993), *The Sex of Things* (Grazia & Furlough 1996), *The Prose of Things* (Wall 2006), and *The Ideas in Things* (Freedgood 2006). All these volumes, spanning anthropology and literature, commodity culture and art, focus on the work of exchange and consumption carried out by things, through which people satisfy their material wants and needs.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, at the Pennsylvania State University conference *Objects in/and of Visual Culture*, held in 2004, artists and academics presented papers on cadavers, souvenirs, televisions, books, toys, educational objects, and design. In 2005, the University of California Humanities Research Institute hosted a research group entitled *Object of Media Studies*, focused on objects in cinema, television, and media. More recently, in 2014, the School of English, Media Studies and Art History (University of Queensland, Australia) organized the 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Work in Progress Conference on *The Life of Things*. Finally, in December 2016, the Forum of Contemporary Theory, together with the English Department of the University of Dehradun (India), organized the 19<sup>th</sup> International Conference on *Materialities: Objects, Matter, Things*.

object world and humans as gendered subjects. Moreover, injecting feminism into discourses on things is a step forward in the study of women's exploitation. Indeed, does not feminism already deal with objectification, instrumentalization, and utilitarianism? Is it not based on ideals of inclusivity which justify the interest in nonanthropocentrism and the nonhuman, materialism and thingness, intersections and «interspecies companionship» (Haraway 2004, pp. 295-320), including the inorganic? Feminist politics, then, may gain from looking at the realm of inanimate, nonhuman objects as the object world is precisely a world of exploitation, of things ready-at-hand. The world of tools, which are there for using, is the world which women have been assigned under patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism throughout history. In other words, women share continuity with other objects in the world as subject to subjects' dominion. Hence, while «the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house», as Andre Lorde famously put it (pp. 110-113), a feminist account of the “tool being” can be illuminating as far as human objecthood is concerned. Women, indeed, have a privileged standpoint: they can approach objects from the inside-out position of being an object too.

This outward orientation of feminism—towards the object world rather than the inner world—has been adopted in a recent philosophical approach called «Object-Oriented Feminism» (Behar 2016). As Katherine Behar explains in the introduction to *Object-Oriented Feminism*, a volume she edited, a feminist intervention into philosophical discourses on objects, things, stuff, and matter is needed in order to correct the gender imbalance in material culture studies. She argues that orientating feminism towards objects does not mean abandoning the concerns of real human subjects, i.e. women, but realizing that humans and nonhumans are of a kind as one is in the other. In this respect, Elizabeth Grosz claims that feminism should shift from a «politics of recognition», of «standing out» to a «politics of immersion», of «being with»; from a paradigm of visibility to an impersonal politics of imperceptibility (2002, pp. 463-472). In other words, a self-recognition in objecthood shows the value of looking for the outdoors inside.

If it is true that people and things are to be considered as one analytical unit based on their mutual influence and constitution, studying the relationship between gender and things will offer a deeper insight into the social construction of men and women as such. Hence, a first step towards shedding light on this obscure zone of academic research may be achieved by answering questions such as: do things influence the interpersonal relationships between genders? If so, how? Is it right to argue that things affect the gendered perception of the self? Is

it possible to experience the objectification of gender discrimination and oppression? Can we talk about thingness of gender and gendering of things? What is the metonymic power of things, examined in specific contexts, from a gender perspective? These questions constitute the starting point of my investigation in the field of Indian literature by contemporary women writers. As I will explain more thoroughly in the section focused on the object of my work, this facet of present Anglophone literature lends itself particularly well to an object-oriented and gender-based analysis. Elaine Freedgood and Cynthia Wall—who have recently analyzed some works of fiction from the point of view of Thing Theory<sup>3</sup>—have found a particularly fertile terrain in realist Victorian novels. In the same way, a special inclination to the description of the minutiae and the details of women's daily lives can be noted in the Indian literature produced by women over the last twenty years.

An object-oriented close reading of narratives offers new insights into the condition of the characters that populate them. In other words, the objects constituting the material world created by writers are invested with meaning and, therefore, they might be read metonymically as tangible representations of their inner life. Two main reasons justify this assumption. First, since the human mind is embedded in the culture and the material world—as Lambros Malafouris has demonstrated through his study on Material Engagement Theory (2013)—and things are cognitive extensions, a thorough study on literary things will offer a deeper insight into the subjectivity of Indian women authors (and their characters). Second, the engagement of female fiction with an «aesthetic of the everyday» (Dutta 2013, p. 146)—i.e., a narrative method focused on the representation of women's daily experiences within the spaces and contexts in which their lives unfold—is far too rooted as a phenomenon to be considered merely a contemporary women writers' "favorite theme". In fact, ideological reasons lay behind this particular kind of realism, which needs to be problematized and investigated in depth.

As Naomi Schor has suggested in her book, *Reading in Detail* (2007), women's engagement with the small and the detail should not surprise readers. Indeed, the unchallenged association of woman and the particular «spans not only cultures, but centuries, extending from antiquities to the present day» (p. 10). Traditionally, the detail has been attributed a connotation of effeminacy linked to the women's

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<sup>3</sup> See Elaine Freedgood's *The Ideas in Things. Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (2006) and Cynthia Sundberg Wall's *The Prose of Things. Transformations on Description in the Eighteenth Century* (2006).

ideal preoccupation with the ornamental, the little daily tasks, the minutiae of life. The anthropologist Sherry Ortner, for instance, points out that women are thought to be more embedded in the concrete and the particular than men, as «the family (and hence women) represents lower-level, socially fragmenting, particularistic sorts of concerns, as opposed to interfamilial relations representing higher-level, integrative, universalistic sorts of concern» (1974, p. 79). Not only is the detail associated with effeminacy and decadence, but also with the everyday «whose “prosiness” is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women» (Schor 2007, p. xlii). Hence, the detail is not sexually neutral, but, as Schor claims, «gendered and doubly gendered as feminine» (p. xlii). In all likelihood, this is the reason why particulars have been devalued in literature, until the genre of realism spread and the detail, de-gendered, passed into a field of artistic representation also chosen by men. This progressive valorization of the detail can be read from a historical perspective as a reaction to the «idealist metaphysics which looms so large on the agenda of modernity» (p. xlii) and the result is that «we live in an age when the detail enjoys rare prominence» (p. xli). Surprisingly, then, there is no reliable body of evidence that shows that women’s forms of art are either more or less particularistic than men’s, as Schor clearly advocates. However, a feminine specificity can be recognized, that is, it can be seen as a way of addressing reality from the perspective of the detail as a subversive act. Indeed, from a feminist point of view, telling a story through details is a way of subverting the hierarchical order of the work of art, thus preferring the periphery to the center, the accessory to the principal, the background to the foreground. Such an attitude towards the work of art recalls James’ gesture—illustrated in the previous section—of turning a painting upside-down in order to appreciate it in its real essence. Therefore, it is possible to rethink the relationship between the content of a text and the manner in which it is read: to read in detail is, however tacitly, «to invest the detail with a truth-bearing function» (p. xlvii).

According to this point of view, the small things become containers of meaning, physical counterparts of ideas and symbols, in a word: metonymies. As Samuel P. Whitsitt suggests in his book, *Metonymy, Synecdoche and the Disorders of Contiguity*, metonymy, in the classical sense, «is thought of as selecting either the word of the contained for the container . . . , or vice versa» (2013, p. 22). This trope is used particularly in realist texts in which, as Roman Jakobson points out, «the Realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time» (1990, p. 130). What Whitsitt argues in his explanation is that the relationship between the two classic

components of metonymy, i.e., the container and the contained, is one of arbitrariness and substitutability. Indeed, the container and the contained establish a relationship of contiguity to the extent that they are two and will never become one. In other words, what is inside the container can never become one with it. Such an idea of doubleness supports Jane Gallop's view that «by contiguity, by metonymy, a certain femininity is suggested» (1985, p. 126). Interestingly, as the detail has been traditionally associated with the female by virtue of its marginality, metonymy tends to be aligned with woman «in its fluidity, in its dependency on context and difference . . . », as Pam Houston has argued (1992, p. 83).

Shifting our discourse back to the literary field, this would mean that the duality represented by women is also reproduced in the objects they use or surround themselves with, which become containers of thoughts, feelings, or values, depending on the different contexts. Such an assumption is supported by three main ideas. First, Whitsitt confirms that «so often in literature, regardless of whether the author is male or female, metonymy is aligned with woman» (2013, p. 32). Therefore, women characters usually deal with material entities that offer a twofold perspective on their world: both literal and symbolical. Second, Brown's study points out that «objects traditionally have a metonymic relation to characters in the realist novel—they are legible as indications of character» (2003, p. 161). Therefore, mental acts are transformed into physical operations or artifacts to such an extent that thoughts or emotions are externalized and assume a physicality of their own. At the same time, objects transcend their mere tangible presence and acquire a metaphysical value: they become things. Third—and this might be considered as an overarching condition for the two previous points—Malafouris, in his research on the relationship between human conceptual processes and bodily experiences, claims that material metaphors—which could also include metonymies—are linguistic expressions including the production and use of material culture. Hence, they are materially enacted thoughts, a set of objectified «ontological correspondences» (2013, p. 65). According to this view, material things enter a semiotic dimension, thus becoming signs which embody a message.

Obviously, the interest in things has to be contextualized historically and culturally. The anxieties, aspirations, and values of a certain culture are crystallized in the material object and, as Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins argue in their introduction to the collection they edited, *The Object Reader*, «[o]ur spiritual, emotional, sexual, social, cultural and political lives are conducted in relation to objects and thoroughly mediated by them» (2009, pp. 1-2). This means that the

context in which the object culture is produced is particularly important for the investigation of things.

## The problem of defining “the thing”

The application of Thing Theory to the literary works requires a further explanation due to the complex notion of “thing”. Indeed, while Brown’s thought is entirely based on the opposition between “thing” and “object”, this distinction is not sufficient to analyze all the narratives in my corpus. In novels like *The God of Small Things* and *The Mistress of Spices*, for instance, the difference between human and nonhuman, person and thing, living and non-living entities is often blurred. Consequently, before illustrating the classification criteria and developing a methodological strategy, a few questions should be addressed, such as: should I consider as things only non-living inanimate entities, or also animate and living entities (such as plants and animals)? Should I think of a thing as the opposite of a person? If so, how should I categorize the other living beings in nature? Can the selection of things be limited to the distinction between material and non-material? These doubts have arisen because among the main symbols of the novels, there are natural elements like the river, plants, but also corpses and objects which transform themselves with the passing of time, as if they had a life of their own. Therefore, a few integrations to the concept of thing illustrated by Brown as well as a viable definition upon which to build my literary analysis, seem to be necessary.

As the philosopher and novelist Tristan Garcia points out in his volume, *Form and Object*, in contemporary culture, the «thinghood» of a thing is related to the materiality of a concrete object, a portion of matter which has some coherent qualities (2014, p. 34). According to this commonsensical view, a thing can undergo spatio-temporal displacements without its identity being altered by them. In Garcia’s terms, «[a] “thing” [is] that which has both spatial and temporal unity» and «the more this thing appears to us as insubstantial, weak, vague, confused, “pliable”, confounded with its environment, or heteronomous, [the more it] becomes decidedly unthingly» (p. 35). However, thinking things as those entities which have permanent consistency and seemingly remain the same as time passes would exclude a series of other elements. For instance, if we think about the river or a flower, this statement will be contradicted since the former is characterized by a variable movement and the latter withers. At the same time, we cannot but

call them things, as opposed to people and animals. These cases show that claiming that things have a spatio-temporal unity would mean implying that their displacement does not modify their shape and the passing of time does not change them in any part. In this regard, Garcia also agrees that «every material thing continually loses its parts from one moment to the next» and concludes by maintaining that «a spatio-temporal thing . . . is not a model of identity» (p. 36). Hence, the definition based on the spatial and temporal unity of things is not workable for a proper selection of the material entities in my corpus of texts.

A second option would be to distinguish between the material and the non-material, but this path also poses a few problems. Indeed, every entity, even the most abstract, has a material side as well as a linguistic, visual, or acoustic representation. As Garcia puts it, «[e]very idea that is given as absolute and absolutely immaterial derives from something material, which it gradually points back to, by making it relative: the soul, a divinity, desire, and so on» (p. 45). In Roy's novel, for instance, the concept of history is materialized in the mysterious house on the other side of the river, and in Lahiri's short story the idea of India is embodied by Mrs. Sen's cooking utensils. Therefore, since everything has some material and some non-material properties, materiality is not a good principle by which to single out things.

All things considered, then, I have come to the conclusion that, in order to define things and measure their "thinghood", a fundamental property should be considered, i.e. the presence (or absence) of consciousness. Everything which has memory, feelings, expressive means, forms of language or understanding cannot be included in the category of things. Lambros Malafouris' non-anthropocentric thought helps us restrict the scope when he talks about «agency» and «sense of agency» (2013, p. 214). As for the former, he points out that it is not an exclusive property of human beings as things can also be considered as agents in their own right. Indeed, they do not just represent something or passively communicate a message. On the contrary, they constitute the real essence of the message, they are its objectification. Martin Heidegger also noted that thinking of agency as an exclusively human property is a mere invention of Western thought, based on the conviction that matter is just a passive entity to be manipulated and controlled (1977, p. 5). He invited us to «listen to things», to notice their talking to us in non-anthropocentric ways. Unlike what is traditionally claimed, things have a strong affective potential and act powerfully at the non-discursive level. In this respect, Malafouris argues that «[t]he distinctive properties of the material world bring about meaning in ways that language cannot»

(2013, p. 94). As for the latter, i.e. the sense of agency, Malafouris claims that this, on the other hand is an exclusively human property as only humans can display awareness of voluntary behavior and sense of responsibility. Evidently, the sense of agency is dictated by consciousness. Hence, according to this line of reasoning, consciousness is the border line between what can be called «thing» and the other categories of the phenomenological world.

Obviously, considering agency from a non-anthropocentric perspective is not aimed at devaluing the importance of human subjectivity, but at understanding the nature of human subjectivity from a new symmetric point of view. Literary studies would certainly benefit from this new perspective because while material culture is a fundamental analytical tool for cognitive sciences—as Malafouris advocates—the same is true for literature, which relies massively on things in order to communicate its expressive potential. Interpreting a material sign means accepting that thinking is no less physical than acting and things have a performative power. According to this view, things become thoughts, actions, and emotions within a «mindscape» (p. 227), that is, a mental landscape in which subjectivity and the material world are constitutively intertwined.

In conclusion, besides Brown's definition of thing as opposed to object, another property could be added to circumscribe this notion: a thing is that which has neither consciousness, nor sense of agency. As is evident, it is easier to define things by saying that which they are not. This is due to a fundamental fluidity of the concept of thing, as Malafouris also admits: «[Thingness is] an ontologically fluid state [that remains] formless and plastic, ready to take shape of our embodied projections» (p. 8).

The common thread linking the studies on things is the intimate connection they have with humans. Hence, the inevitable vagueness of definition, on the one hand, and the close relationship with human subjectivity, on the other, result in a specific orientation that I will give to this volume. More specifically, I do not aim to reach scientific purity or absolute objectivity by providing an exhaustive perspective on the literary things analyzed. Rather, I aim to carry out a systematic analysis that best enables me to bring into focus the intersection of people and things and its implications. Since this kind of analytic orientation relates to the way the material world intersects with subjective human experience, «any shift to greater objectivity doesn't take us nearer to the nature of the phenomenon», as the philosopher Thomas Nagel also claims (1974, p. 174). Therefore, for each work examined, I will search for a viewpoint that helps me perceive the particularities of the phenomenon I am exploring. This will be possible by reading the



work of fiction “backwards”, thus focusing on the affective and cognitive potential of things, which literary research has undermined for a long time.

In order to do so, I am going to follow the model used by Francesco Orlando in his study of objects in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western literature (2015, pp. 55-74). Commenting on the considerable quantity of obsolete objects populating Western literature between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Orlando underlines how what was traditionally considered as useless, superfluous, insignificant, and even indecent, eventually found its place in literary texts. With the appropriate temporal and cultural adaptations, it may be claimed that a similar phenomenon is taking place in the contemporary fiction of Indian women writers, which is breaking with the past through a new way of representing reality. In their works, things assume a great metonymic capacity, and their de-functionalization is proportional to their literary value.

First, therefore, I am going to take into account the material elements which have lost their primary functionality and have become a thing rather than an object or, to use Malafouris’ expression, «a pathway rather than a boundary . . . [through which] a person feels, thinks, discovers, makes sense of the environment, but also enacts the way forward» (2013, p. 224). Indeed, used by the different female characters, certain objects acquire a secondary functionality, which is interesting to interpret in terms of gender. As I have underlined in the previous sections, the body of writings published by Indian women authors over the last twenty years has both a formal and thematic constant which makes them particularly suitable for an object-oriented analysis. From the point of view of style, the writers focus great attention on detail and offer accurate descriptions of interiors and, in general, the settings of their stories. From the point of view of the topics tackled, they attach particular importance to things linked to the world of the emarginated—mainly women—and their relationship of reciprocal exchange and constitution. As this last point suggests, what traditionally constitutes the narrative background is moved to the foreground: women and their personal experiences are given a central position. Similarly, artifacts, utensils, clothes, and all the objects that gravitate around women in their everyday lives become protagonists and, as an integral part of the narrative, they «deserve a place in the story» (Orlando 2015, p. 39, my translation). In this respect, it is interesting to reflect on what Orlando claims about literature, which he considers as the imaginary location where the «return of the repressed» takes place (p. 7, my translation). In his view, «the repressed» are represented by things. Hence, the rehabilitation that Indian women writers try to ensure for women—at least in the literary

space—is enacted through a rehabilitation of the material world which surrounds them, by virtue of its «metaphysical value» (p. 39, my translation).

Second, I will consider nonhuman inanimate entities, i.e. natural things and cultural artifacts, and human inanimate entities, i.e. corpses. I will exclude the categories of nonhuman living entities (like animals) and, obviously, human living entities (people). All in all, the common property of the things tackled in this volume is «non-functional corporeality» (Orlando 2015, p. 72). This includes material entities which have lost their previous function or are no longer functional. Evidently, the concept of functionality will vary depending on the text and its cultural setting.

As far as the methodological approach is concerned, in my close reading I will apply an inductive criterion, which means that the analysis will proceed following an ascendant direction starting from the specific content of the texts and culminating in their abstract interpretation in the contexts in which they appear. This upward movement reflects the choice of Indian women writers to start from the very low levels of society in order to tackle, in more general terms, big social and moral themes. Moreover, I will read the texts adopting a «hunter-gatherer analytic orientation», as Malafouris has named it (2013, p. 52), which does not mean extrapolating things from the context in which they appear as a series of separate entities (which could be easily manipulated depending on my interpretative needs), but understanding how they are related and enmeshed and through what mechanism those linkages are effected. Drew Leder (1990) refers to these bonds as the result of a «phenomenological osmosis» in order to stress the continuous exchange between the human mind and the material world as well as their dialectical relationship. Obviously, the context plays a fundamental role in the interpretation of this symbiotic relationship as meaning is not part of the material sign. On the contrary, the sign should be considered as a container which holds different meanings in different contexts (Malafouris, 2013). This view also supports my decision to consider the things I am dealing with as metonymies (or signifiers) in which, by definition, the relationship between the container and the contained is based on arbitrariness and contiguity.

The last issue that should be tackled as far as the selection of things is concerned is: which things deserve to be examined? Should I select things on a quantitative or qualitative basis? After a thorough examination of the fiction I am going to work on, I have realized that a quantitative analysis would not be appropriate as it would be limited to a certain number of words or lines, while important elements, which occur with a lower frequency throughout the text, risk

being overlooked. Therefore, I will support my analysis through qualitative decisions based on illustrative examples taken from the texts, which do not highlight merely the quantity, but also the literary value of the signs. Naomi Schor defines these elements as «*diegetic details*» (2007, p. 176), that is, a class of details which serve as agents of psychological revelation as well as narrative catalysts. From this perspective, they cease to be mere background components of a classic realist narrative and become signifiers with a proleptic function and symbolic qualities.

## Contemporary Indian women's writings in English

The focus of this book concerns the social and cultural context of India over the last twenty years. The reason why this span of time is particularly interesting lies in the fact that starting from the end of the twentieth century, the effects of the liberalization of the Indian economy have begun to show. Indeed, India has finally opened up to the rest of the world and taken advantage of the effects of globalization and technological development. The communication revolution and proliferation of electronic media, greater access to information and easier international contact, faster urbanization and the rise of Indian multinational corporations with huge employment potential are some of the main changes India has experienced since the end of the 1990s. The most relevant consequence of this is that English has lost its ideological baggage of being a colonial import and people, namely the young in urban India, consider it a necessary tool for global opportunities. Thus, the last two decades have been a watershed in India's history as living in India and being Indian will never be the same again.

Another reason why the last twenty years deserve special attention is linked to the Indian literary context. Indeed, in 1997 Arundhati Roy published her first novel *The God of Small Things*, which would change the approach to tackling the social themes at the core of India's culture. Besides the literary value of the book, which received worldwide recognition, Roy's novel also represents a watershed in India's literary tradition through the break it makes with the literature produced until then by male authors, both in terms of style and themes. As an act of rebellion, Roy uses a more intimate writing style and places at the center of her story the little individual spaces built in resistance to the huge traditional structures and apparatuses (such as tradition, religion, the political government, etc.). Moreover, her protagonists belong to the lowest levels of society and their day-to-day frustrations are explored in detail because the true meaning of history is

stored in the small things and the “small lives”. From that moment onwards, the pervasive valorization of the minutiae, the partial, and the marginal has become a distinct writing strategy of Indian women authors, as Dutta has also underlined in her contribution, *Indian English Women’s Fiction and the Fascination of the Everyday* (2013, p. 145). The result is a type of narrative that is very different from the literary mainstream dominated by male writers. Unlike men, who are particularly concentrated on the great themes linked to post-independence and postcolonial national issues<sup>4</sup>, women tend to produce an entirely new response to these classic themes. Dutta defines Indian female fiction as

[a] narrative of the small and the material, the insignificant processes underpin great historical movements, the lives of the individuals in their minute details . . . . As this narrative of ordinariness and insignificance takes shape, the fiction shows it becoming the vehicle of empowerment for a new generation of men and women. (2013, p. 50)

As the comment above suggests, the small objects are rehabilitated and reinvested with power to such an extent that they become symbols of women’s lives. Moreover, the everyday works as a narrative method with ideological implications, such as the valorization of the domestic work and the opportunities of empowerment it might offer, as Henri Lefebvre argues:

Agriculture, the village, the house and its basic equipment, the hearth, cooking utensils, furniture, fabrics . . . everything involving the house, the home and domesticity, and thus everyday life. . . . *Women symbolize everyday life in its entirety. They embody its situation, its conflicts and its possibilities.* (2008, pp. 221-222)

The focus on the small and the material becomes both a formal and thematic constant in Anglophone Indian women’s literature of the last twenty years, in which the material object world, from being merely the background of the story, «becomes the structural framework holding the narrative together» (Dutta 2013, p. 147).

This special interest in the realm of the domestic has its rationale in two main sources: the historical and the feminist. On the one hand, exploring different aspects of life in modern India suggests that the postcolonial novel is no longer

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), a national epic about India before and after independence, and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988), a grand narrative on India’s Partition from Pakistan.

tied to the colonial past, but projected towards a new life. More specifically, women's formal and thematic choices may be interpreted as an act of resistance and rupture with respect to the post-independence epoch, in which the new nation-state—a male-constructed space, ruled by male leaders—reclaimed cultural integrity by using gender as a formative element. This is also confirmed by the postcolonial critic Elleke Boehmer, who explains that, within the postcolonial context, women not only embodied the nation, but they were also the bearers of the national culture (2005, pp. 11-12). According to this view, women were supposed to preserve Indian traditions and identity after colonization and symbolize values such as «birth, hearth, home, roots, the umbilical cord» (p. 38). As the heart of the Indian home, women are totems to venerate and isolate at the same time because the domestic sphere is sacred and needs protection—ensured by the national sons—from any external incursion. Hence, women are paradoxically both at the center and at the margins of the postcolonial Indian household, which, as Partha Chatterjee points out, is the storage of tradition. Indeed, it enables men to appropriate the focus of European modernity while conserving authenticity (Chatterjee 1989). As the observations above show, the gender hierarchies in force within the traditional Indian family were applied to the structure of the new nation as if they were naturally given and, therefore, unquestionable. However, postcolonial women writers progressively realized that gender is discursively organized and relationally derived, and so is the idea of the nation, imagined and constructed according to cultural variables. Therefore, they started questioning or even rejecting the dominant narrative of the postcolonial independent nation, especially from the 1980s onwards. In this respect, Boehmer claims: «National structures have marginalized women, now [Indian women writers] assert the importance of location and locale: rooms, stores, verandas, villages, where women's lives unfold» (2005, p. 189). Hence, the household, from place of oppression and marginalization, becomes a space for resistance and empowerment.

On the other hand, the choice of focusing the narrative on the locations typically inhabited by women is based upon a fundamental principle of Indian feminism, that is, the idea of compromise, collaboration and balance, as Suma Chitnis illustrates (2004, p. 24). Traditionally, the relationship between Indian and Western feminism has been problematic, especially because of the uniqueness of the Indian context. Suffice it to say that in no Indian language is there a proper translation for the word «feminism» (pp. 31-32). The main reasons why Indian women have never felt totally involved in the feminist discourse originating in the West

are linked to three main factors: a different conception of patriarchal oppression, a particular relationship with individuality, and a delicate historical situation of India, inevitably connected with the colonial experience. As for the first point, it should be noted that Indian society is extremely hierarchical and the oppression exercised by a man is not the only kind Indian women must endure. Indeed, as Kimberle Crenshaw explains very well through the concept of «intersectionality» (1989), class, caste, employment, education, age, and family are additional sources of discrimination for women. In this respect, Chitnis clearly states that «the concept of equality is alien to Indian society» (2004, p. 11). As far as the second point is concerned, individuality is interpreted in a very different way with respect to the West since, according to the Indian mentality, there is no clear distinction between private and public, and the preoccupation for the self «is a luxury, an indulgence, an unnecessary (illusionary) pleasure», as Marangoly George explains (1996, p. 142). This means that women's individual sacrifice must be included in a collective struggle for the sake of the nation—which explains why gender and nationalism are profoundly interrelated in India. As for the last point, it is important to bear in mind that Indian feminism is rooted in the colonial past and embracing Western feminism would mean overlooking the specific historical circumstances of India. The feminist struggles in the subcontinent, dating back to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, started as women's movements against the colonizers in favor of the democratic values of social justice. Thanks to the nationalist and feminist movements developed over the pre-independence years, women's power began to be valued and, after independence was obtained in 1947, the Indian constitution established formal equality between the sexes. However, the rights and legal protections granted to women have never been applied systematically and, still today, most women—especially those living in extra-urban areas—are educated to the devotion of the father and the husband. As Clara Nubile has also underlined, contemporary Indian women are still part of a male-centered system to the extent that they are considered as a male-appendix (2003, p. 22). They are morally obliged to bear a son and childless women are marginalized and stigmatized. It is not excessive to say that, over time, they have been objectified.

Martha Nussbaum defines objectification as a state including a number of characteristics, such as instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, exchangeability, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity (1995, p. 249-91). This description reflects perfectly the condition of Indian women, as a recent study carried out by the International Center for Research on Women also

demonstrates. The research, called *Masculinity, Intimate Partner Violence and Son Preference in India* (Nanda *et al.* 2014), points out that women have internalized male dominance as they have been socialized to believe that men's violence against women is justified (p. 3)<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, most women are not aware of the laws protecting their rights or would not know how to address authorities if their rights were violated. Another interesting aspect highlighted by the researchers is that men, as well as women, feel trapped by the shackles of patriarchy<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, their aggressive behavior towards women is not naturally ingrained, but has specific historical reasons which date back to the Pre-Vedic and Vedic times and, as Sunita Sinha states in her book, *Re-thinking Gender: Masculinity, Femininity and Queer-ity in Postcolonial Indian Fiction* (2016, loc. 604-11), reached their climax in the colonial period. In the pre-modern context, i.e., before British colonization, men's effeminacy was highly valued because the Hindu divinities were mainly female (Chitnis 2004, p. 16) and represented models of strength and authority to emulate. Nubile explains that with the arrival of the Aryans—who are also responsible for the introduction of castes in India—Brahmins replaced the female with the male (p. 2). Marriage, then, became only a means of incorporating the mother goddess into the patriarchal Brahmin religion. In the Post-Vedic period, starting around 300 BC, women's status in society began to decline, especially after the publication of a sacred code of laws, the *Manusmṛiti*, around 200 BC, which established the rules of social behavior. Since then, the control over women has been considered a fundamental duty of men:

In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead under her sons'. She should not have independence. (Manu 1991, p. 5148)

Indian masculinity, thus, can be understood as a construct that arose out of a deep-rooted sense of superiority in relation to women, who are subjugated and oppressed. Another passage of the manuscript suggests how women are reduced to a womb to be ruled and dominated by male laws and their sexuality is a family—if not national—concern:

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<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly, 64.9% of the interviewed women agreed with the statement «there are times when a woman deserves to be beaten» (Nanda *et al.* 2014, p. 28).

<sup>6</sup> About 93% of men agreed with the statement that «to be a man, you need to be tough» (Nanda *et al.* 2014, p. 27).

The husband enters the wife, becomes an embryo, and is born here on earth. That is why the wife is called a wife, because he is born again in her. The wife brings forth a son who is just like the man she makes love with: that is why he should guard his wife zealously, in order to keep his progeny clean. (p. 197)

In this period, a series of practices based on the control of women's bodies were introduced, such as arranged marriages, child marriages, and the dreadful practice of *sati*, i.e. the widow's immolation. The concept of *pativrata* was introduced, that is, the worship of the husband by the wife who becomes a mere commodity belonging to men. In the Mughal period, marked by the invasion of the Muslims in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the low position of women in society was reinforced while the arrival of the British colonizers in the nineteenth century made the situation even worse. Indeed, during the British Raj a new idea of hyper-masculinity was introduced. Hindu men had to re-think their own identity in order to conform with a dominant, heterosexual, and monotheist male model. The effeminacy that the Hindu religion had valued highly was exploited by the colonial logic according to which those who did not show rigid and hegemonic masculinity were not entitled to self-government. The lack of authority, competition, and assertiveness justified the presence of the white men's guide. The result was the development of an extremely patriarchal system, highly hierarchical, which has been maintained and integrated by means of a complex combination of custom, functionality, and religious belief. As a consequence, a double colonization started for Indian women: first, they were subjugated to their husbands, fathers, and sons, and, second, to the male British colonizers. Over the years, men and women have internalized a series of behavioral codes which force superiors to fulfill their obligations to their inferiors and instruct women to self-denial and self-subjection. As a result, Indian feminism has mainly aimed at guiding women towards a cultural redefinition of selfhood which, given the particular Indian context, is only possible by placing value on the idea of compromise and the capacity to live with contradictions and conflicting alternatives. This brief digression on the Indian postcolonial context and the development of a particular kind of feminism is, in my opinion, necessary to gain a better understanding of the literary works examined in the next chapters.

The corpus of literary texts I have decided to analyze consists of four works of fiction published around the turn of the century. The authors are all women who write about women or have shown, throughout their literary production, a particular sensitivity towards women's issues. Moreover, the writers' personal



stories are particularly interesting, especially as regards their contribution to the fight for women's equality in a highly hierarchical and discriminatory society like that of India. The books I will comment on are: *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, *Ladies' Coupé* (2001) by Anita Nair, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) by Jhumpa Lahiri, and *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The order followed in my analysis is thematic rather than chronological. The first two novels are written by authors who still live in India and address issues linked to the condition of women in India, from the post-independence period until the present day, while the other two books are written by diasporic writers and deal mainly with the negotiation and formation of women's identity in the diaspora. Lahiri's book is a collection of short stories and I will be concentrating on "Mrs. Sen's", which I will compare with the last story in the collection "The Third and Final Continent".

Being aware of the fact that the status and lives of women in post-independence India as well as in the Indian diaspora in the West vary substantially by class, location, region, and upbringing, I will comment on Indian women's conditions as described in fictional representations. The reason why I have decided to focus my analysis on these books is based not solely on the themes tackled, but also on the narrative style chosen by the authors. More specifically, the women writers listed above, who are known for constituting a major facet of the present Indian Anglophone literature, perfectly represent the «aesthetic of the everyday», which Nandana Dutta has interpreted as a tactic of resistance and empowerment (2013, pp. 149-152). Their narratives are written from multiple locations and perspectives, making them a fertile new area for the study of modern India. The kind of engagement that their works show suggests an entirely new response to the post-colonial situation and to postcolonialism's classic themes. There are sharp and perceptive approaches to new realities in India and they are, therefore, thematically and formally adventurous. In this respect, the books I have selected belong to the two main traditions within Indian fiction in English, that is, the social realist (dealing with everyday or topical issues) and the magic realist (in which history is estranged and distorted). As Paul Sharra has noted, the former «tends to take cultural tradition as given (even when a social critique is being mounted), whereas the latter calls that tradition and its literary icons into question» (2013, p. 96). However, in their re-use by contemporary Indian women authors, these narratives appear to have a quality that suggests the development of a new aesthetic. The source of this aesthetic is in the daily life that the narratives call forth, which has both a historical rationale and a contemporary relevance. As Dutta has

noted, works like Nayantara Sahgal's *Lesser Breeds* (2003), Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000), and Anita Desai's *Fasting Feasting* (2000) represent the ability of women's fiction to carry tradition into the new century through a focus on the everyday. Although novels by these older writers show how their mode of writing has been honed over time and adapted to a particular use of the everyday, in my work I have decided to select narratives by newer writers who explore a range of themes and locations. The tension between home and world as well as high feminist consciousness constitute distinctive characteristics of their body of work. The power enclosed in small things reflects the tactic of contemporary Indian women writers in a kind of detailing of ordinary things which are part of the feminine social, familial, and individual everyday. From this perspective, an object-oriented analysis is going to shed new light on the characters' inner worlds as well as on the ideological implications of the material context which surrounds them.

In the chapter «Big and Small Things», I am going to provide a close reading of Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), by analyzing the most relevant material elements referring to the main characters, who represent the categories of people at the margins of Indian society, namely women, children, and the untouchables. As I have previously stated, my whole analysis will be influenced by a gender perspective and supported by studies on the Indian culture, postcolonial theory, and women's studies. The background of the story is India over the years following independence, when the postcolonial process had just started, but was already beginning to show its downsides and contradictions. I will show how reading the novel from the perspective of Thing Theory will make it possible to understand thoroughly not only the most significant nuances of the characters' identities, but also the context in which they live. Hence, as the title of the chapter suggests, it is in the small things, the small lives, that the true meaning of the story lies. The cultural, historical, and geographical circumstances told in the novel are so important for their impact on people's lives that certain elements of the landscape acquire progressively the status of characters. Therefore, they will also be given close attention in the analysis.

The chapter «(Un)homely Things» will be focused on Nair's novel *Ladies' Coupé* (2001). Like the previous novel, it is set in India, but in more recent times, that is, when the colonial past is far away and new generations of women start to struggle between a conservative past and a future open to changes and new opportunities. Given the setting in a train compartment for women, the main trope is the tussle between home and travel, the past and the future, tradition and

change. Approaching this text through Thing Theory means examining the things which gravitate around the lives of five women protagonists in order to understand their relationship with home and what it symbolically represents for them. I will point out that the centripetal or centrifugal force of home is materialized through a series of objects, which will be the focus of my comment. To support my analysis, I will use some studies carried out in the literary and social field dedicated to the topic of home and homelessness in South Asian fiction and postcolonial contexts. As in the case of Roy's book, the particular setting of this novel deserves special attention because the berth which hosts the women's travel becomes an additional character with human connotations and action potential.

In the chapter «Diasporic Things», the analysis is centered on the short story “Mrs. Sen’s”, from Lahiri’s collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). As the title of the chapter suggests, the narrative is set in the diasporic space of the United States and I will focus on the young woman protagonist’s experience of migration. The study of the things which populate Mrs. Sen’s life and the use she makes of them tells us much about her process of identity reconstruction in the West. I will argue that the woman’s physical orientation towards certain objects rather than others reflects her strategies of survival in the hostland as well as the difficulties of breaking with the past and embracing an unknown future. In order to address the complex notion of bodily orientation in terms of gender and migration, my references will include some studies on object-oriented feminism, feminist thing theory, and, of course, the Indian diaspora. A final section of the chapter will be devoted to a comparative analysis with another story from the collection, i.e., “The Third and Final Continent”, which, in my view, will clarify the main points of my argument.

The chapter «Trans-formative Things» will focus on Divakaruni’s novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997). Migration will be addressed from a different perspective compared to Lahiri’s short story, as while “Mrs. Sen’s” tells us about the physical and psychological paralysis of the woman protagonist, this book is all about transformation, transgression, and change to overcome an interior fracture. Hence, I will look at the things associated with the main characters, both men and women, which suggest the migrant’s twofold personality and perspective on the world. By exploring the material object world of the novel, I aim to show that things are not necessarily anchors to a static identity, but may become a vehicle for a new life. I will read the physical context of the novel in the light of magic realism, that is, a transgressive narrative strategy for the emergence of the marginal, the hybrid,

and the subaltern. In this respect, I will draw a parallel between the genre of the novel and the characters presented by showing that not only can opposite worlds coexist harmoniously, but that new possibilities of expression can open up from their encounter.

In conclusion, the purpose of my work is to bring what is behind to the front in a feminist key. The behind is that which is produced by acts of relegation, but it is also the location in which meaningful, ordinary things happen. As Sara Ahmed has argued, «[t]he background would be understood as that which must take place in order for something to appear» (2005, pp 13-14). Hence, by scratching through the surface of things, I aim to capture stereoscopic images of the object world in which Indian women circulate, interact, and project their interiority. Starting from the next chapter, I will look at how things mediate relations between gendered subjects and how Indian women writers imbue things with meaning.



## BIG AND SMALL THINGS

Let us not take it for granted that life  
exists more fully in what is commonly  
thought big than in what is commonly  
thought small.

(Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*)

Over the last two decades, a shift in focus can be observed in the literary production of Indian women authors. Unlike their male counterparts, whose main concern is the nation's history or its shadow in the contemporary (as is evident, for instance, in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), in which Thama's story is itself the story of Partition), Indian English women writers consider the nation as «an invisible other to the lives they write about» (Dutta 2013, p. 151). As a consequence, they tend to explore the effects of large political structures—such as patriarchy, caste segregation, gender discrimination, etc.—on individual lives. In other words, they recognize that big themes are inextricably linked to local issues, thus using the locale as a means for addressing regional, national, and transnational contradictions. Hence, they choose to foreground the world inhabited by the people living at the margins of society and the micro-activities they perform in their daily lives. In this chapter, I am investigating the realm of things which characterizes the oppressors and the subalterns' identities in Arundhati Roy's prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). The aim of my close reading is to show how, through the material things they engage with, the former express a form of neo-colonial power within a postcolonial context, while the latter perform acts of communication and resistance.

Post-independence Indian English fiction constitutes an important part of world literature today and women novelists have made significant contributions to this genre. The publication of Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*

(hereafter *TGST*) in 1997 marks a watershed in Indian literary production. Indeed, Roy—the first South-Asian woman to win the Booker Prize for fiction—interrupts a long male tradition of post-independence narrative focused on important social and political themes relating to the formation of the new nation-state. As Bill Ashcroft has observed in his essay, *Re-writing India*, Roy's fiction subverts the grand narrative of the nation rejecting the epic scale of previous novels «in favour of a story of small people» (2013, p. 35) whose lives are overturned by small things that take on an enormous significance. By listening to the myriad of small voices in Indian society, Roy has adopted a postcolonial approach to History according to which «it is by reading the silences in the interstices of the grand narrative of History that the stories that make up the nation can be recovered» (p. 35). The setting chosen by Roy—a small village in her home-state of Kerala—is a clear demonstration of this shift in focus from big metropolises like Bombay—in which, for instance, some of the main novels by Salman Rushdie are set—to small villages and the small lives that populate them. The story of a Syrian-Christian family from Ayemenem becomes the allegory of corruption and the patriarchal mentality of the whole sub-continent. The village is a political allegory of the newly formed nation-state of India and includes all the elements of the postcolonial dilemma. Like a number of non-Western feminist writers and activists, Roy foregrounds the problematic intersection of gender, race, caste/class, and nation. In this respect, Susan Stanford Friedman points out how Roy uses the locale to address the politics of regional, national and transnational contexts (2005, loc. 3295). The contradictions and social inequities within the nation-state, such as gender and caste discrimination, need to be interrogated if future freedoms are to be achieved on both an individual and national level.

As seen in contemporary analyses of women's literary production, particularly from the postcolonies, the personal is represented as political, and the dialectic relationship between self, community, and nation is foregrounded. As Ketu H. Katrak has noted: «Postcolonial women writers explore the personal dimension of history rather than overt concerns with political leadership and nation-states as in the work of their male counterparts» (1996, p. 234). This does not mean that they are less engaged with the political. On the contrary, they re-envision a new conceptualization of politics, «recognizing the personal, even the intimate and bodily as part of a broader sociopolitical context» (p. 234). David Damrosch, in the video «*The God of Small Things*: Invitation to World Literatures», for instance, has defined Roy as a «glocal writer», both global and local, that is, engaged

with a grand story grounded in local details, small things. Through this approach, which Julie Mullaney has defined as «archaeological» (2002, p. 32), Roy reconstructs History by putting together small stories, in a constant tension between small and large, private and public, present and past. Indeed, History is made up of individual acts performed at the domestic, local, and intimate levels of people's lives, especially of the powerless. As I will examine later more in depth, women, children, and untouchables are the protagonists of Roy's novel which, while keeping its focus on the local, reflects on a national context, thus amplifying its dissenting power.

This new way of seeing the world, through the lenses of the marginalized, is part of an artistic process based on an «aesthetic of connection» (Tickell 2007, p. 32) which challenges the boundaries that are set up between the powerful and the powerless and poses questions about the traditional, often simplistic worldview. In her book, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to the Empire*, Roy claimed: «[T]he theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as non-fiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless circular conflict they're engaged in» (2006, p. 13). Her awareness of the interconnectedness of the world, in which big issues are inextricably linked with local concerns, is the very basis for a political and imaginative perspective, as she also confirms:

*The God of Small Things* is a book which connects the very smallest things to the very biggest. Whether it's the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water in a pond or the quality of the moonlight on a river or how history and politics intrude into your life, your house, your bedroom, your bed, into the most intimate relationships between people—parents and children and siblings and so on. (p. 11)

This viewpoint has a double political effect. On the one hand, it emphasizes the extent to which the dynamics of large political structures have tangible effects on people's daily lives. On the other hand, it is part of a strategy aiming at giving dignity to the powerless as well as denying the powerful the exclusive right of speech.

Roy's focus on details reflects her attempt to foreground that which is normally relegated to the background or the margins. As Shirley Chew wrote in her review of the book: «[S]ome of Roy's finest touches spring from her skill at registering the unsayable terrors lodged below the surface of everyday things» (1997, p. 23). In this respect, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has also pointed out how small, ordinary things, in their modesty and lack of ambition, have strength and are the



source of a moral position (2005, p. 235). Things tend to remain peripheral to our vision, fade out of focus, and yet they are determinants of our behavior and identity. As material culture studies have largely demonstrated, the exterior environment makes us who or what we are. As an architect, Roy is deeply aware of the power of things to set the scene, direct our actions, and constitute the landscape of our imagination. In the preface to *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*, Roy admits that her writing is shaped by her knowledge of architectural design: «Studying architecture taught me to apply my understanding of structure, of design, and of minute observation of detail to things other than buildings» (2003, p. xii). Indeed, commenting on the vividness of the descriptions, C. J. Davees writes: «[A] company of small things makes their Big presence felt . . . : “An alarm clock. A red car with musical horn. A red mug for the bathroom. A wife with a diamond. A briefcase with important papers” (Roy 1997, p. 61)» (2012, p. 329). This series of details contributes to the formation, in the reader’s mind, of a sensory landscape which is almost physically perceived. The world of the marginalized, made up of visual, acoustic, olfactory, and tactile signs, constitutes the under life of the book. The description which opens the novel is suggestive of Roy’s capacity of close observation of and sensitivity towards the environment:

May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun. . . . But by early June . . . [t]he countryside turns an immodest green. . . . The wild, overgrown garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives. (*TGST*, pp. 3-4)

The emphasis on colors, smells, sizes, and movements of the natural world guide the reader through a nearly corporeal perception of the reality described. Roy ascribes her deep sense of place to her childhood surroundings: «The kind of landscape that you [grow] up in, it lives in you. . . . [I]f you spent your very early childhood catching fish and just learning to be quiet, the landscape just seeps into you» (qtd. in Tickell 2007, p. 34). Indeed, most of the story is told from the point of view of the twin children protagonists, who look at the world with constant wonder and curiosity. Moreover, Roy’s statement also suggests that her life, especially her early childhood, has deeply influenced her development as a writer.

Like the twin protagonists, she and her brother were born from a Syrian-Christian mother—the activist and teacher Mary Roy—and a Bengali Hindu father. They divorced when the children were still very young and the mother was forced to return to her family home in the small town of Ayemenem. There, in the conservative world of rural Kerala, she was never fully accepted because of her status of divorcée and mother of two children born from an interfaith marriage. Hence, surrounded by the idyllic nature typical of Kerala, Roy had to face social stigma and stifling conventionality. Her sensitivity to social injustice as well as her political involvement can also be traced back to her childhood and her mother's example of feminism and social activism.

Mary Roy founded a school in Ayemenem and became involved in a court case against the limited amount of property a daughter could inherit, which she eventually won at the Indian Supreme Court. Roy and her brother were educated through unconventional methods, free from any institutional imposition or convention. On this, she claims: «My childhood's greatest gift was a lack of indoctrination . . . it's not that I'm somebody who's remarkable because I've learned to think outside the box. The fact is that the box was never imposed on me» (Roy 2006, p. 106). Perhaps because of their similarity and the pressures of being parented and taught by the same person, Roy's association with her mother became increasingly complex to the extent that, at the age of sixteen, she decided to attend a boarding school in Tamil Nadu. Afterwards, she moved to Delhi, where she joined the Delhi School of Architecture. After growing disillusioned with the work she was doing for Delhi architectural firms, she unexpectedly won a scholarship to study the restoration of ancient monuments in Italy. There, writing letters to her future husband, she realized her talent for writing and, when she came back to India, she started working on documentary film commentaries and television screenplays. In addition to her screenwriting, Roy started to publish newspaper articles. By the mid-1990s, Roy had already started writing the manuscript of *TGST*, which was published in April 1997 and won the Booker Prize in October of the same year, becoming a best-seller that was translated into over forty languages. In India, the reception of the book was generally positive, although it was involved in a short-lived court case based on the charge of obscenity for the sex scenes in the novel. After the publication of her first book, Roy turned her attention to journalism and ecological/political activism through which she has expressed her concern regarding the negative impact of transnational capitalism in India.

Twenty years after *TGST*, Roy published her second novel: *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). The strong continuities between *TGST* and her non-fictional works have led Roy to question the distinction between fiction and non-fiction and to argue that they are simply «two different techniques of storytelling» (2006, p. 13).

As anticipated above, her training as an architect has played an important role in her writing style, not only by stimulating her attention to detail and meticulous development of the setting, but also by guiding her through the design of the structure of her books. Talking about the formal construction of *TGST*, in an interview on *The Week*, she paralleled her working on the text with that of working on an architectural plan: «I would start somewhere and I'd colour in a bit and then I would . . . stretch back and stretch forward. It was like designing an intricately balanced structure» (1997, p. 46). Indeed, the book is composed of a series of superimposed layers on a framework which constitutes «the skeleton» of the story. As when building a house, the external structure is developed first, while the interior spaces are refined afterwards. A clear demonstration of this is the fact that by the end of the first chapter we already know the main facts of the story as well as how the story ends. In other words, at the very beginning, we have a clear vision of the whole design of the book, but we get to know the details slowly, as we get into the book, page after page. This process is well described by the author herself, who claims:

[I]t was really a search for coherence—design coherence—in the way that every last detail of a building—its doors and windows, its structural components—have, or at least ought to have, an aesthetic, stylistic integrity, a clear indication that they belong to each other, as must a book. I didn't just write my book. I designed it. (qtd. in Abraham 1998, pp. 90-91)

Although the reader becomes immediately familiar with the main events of the novel, their attention is kept alive by a very lively narrative technique based on prolepsis, analepsis, ellipsis, repetitions, etc. As a consequence, a series of details are added until the very last page to the extent that the reader is entertained by constant implementations and clarifications.

As several critics have noted, Roy's technique has undoubtedly been influenced by a form of local art, typical of Kerala, that is the *kathakali* dance-drama. It is a form of epic tale dating back to the seventeenth century during which the actors, through dance and hand gestures, engage in performances which can last for hours, usually from nine or ten at night until dawn. Ancient Indian epics are

told in an alternation of dance and vocal or musical elements without rigidly respecting the precise order of the plot, the chronological sequence of the events, or time limits (Mullaney 2002, p. 53). As in *TGST*, although the spectators already know how the story ends, they are guided through it from different angles each time. *Kathakali* performers can choose to enter the narrative from many different points of view, not necessarily from the beginning.

An episode in chapter 12—when the adult twin protagonists go to see a *kathakali* performance in a temple near their home—includes a metanarrative reflection of the writer:

It didn't matter that the story had begun, because kathakali discovered long ago that the secret of the Great Stories is that they have no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don't deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in. Or the smell of your lover's skin. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don't. In the way that although you know that one day you will die, you live as though you won't. In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn't. And yet you want to know again. (*TGST*, p. 218)

This statement reflects Roy's mode of writing which, like the *kathakali*, «can fly you across whole worlds in minutes or . . . stop for hours to examine a wilting leaf» (*TGST*, p. 219). The complex structure of the text is reflected in the several narrative levels on which the plot is based.

The novel moves back and forth between two brief time periods in the life of three generations of the Ipe family, members of the Syrian-Christian élite: thirteen days before a catastrophe in December 1969 and one day in June 1992, when the youngest generation, the twins Rahel and Estha, are reunited for the first time in 23 years. The catastrophe, which changes the life of all the characters, are the deaths, both occurring on the same day, of the little cousin Sophie Mol visiting from England, who accidentally drowns in the dangerous waters of the Meenachal River, and of the untouchable Velutha, who crosses the river every night to secretly meet the touchable mother of the twins. The mother's aunt—the most evil character in the book—denounces him as a rapist and kidnapper of children in order to save the family from scandal, resulting in the police capturing and beating him to death on the other side of the river. After these tragic events, the twins' mother is repudiated by the family and dies four years later,

while the twins are separated for 23 years. The events of 1969 are thirteen days of doom that leave the children emotionally frozen in time. This brief time period is amplified by constant digressions, which add a historical dimension to the story, thus transforming it into a timeless mythical tale. Roy concludes the first chapter with the following statement:

To say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem is only one way of looking at it. Equally, it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar. . . . Long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag. That it really began when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much. (*TGST*, p. 33)

This passage contextualizes the story that is about to be told with a series of historical references. The reference to the «Love Laws» is certainly the most relevant as it recurs like a refrain throughout the novel. The author is talking about the ancient Hindu law code of Manu, which establishes, for instance, the subordinate role of women in Indian society as well as the norms relating to caste division, untouchability, inter-caste marriages, etc. The fact that everything starts because of these laws anticipates that love and transgression are going to be the elements around which the story unfolds. Indeed, as Friedman has also noted, at the core of the novel lies «a series of dystopic and utopic border crossings that transgress material, social, psychological, sexual, and spiritual frontiers» (2005, loc. 3299-3300).

The series of traumatic events and its disastrous effects start when the orange-drink man at the movie theater forces seven-year-old Estha to masturbate him. Then, the twins' cousin, who has just arrived in India and is cherished for her Englishness, tragically dies while crossing the river on a boat with the twins. Ammu, the twins' mother, also crosses the river every night to secretly meet Velutha, a charismatic untouchable young man who left his village to get an education and returned to be the engineer and foreman at the Pickles and Preserve factory run by the Ipe family. His tender nature and deep affection for the twins makes him their surrogate father. Velutha's father, completely subjugated to the caste constraints, betrays his son to Ammu's mother—Mammachi—and aunt—Baby Kochamma. The latter goes to the police to denounce Velutha, who, despite being a member of the communist party, does not receive the support of the town's communist leader. The twins witness the bestial beating of their untouchable friend carried out by a group of policemen. The evil aunt locks Ammu

in her room and convinces Estha to make false accusations against Velutha, who lives long enough to hear Estha's betrayal of him, but not long enough to hear Ammu's confirmation, in front of the police officer, of her true love for him. Chacko, Ammu's brother, repudiates her and she later dies alone, unable to support herself and reunite with her children. Estha is returned to his dissolute father in Calcutta, while Rahel is sent to a boarding school. The children are psychologically devastated by the events that occur over these thirteen days in 1969. Estha retreats into total silence and develops a kind of servile, feminine attitude. To the great embarrassment of his father, «he did the sweeping, swabbing and all the laundry. He learned to cook and shop for vegetables» (*TGST*, p. 13). Rahel, on the other hand, is repeatedly suspended from school because of her rebellious behavior as if «she didn't know how to be a girl» (p. 18). The day of remembrance in 1992 is told from the point of view of thirty-one-year-old Rahel, who goes back to her native village to finally meet her brother, Estha, who has returned to Kerala after his father decided to move to Australia. The day ends with incestuous intercourse between the twins, as if the union of their broken selves enabled them to be whole again.

As this brief summary of the plot shows, the narrative structure of the text is quite complex and convoluted. The events are not narrated in the chronological order I have followed here, but unfold out of a temporal sequence as fragments of memory retrieved between the conscious and unconscious. As Madhu Benoit has pointed out, time is superimposed in layers to such an extent that «the past is always in the present, and the present is always shaping the future» (2006, p. 77). Consequently, time progresses in a circular motion, with fluid backward and forward movements. The two time sequences of the story—before and after Rahel's return to Ayemenem—are constantly juxtaposed and interrelate with a third section, that is, the a-chronological time of History, which dominates the private lives of the characters. Reflecting on the trope of return, on which the whole novel is based, Mullaney has pointed out that this makes *TGST* an anti-*bildungsroman* (2002, p. 45). More specifically, she claims that Estha and Rahel make a journey in reverse, to a moment and a place in which their lives had remained frozen. I would argue, however, that the return home allows the twins to re-elaborate past traumas and finally move on with their lives. In other words, memory does not act like an anchor preventing them from moving, but as a driving force which facilitates a new beginning.

Despite having been examined thoroughly from the point of view of time (Mullaney 2002; Benoit 2006; Prasad 2006; Davees 2012; Piciucco 2012), the full

potential of *TGST* is expressed through space. Rahel's day of remembrance in 1992, which sets the whole narrative in motion, is marked by a concatenation of spatially-oriented memories. In other words, rather than relying on time, the narrative moves around locations which engender different fragments of events. Susan Stanford Friedman, in her essay, *Spatial Poetics and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things* (2005), has examined some of the main buildings which bring into focus the social, cultural, and political systems presented in the novel. I believe, however, that another space, belonging to the natural world, also deserves special attention: the Meenachal River. As the core around which the narrative unfolds, the river is the catalyst of narration in both the past—as the place where transgressions, encounters, and tragic events occurred—and the present—when a walk along the riverbank triggers memories and an unconscious re-evaluation of past traumas. From this point of view, the Meenachal River can be considered as a contact zone with vital materiality enacting the confrontation between opposed forces and instantiating the psychological journeys of characters.

## The contact zone of the Meenachal River<sup>1</sup>

Kerala, the setting of *TGST*, is a highly anomalous region. Located at the south-western tip of India, it has been a historical meeting point of different cultures. As Arundhati Roy said to David Barsamian in an interview in 2009, «[Kerala] is home to four of the world's great religions: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Marxism». Moreover, Kerala prides itself on its rates of literacy, network of social welfare programs, strong labor movement, and the status of its women—all among the best examples in India. It is also distinctive for its relatively large Christian population—about 20 per cent—which has historically constituted the élite of the region. In the novel, Roy uses this locale as a metonym of post-Empire India, i.e., a heterogeneous space in which conflicting sets of norms and distinctions exist. Kerala is the place where ancient Hindu traditions coexist with the Syrian Christian culture, dating back to the fourth century, as well as with the colonial cultural heritage and the communist ideology from the nineteenth century. Like India, Kerala is a transcultural palimpsest of different traditions and

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<sup>1</sup> An adapted version of my analysis of the Meenachal River was published in the issue no. 30 of the online international journal “mediAzioni” in April 2021 (ISSN 1974-4382), with the title *The Meenachal River as Vital Materiality in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*.

heterogeneous local and global relationships. Probably, it is because of its backwaters that this region appears to be constantly on the move, related to numerous intercultural spaces and, at the same time, divided by countless boundaries, both in the novel and in real life.

The backwaters are a distinctive feature of Kerala. They are a network of rivers, lakes, artificial and natural canals, and estuaries that run between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats, from the city of Kolham to Kochi. The backwaters are an invaluable resource for the population of the region as they are regularly used for fishing, transportation, and agriculture. They undoubtedly facilitate the encounter and mixing of cultures, but they also multiply the boundaries that construct and identify an individual. Indeed, Roy depicts Kerala as a state in which lines entrap people and cannot be crossed, either literally or symbolically. At the beginning of the first chapter, anticipating some of the events concerning the main characters, the author writes: «Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks, and Limits have appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons» (*TGST*, p. 5). Not surprisingly, Roy has chosen a watercourse as the main concretization of these borders: the Meenachal River. The Meenachal is the backwaters' most powerful resident, flowing through Kottayam district, and is at the heart of the activities of the Ayemenem population. It is a powerful social network wherein non-human actors play a vital role in marking human time and recording events that bind communities together. In the novel, the river is represented as an «ecological collectivity», to use Aarti Vadde's expression (2009, p. 522), in which bonds among humans are reflected in bonds across humans, animals, and vegetation. And it is from their interaction that the whole entire takes shape.

Roy's novel defies the Cartesian vision of reality, according to which an artificial line divides people from things as if they were two conflicting and incompatible entities. For this reason, I believe that the novel's context can be examined from the perspective of Material Engagement Theory, which challenges this dualistic approach and is based on the presumption of inseparability between thought, action, and material things. In other words, its argument—elaborated by the French philosopher, semiotician of material culture, and archeologist of the mind Lambros Malafouris—is that things play a fundamental role in the process of human cognition and the mind cannot be separated from the body or material culture<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, thinking is embedded in situated action and material

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<sup>2</sup> Malafouris uses the term “material culture” to refer to things, artifacts, materials, objects, and material signs.



contexts. Therefore, in the cognitive landscape, brains, bodies, and things have equal roles. The anthropologist of material culture Daniel Miller, for instance, has claimed that we constantly think through things and engage with them, but are rarely aware of the action potential of this engagement in shaping our minds (2010). Indeed, we are so used to the presence of things around us that we do not tend to think of them as powerful tools for our cognitive development. They often go unnoticed, so much so that Miller talks about «humility of things» (p. 50). However, their presence is so pervasive in our everyday lives that an ongoing dialectic occurs between humans and things, to the extent that humans make things and things, in return, make us who or what we are. The sociologist Bruno Latour has also recognized that «there is no sense in which the notion of a human can be disentangled from the nonhumans into whose fate it has woven more and more intimately over the ages» (1994, p. 794). It is from this perspective that it may be claimed that minds, bodies, and things form an inseparable analytic unit.

The active role of things in the development of the human species is demonstrated by the fact that humans, unlike any other species, are capable of signification and symbolization. As a result, as Chris Tilley has claimed, things can be considered as «material metaphors» which, unlike words, «[do] not just communicat[e] meaning but actively [do] something in the world as mediators of activity» (1999, p. 265). Things bring people together and provide channels of interaction, thus becoming what Malafouris calls «vital materiality» (2013, p. 44). According to this non-anthropocentric perspective, agency is not only a human property as it can also be attributed to the material world as something active with which humans engage and interact. Things, indeed, have a strong evocative power which makes them our «emotional companions» and «intellectual anchors» (Turkle 2007). In other words, they are signs which act at the non-discursive level as concrete exemplars of our emotions, thoughts, and feelings. These physical signs are not merely signifiers of a signified, but also shape our social and cognitive universe, providing a stimulus for meaning and communication between humans. As Malafouris points out, they «enact and bring forth the world» (2013, p. 99). Therefore, the material agency of things gives them causal efficacy, that is, they are responsible for events to happen. More specifically, they are responsible for that which happens within a hybrid lived space—created through the linkages of cognition and material culture—«at the intersection of personal, peripersonal, and extrapersonal space» (Malafouris, p. 245).

The river in *TGST*, for instance, is a highly complex hybrid space both literally and metaphorically as well as being a material entity with a capacity for action

and meaning. As the core of all the main events in the book, the Meenachal is a border, a threshold repeatedly crossed and re-crossed, and a fundamental network of relationships. Therefore, in *TGST*, space is not a static or passive presence, but rather a generative force, «active, mobile, and full» (Friedman 2005, loc. 3251). As Malafouris has argued, «humans are spatially located creatures» (2013, p. 67). This means that space is not merely the backdrop against which human lives unfold—it also plays a fundamental role in the way we shape our subjectivities and interact with the world. In literature, space has often been commented on as the “description” which interrupts the flow of events or the «setting» which functions as background to the plot. However, in *Atlas of the European Novel*, Franco Moretti claims that mapping the locations of novels helps to identify «how space gives rise to a story, a plot» (1998, p. 7). He also writes that «[g]eography is not an inert container, is not a box where cultural history “happens”, but an active force that pervades the literary field and shapes it in depth» (p. 3). As an integral part of narration, it may be claimed that space enacts encounters, exchanges, and interactions between people and things. It is from this perspective that Grossberg talks about «spatial materialism», a concept according to which space, as «the milieu of becoming», allows for the understanding of reality as a question «not of histories but orientations, directions, entries and exits» (1996, p. 179). His idea suggests a revision of the role of space in the narrative as well as the interaction between characters and the place in which they act.

The Meenachal river, for instance, is an example of the interplay of location and action. Indeed, it is not only the lifeblood of the region, but, on a symbolic level, it is also a liminal space which, by its very nature, enables contacts and crossings. This characteristic makes it a «contact zone», that is, «[a] space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relation» (Pratt 1992, p. 8). Marie Louise Pratt explains, further, that such a contact zone is «an attempt to provoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect» (p. 7). Indeed, the Meenachal might be considered as a site in which opposing forces meet and confront one other. From a literal point of view, in the Meenachal, the fresh water of the river mixes with the salt water of the Arabian Sea. Science demonstrates that when fresh water and salt water meet in an estuary, they do not always mix readily. Because the fresh water flowing into the estuary is less salty and less dense than the water from the sea, it often floats on top of the heavier sea water. This encounter between these two different types of water creates turbulence and

several conditions need to be met for a harmonious balance (such as a certain direction and speed of the wind, a specific tidal range, etc.). The Meenachal's direct connection with the sea (which, in turn, merges with the Indian Ocean) makes it possible for the local communities living along the riverbanks to be joined to the rest of the world. From a figurative point of view, the river is a natural boundary in which the banks simultaneously connect and separate opposing entities. On the one hand, on the riverbanks, encounters between touchables and untouchables, laws of love and laws of tradition, East and West are possible. On the other hand, however, Roy's story demonstrates that the communication and exchanges enabled by the river actually amplify the polarities around which Indian society is built. Despite being the place where people at the margins of society—such as a divorced young woman, twins born from an inter-faith marriage, and an untouchable young man—find shelter from the rigid caste and gender laws, the border space of the river generates and shapes stories of division and discrimination.

Looking at the unifying potential of the river, the first example that comes to mind is the strong affective bond that develops between the touchable twins and their mother and the untouchable Velutha. On the riverbanks, the twins play every day with Velutha, who «lived in a little laterite hut, downriver from the Ayemenem house. . . . [Estha and Rahel] would sit with him for hours. . . . He was teaching them to use a planer. . . . It was Velutha who made Rahel her luckiest-ever fishing rod and taught her and Estha to fish» (*TGST*, p. 75). From the children's point of view, the river is a playground as well as a wonderful place which they long for whenever they feel lonely, abandoned, or out of place. A case in point is when they are in a motel room, near the airport of Cochin, the night before their English cousin is due to arrive. The whole family's attention is focused on the arrival of the little girl and the twins unconsciously feel excluded from the circle of familial protection and affection. In that unfamiliar place, pervaded by unpleasant smells and squalid furniture, the only thing that makes them feel better is the thought of their river:

They dreamed of the river. Of the coconut trees that bent into it and watched, with coconut eyes, the boat slide by. Upstream in the mornings. Downstream in the evenings. . . . It was warm, the water. Graygreen. Like rippled silk. With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it. (pp. 116-117)

In that heavenly place, nobody cares about caste or gender differences as nature prevails over culture and tradition. The opposition between nature and culture is weakened by the waters of the Meenachal. Indeed, the downtrodden characters that live in symbiosis with the river, namely the twins, their mother, and Velutha, have the opportunity to go back to a natural state, protected from the influence of any superstructure. The descriptions of the prosperous vegetation, the heavy rains which make flowers bloom, the hundreds of small lives which populate the river and its surroundings suggest that, there, life prevails and is expressed in all its forms, without any limit.

The river is also the place where, on thirteen consecutive nights, the twins' mother secretly meets Velutha to touch him and be touched by him. Their love, free from any social or religious constraint, takes shape on the Meenachal's riverbanks. By crossing the river, they are symbolically crossing the lines imposed by society, that is, the borders which delimit the categories of class and caste. The water of the river blurs these limits and connects two closed-off worlds. The woman and the man's needs are satisfied, not so much in physical terms as in affective terms. Indeed, as a divorced woman, she does not have a «Locusts stand I» (p. 56)—as the twins understand the Latin expression “*locus standi*”—neither in society, nor within her family. Hence, the river is the only place where she feels at one with the world that surrounds her, in peace with her small town (and its traditions), and part of a natural environment in which small lives also have the right to exist: «She spent hours on the riverbank with her little plastic transistor shaped like a tangerine. She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims» (p. 43). Along the river, she can find solace as if water could soothe her «liquid ache» (p. 43).

The adjective «liquid» gives an idea of the shapeless pain suffered by a person whose identity is not defined within Indian society. Similarly, Velutha's broken identity, as an untouchable, seems to take on a new shape near the river. His midnight swims can be interpreted as a sort of purification rite he performs daily in order to clean his body of the dirt attributed to him by society. Born impure and polluted for the Hindu religion, he embodies the filth of India. In Kristeva's terms, he represents the abject, that is, somebody to be kept at a safe distance, cast away, and outside of the boundaries of civil society (1982, p. 2). The natural setting of the river helps him to connect with his real self, independently of any cultural bias. In the river, he can feel safe and free from the category into which he was placed before birth, which wants him dirty, untouchable, and polluted. A representative scene illustrates this concept very well. As soon as Velutha

understands that no one in the community is going to support his love for a touchable woman, he feels a visceral need to plunge into the river, as if returning to the womb:

Naked . . . he walked down the thirteen stone steps into the water and further, until the river was chest high. Then he began to swim with easy powerful strokes, striking out towards where the current was swift and certain, where the Really Deep began. The moonlit river fell from his swimming arms like sleeves of silver. It took him only a few minutes to make the crossing. When he reached the other side, he emerged gleaming and pulled himself ashore, black as the night that surrounded him, black as the water he had crossed. (*TGST*, pp. 273-274)

The water of the river is like the amniotic fluid, from which he draws sustenance and comfort. There, in that totally natural environment, his untouchability loses its meaning. His action of entering the river, in a semi-conscious state, resembles a sort of baptism, returning him to a state of innocence and purity. For the two lovers, the water blends the opposition between love and the laws of love, which «lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much» (p. 168), to the extent that it is simply biology which sets the rules of their union.

However, unlike Indian tradition, which seems to be immutable and permanent, the river changes with the tides and seasons, flowing at different paces at different times, with invisible currents. It changes substantially during the course of the story, from life container to cause of death. Its change parallels that of the Ipe family and the entire community of Ayemenem. The more corruption and indifference spread among its inhabitants, the more the river changes its nature. The first dramatic episode which demonstrates this is the death by drowning of the 10-year-old English cousin, Sophie Mol, as anticipated above. Although the river has always been a friend to the children playing along its banks, it is unpredictable, just like the members of the local community. The change starts to become visible when the children are about to cross the river to reach the History House, an ancient colonial building located on the opposite riverbank: «Three children on the riverbank. . . . The river itself was dark and quiet. An absence rather than a presence, betraying no sign of how high and strong it really was» (p. 273). The words of Velutha's brother's, aimed at warning the twins about the unreliable "character" of the river, sound like a tragic premonition: «You must be careful, . . . . This river of ours—she isn't always what she pretends to be» (p. 201). He tells the twins that the first third of the river can be trusted, but one never knows what will happen in the rest. Indeed, while the twins are trying to

cross the river, together with their young cousin, the current overturns their boat, killing the English girl. The twins will soon discover that people, even those they think they can fully trust, like family members, are as treacherous as the river. The unpredictable part of the river represents the dark side of their nature that all people hide from others.

Later, the riverbank, instead of protecting Velutha by concealing his footprints, guides the policemen searching for him after he has been accused by the twins' great-aunt of raping her touchable niece (the twins' mother) and kidnapping the children. The purpose of these lies is to save the family honor since the relationship between Velutha and the twins' mother has become public. The crossing of the river by the policemen is highly symbolic as they use what had been a means of transgression as a way to restore boundaries and limits: «[A] posse of Touchable Policemen crossed the Meenachal River, sluggish and swollen with recent rain, and picked their way through the wet undergrowth, the clink of handcuffs in someone's heavy pocket» (p. 288). Moreover, this place, which was previously so welcoming for people at the margins of society, now becomes a site of risk and violence. Near the riverbank, while Velutha is sleeping, completely unaware the police are searching for him, history prevails over humanity, tradition over nature, separation over connection. The policemen beat brutally the young man in front of the astonished eyes of the twins, who are there resting after surviving the dangerous river crossing the night before. The barbarity hidden behind the policemen's act, which recalls the cold and calculating attitude of perpetrators of genocides, is represented by the emotional detachment from what they are doing. The men

were history's henchmen. Sent to square the books and collect the dues from those who broke its laws. Impelled by feelings that were primal yet paradoxically wholly impersonal. Feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear—civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness. . . . Man's subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify. (p. 292)

Afterwards, the river gradually becomes an enemy for its most affectionate residents—both human and nonhuman—who can no longer trust it.

The river also reveals its Janus-faced nature in the present. When Rahel, the twin girl, comes back to Ayemenem 23 years later, the first thing she is confronted with is the decaying river. Roy personifies it as an elderly moribund person on a hospital bed: «It greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where

teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed» (p. 118). Although it was June and it was raining, «the river was no more than a swollen drain now» (p. 118). As a result of globalization, the river has been transformed from a playground into a cesspool, smelling of «shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans», in which «[m]ost fish had died» (p. 14). Downriver, a saltwater barrage has been built «in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby» (p. 118). This devastation is a symbol of economic, social, and ecological failure, which is reflected in the river. The river also reflects the shadow of a luxury hotel, built where the History House used to stand. This place, for instance, can no longer be approached by the river since developers have fractured the backwater sphere by building dams between the hotel and the Meenachal. The narrator observes that tourists «arrived by speedboat, opening up a V of foam on the water, leaving behind a rainbow film of gasoline» (p. 119). The transnational corporate tourism has destroyed not only the landscape, but also the local culture. Indeed, the *kathakali* dancers now perform a shortened version of the Indian epic near the swimming pool—because «no swimming» signs warn people from getting near the polluted river—while tourists drink cocktails and sunbathe. Their job has totally lost its aura of magic and is now used merely to add a little exotic flavor to the holidays of Westerners. In conclusion, the waters of the Meenachal, thick and toxic with pesticides, now collect the awful consequences of globalization.

The progressive desecration of the river parallels the psychological journey of the characters towards solitude and perdition, emptiness and silence. As children, for instance, the twins used to spend their days along the river full of joy and optimism. The riverbanks were their playground, which they shared with fish, trees, insects, spiders, stones, the mud, and even the moon reflected in the water in a sort of joyful dance. Paradoxically, however, the river is responsible for the ending of their innocence. It is because of the river and the death it caused that «childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt» (p. 303). As a result, when the grown-up twins go back to Ayemenem after 23 years, along the ravaged riverbanks of the Meenachal, they, too, are devastated, incapable of joy or trust in others. Their incestuous encounter, revealed at the end of the book, is the only possible outcome after years spent as ghosts, with split selves. Now, finally, they identify with one another and fill each other's missing part.

Adults, namely the twins' mother and Velutha, have the same twofold relationship with the river. They choose the river as the site in which to start and live their forbidden love. Although they are perfectly aware of the risks, they choose

freedom over rules, emancipation over obedience. At the beginning, the river is complicit in their union. They cross it in darkness with a boat and the wildlife surrounding them seems to facilitate their secret encounters. The young woman knows that this is the only way she can assert her will and lay the ground for her own happiness. Indeed, after the epiphanic moment in which her eyes meet Velutha's eyes in an unusual, more intimate way, she is first to act and goes to meet him at the river:

She knew the path to the river as well as her children did and could have found her way there blindfolded. . . . She didn't know what it was that made her hurry through the undergrowth. . . . That made her arrive on the banks of the Meenachal breathless. . . . As though her life depended on getting there in time. (p. 314)

Her behavior suggests that she has changed—consciously or not—her attitude towards life and has become the master of her own destiny. Her psychic development from obedient woman to rebel parallels Velutha's change. The night of their first encounter, for instance, the young man goes swimming hoping to meet her: «He . . . began to swim. Upstream. Against the current. He turned towards the bank. . . . When he saw her the detonation almost drowned him. It took all his strength to stay afloat. He trod water, standing in the middle of the dark river» (p. 315). His swimming upstream, against the current, to reach the riverbank where the woman is waiting for him is another clue to his desire to defy social constraints. However, as Roy implies many times throughout the novel, the only possible consequence for breaking thousand-year-old laws is to be carried away by the current. The deaths of both Velutha—violently beaten and treated like a dog—and the twins' mother—who ironically dies of suffocation in a squalid motel room—demonstrates how individual choices are often overcome by superior forces which put things back into place in one way or another. Here, too, the river identifies with the sufferings of its people. Like them, it is a place out of control until it is dammed to keep out salt water and use fresh water for rice paddies. The damming represents limitation of movement, an obstruction of vital processes which reflects the experiences of the marginalized characters. The river's change over the years instantiates the characters' psychological journeys, which go from innocence to guilt, from joy to perdition, from life to death.

As vital materiality, the river has agency of its own and, by its very nature, allows transgressions and crossings. It is both a container and generator of



history and, being a liminal, hybrid space, it offers an opportunity for people on the margins to develop their own way of thinking and living. Hence, given the deep relationship between the river and the lives around it, the Meenachal may be considered as a «mindscape» (Malafouris 2013, p. 227), that is, a cognitive landscape in which bodies, minds, and things are interrelated and shape each other. In other words, the river is the ideal location in which the ontological coalition between mind and matter, people and things, can take place. As a result, the characters' cognitive and emotional states or processes literally comprise elements in their surrounding material environment, namely the river. According to Malafouris' hypothesis of the extended mind, our mind goes well beyond the skin or the skull and literally extends into the extra-organismic environment. Therefore, our ways of thinking «are not merely causally dependent upon but *constituted by* extracranial bodily processes and material artifacts» (2013, p. 227). Indeed, through the river characters can make sense of the world, feel, discover, but also find their way forward, for better or for worse. Despite the river ultimately symbolizing an eternal flux which overwhelms everyone and everything that tries to stop it, it remains a fluid border between apparently impermeable boundaries. Therefore, fluid bodies like those of the protagonists of the novel, deprived of any space in society, find their natural habitat in the river. As a hybrid material sign, it is not merely a conceptual abstraction, but physically enacts contamination and osmosis. This happens both literally and symbolically.

On the one hand, East and West meet through the river, different cultures clash, and an interaction between modernity and tradition takes place. As the novel suggests, the outcome is quite tragic since, as a result of globalization, Indian culture is bound to become nothing more than an exotic performance, a tourist attraction. Moreover, village inhabitants gradually lose respect for places like the river which have given them sustenance for centuries. Children defecate onto the riverbed, mothers wash clothes and pots, and people bathe themselves with soap. This is the painful reality depicted by Roy when she talks about the Meenachal: «Once it had the power to evoke fear. To change lives. But now its teeth were drawn, its spirit spent. It was just a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea. Bright plastic bags blew across its viscous, weedy surface like subtropical flying-flowers» (*TGST*, p. 119). Hence, the waterway literally allows the passage of contaminating entities which threaten both people and the environment, thus losing its status of ecological collectivity. On the other hand, however, from a symbolical perspective, the process of osmosis enacted by the river has been successful. From a scientific point of view, osmosis

consists of the gradual transition of a liquid from one part to another through a membrane. As the analysis of psychological development of the main characters has shown, the upheaval they all undergo—which has brought loss of innocence, solitude, and death—gradually shifts their status from that of victims to that of heroes. Indeed, their change progressively becomes a form of resistance and struggle. The river has allowed the touchable and untouchable lovers' transition from passivity to active choice as well as the twins' passage from blindness to awareness, from split to whole selves. Therefore, the true potential of the river in Roy's novel is expressed not so much literally as metaphorically. Rather than a landscape, it is a mindscape in which transgressions are enabled, borders are blurred, and communication between opposed forces is possible.

## The oppressors and the subalterns

Now that the setting has been defined, the main characters can be studied by identifying the things they use or which surround them. More specifically, it is interesting to note how the objects associated with the oppressors confirm their status as substitutes for colonial power; while the victims express their agency through a series of objects which lay the ground for their acts of rebellion and resistance.

As her career as both writer and activist demonstrates, Roy's deployment of the small is a way to give voice to the subordinated as well as a means to recuperate their voices and their suppressed histories. The protagonists of her novel are people experiencing the discrimination of caste, patriarchy, and gender, all in a dialectical relationship. This means that, rather than one excluding the other, they intertwine and fuel each other. The oppressed represented in *TGST* may be considered as subaltern in a broad sense, i.e. people «without lines of social mobility» (Spivak 1999, p. 28). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for instance, focuses especially on the gendered subaltern experiencing a double form of discrimination as an object of colonialism and victim of male domination. She asks: «Can the subaltern (as a woman) speak?» (1999, p. 33). However, the Indian society as depicted by Roy provides the most striking example of discrimination based on the opposition between the pure and the impure, touchable and untouchable, men and women, biology and tradition, love and faith. Subordination, then, is necessarily represented as an unstable, more problematic condition, entailing various degrees of rebellion against and defiance of the dominant power.

Focusing on the members of the Ipe family—around whom the whole story develops—two categories of characters can be identified: the oppressors and the subalterns. Unlike Spivak's argument, according to which the subalterns cannot speak because they have been silenced by history, habits, and ideologies, I argue that Roy's novel does not represent the historical silencing of the subalterns within a postcolonial context. On the contrary, the subalterns express themselves through a series of material things which represent their form of communication and resistance. In the politics of representing the subaltern's resistance the alternative to silence cannot only be speech. Another category must be added, that is, action. Action can be performed through a series of non-verbal signs but also through things which may hide a political message.

The things I am going to examine on the part of the oppressors are instances of a neo-colonial power exercised by the tyrannical members of the family, while the things I will consider as regards the subalterns are instances of transgression from within and against the dominant discourse. The victims, in particular, refuse to satisfy the demands of the oppressors by re-articulating their discourse through hybridity.

In his text, *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha has argued that «postcoloniality is a . . . reminder of the persistent “neo-colonial” relations within the “new” world order. . . . Such a perspective enables the authentication of histories of exploitation and the evolution of strategies of resistance» (1994, p. 9). The main events of *TGST* take place at the end of the 1960s, between the two most traumatic events in India's twentieth-century history: Independence/Partition and the state of emergency inaugurated by Indira Gandhi. In between these moments, when the world's attention was elsewhere, India was re-constructing its new identity while also coping with the difficulties and contradictions of the postcolonial era. By excavating the hidden histories buried beneath the homogenizing myth of the nation in the post-Independence years, Roy has uncovered new forms of colonial exploitation embodied by a number of members of the Ipe family. As Chacko, the twins' uncle, also admits, they are «a *family* of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away» (*TGST*, p. 51). Their distinctive feature is their obsession for classification and purity as well as a visceral need to keep everything and everyone under control, within pre-established categories. However, this yearning for order and clear borders condemns each member to a backward process in life expressed through both psychological and physical degradation.

A clear instance is represented by Pappachi, the twins' grandfather on their mother's side. He is an imperial entomologist in charge of the classification of local species of insects. He basically fixes organisms, names, and meanings. The great obsession of his life is a particular species of moth which accidentally fell into his drink one evening. Since he noticed some unusual characteristics, «he mounted it, measured it and the next morning placed it in the sun for a few hours for the alcohol to evaporate» (p. 48). This whole process of fixing, controlling, and constraining underlies a disturbing kind of violence and cold brutality. Pappachi's impulse of giving a name to things transforms the insect into a lifeless, classified, named object of study. Classifying, in this case, means to kill. The great tragedy of his life is that the moth is not given his name. Indeed, when a young entomologist finally establishes that it belongs to a new, unknown species, Pappachi has already retired and cannot stake his claim on the discovery. Since, in his mind, names and titles denote identity and social standing, this failure «tormented him and his children and his children's children» (p. 48) in the years to come. Not only is the moth responsible for his black moods and bursts of anger, but also for the whole family's particular obsession for taxonomies, mastery, and control.

The first victim of Pappachi's desire to dominate others is his wife, whom he beats on a regular basis just for the pleasure of doing so. As a jealous man, he cannot stand the success she has with her small business of pickles and jams and tries to sabotage it by creating the impression among visitors and clients that his wife neglects him: «[H]e would sit on the verandah and sew buttons that weren't missing onto his shirts. . . . To some small degree he did succeed in further corroding Ayemenem's view of working wives» (p. 47). Everything he cannot control has to be destroyed. A case in point is when he breaks the bow of his wife's violin and throws it in the river. He cannot accept she has a talent which goes beyond his capacity to hinder it. Although he behaves charmingly and generously within the community—by donating money to orphanages, for instance—he behaves like a bully with his wife and children.

Another traumatic episode marked by Pappachi's destructive fury is when he cuts the boots his little daughter (the twins' mother) into small pieces. Sat on his mahogany rocking chair, «the Imperial Entomologist shred her new gum-boots with her mother's pinking shears. . . . When the last strip of rubber had rippled to the floor, her father looked at her with cold, flat eyes, and rocked and rocked and rocked. Surrounded by a sea of twisting rubber snakes» (p. 172). Deep feelings of rage and jealousy have developed during his life spent waiting for an

acknowledgment that never comes. A substitute for his unfulfilled ambitions is represented by a skyblue Plymouth car which he buys from an Englishman in a nearby town. His wide new car not only gives him importance within the simple context of Ayemenem, but also enhances his desire for mastery expressed by using a commodity imported from the colonizing west. Roy describes him with an ironic look: «He became a familiar sight in Ayemenem, coasting importantly down the narrow road in his wide car, looking outwardly elegant but sweating freely inside his woollen suits» (p. 47). While the things he surrounds himself with fuel his pride, they are just a façade behind which he deteriorates.

The flimsiness of his world is demonstrated when Rahel, returning to Ayemenem as an adult, enters his study and finds a totally decaying room, where, paradoxically, insects—both alive and dead—and fungi have taken control:

[M]ounted butterflies and moths had disintegrated into small heaps of iridescent dust that powdered the bottom of their glass display cases, leaving the pins that had impaled them naked . . . The room was ranked with fungus and disuse. . . . A column of shining black ants walked across a windowsill, . . . like a line of mincing chorus girls in Busby Berkeley musical . . . Buffed and beautiful. (p. 148)

The world that Pappachi tried to master throughout his life has outlived him and thwarted his attempt at mastering it. The butterflies and moths have escaped from the pins that impaled them, ants walk undisturbed, fungi develop as if in a wild, natural environment. His Plymouth car is also overcome by the force of nature, to the extent that it becomes a part of it, as if it had been swallowed up by earth:

The old car settled more firmly into the ground. . . . Grass grew around its flat tires. The PARADISE PICKLES AND PRESERVES signboard rotted and fell inward like a collapsed crown. A creeper stole a look at itself in the remaining mottled half of the cracked driver's mirror. A sparrow lay dead on the backseat. (p. 280)

Living and dead organisms have taken over Pappachi's realm, despite all his efforts to dominate them. His car, which has become one with the garden, is a further demonstration that the violent impulse to dominate nature and life can only lead to depravity and oblivion.

Another instance of obsession for classification is embodied by Pappachi's wife, Mammachi, the twins' grandmother on their mother's side. In her case, her

desire to master nature is exemplified by her pickle factory. Among the different things she used to produce, such as jams, canned pineapples, curry powders, etc., she also made a banana jam which was eventually banned by the Food Products Organization for being «neither jam nor jelly. . . . An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency» (p. 31). The transgression of categories enacted by the following generations of the Ipe family started with this first attempt to defy the limits existing in nature. Like Pappachi, she also has an obsession which plagues her throughout her life, that is, to find a way to prevent the pots of pickles from leaking. In spite of her attempts to add preservatives and salt, «Paradise Pickles' bottles still leaked a little. It was imperceptible, but they did still leak, and on long journeys their labels became oily and transparent» (p. 159). The leaking is a problem for her as it is something she cannot control, and despite her efforts to stop it by means of a series of artificial methods, she never manages to prevent the natural properties of the products from manifesting themselves. Indeed, even as an old woman, «Mammachi wondered if she would ever master the art of perfect preservation» (p. 159). The perfect preservation she so deeply longs for suggests that she does not accept unmanageable situations, and anything that crosses the lines or, as in this case, leaks out of an edge needs to be put back in place in a way or another. Moreover, what was originally a local business—started by chance in her kitchen—becomes a firm based on capitalist ideals, such as mass production in spite of fine quality of local products, exploitation of employees, investments in machines through loans and mortgages, and exoticization of products to make them more appealing to the Western market. A case in point is the company's slogan printed on the labels («Emperors of the Realm of Taste») and the picture representing a kathakali dancer. Although the image has nothing to do with the business, «it gave the product a Regional Flavor and would stand them in good stead when they entered the Overseas Markets» (p. 46). Mammachi's son's negative influence is highly responsible for the transformation of her small local production, but her exploitative attitude—especially towards women—makes her a perfect example of a neo-colonial perpetrator. For instance, she habitually pays the women her son Chako brings home, thus treating them like prostitutes. She totally justifies his «Man's needs» and has a separate entrance built for his room:

[S]o that the objects of his 'Needs' wouldn't have to go traipsing through the house. She secretly slipped them money to keep them happy. They took it because they needed it. They had young children and old parents. . . . The arrangement

suit Mammachi, because in her mind, a fee clarified things. Disjoined sex from love. Needs from Feelings. (pp. 160-161)

This passage also confirms her impulse to keep clear lines between categories and money gives her the power to have control even over people and their feelings. Her progressive blindness might be interpreted as a form of poetic punishment for her attempt to master the world. Once she becomes completely blind, she obviously loses contact with reality and must suffer the frustration of being cast out of the daily dynamics of both the household and the factory. However, a coincidence, as ironic as it is tragic, allows her to exert control over her family one last time. When Velutha's father loses his eye after an accident, Mammachi insists on paying for him to be treated and for a new glass eye. By having sight saved, he is able to see his son cross the river every night on a boat together with Mammachi's touchable daughter, Ammu. Devastated by the sense of duty and servility towards his benefactor, he goes to Mammachi's and «offered his mortgaged eye. He held it out in the palm of his hand. He said he didn't deserve it and wanted her to have it back» (p. 241). On a symbolical level, the grotesque image means that the man's vision is altered by the blinkers of history. He feels so indebted towards his touchable benefactor that he acts like Judas and betrays his own son. Moreover, the fact that he has a mortgaged eye and wants to give it back suggests that he does not own his own sight and that what he sees is, therefore, actually Mammachi's property. It is thanks to her intervention that he is able to see what he saw: «He told Mammachi what he had seen. The story of a boat that crossed the river night after night, and who was in it» (p. 242). Indirectly, then, it is Mammachi who, once more, is faced with a transgression because «[t]he lovers . . . had made the unthinkable thinkable and the impossible really happen» (p. 242). And she takes immediate action to restore order. However, as a blind old woman, she cannot do much, so her sister-in-law, Baby Kochamma, starts playing her evil role: «Mammachi provided the passion. Baby Kochamma the Plan» (p. 244).

Baby Kochamma is a quite interesting character from the perspective of Thing Theory. The things she surrounds herself with hint at her evil instinct to dominate others as well as her progressive psychological and physical degradation. The most evident instance of her need for control is represented by her ornamental garden, which she creates and maintains at the front of the Ayemenem house. After obtaining a diploma in ornamental gardening at the University of Rochester in the United States, she returns to Ayemenem completely transformed: «There was no trace of the slim attractive girl that she had been. In her

years at Rochester, Baby Kochamma had grown extremely large. In fact, let it be said, obese» (p. 26). She has evidently lost control over her body, her physical needs, and bodily limits, so she finds another way to express her desire to have a tight hold on her surroundings, that is, by bending nature to her own will. She raises «a fierce, bitter garden that people came all the way from Kottayam to see» (p. 27). Everything follows a precise design and several elements recall a Western style:

It was a circular, sloping patch of ground, with a steep gravel driveway looping around it. Baby Kochamma turned it into a lush maze of dwarf edges, rocks and gargoyles. . . . In the center, . . . surrounded by beds of cannae and phlox, a marble cherub peed an endless silver arc into a shallow pool in which a single blue lotus bloomed. At each corner of the pool lolled a pink plaster-of-paris gnome with rosy cheeks and a peaked red cap. (p. 27)

Despite the artificial order given to the garden, a series of different symbols have been mixed, thus creating a sort of conceptual chaos. The Gothic symbol of gargoyles is paired with the Catholic symbol of the cherub, which pees in a pool where the lotus, the national flower of India, floats. Even the image of Baby Kochamma working in the garden evokes a picturesque mingling of styles: «[She] spent her afternoons in her garden. In sari and gum boots. She wielded an enormous pair of hedge shears in her bright-orange gardening gloves» (p. 27). She does not grow her plants with a motherly attitude and patience, as one may imagine, but with a fury close to violence: «Like a lion tamer she tamed twisting vines and nurtured bristling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and Chinese guava» (p. 27). This description conveys a vivid idea of her desire to tame and even limit nature. What is bent needs to be straighten, what grows freely needs to be confined. However, after enduring years of obsessive attention, the garden is eventually abandoned by Baby Kochamma, whose interest is captured by the virtual world of satellite tv. As with Pappachi and Mammachi, nature finds its own way of surviving and expressing itself which prevails over any human compulsion to dominate it. Therefore, without the manic intervention of Baby Kochamma, «[the garden] had grown knotted and wild, like a circus whose animals had forgotten their tricks. . . . [T]he vines kept growing like toe-nails on a corpse. They reached through the nostrils of the pink plaster gnomes and blossomed in their yellow heads . . . » (p. 27). The force of nature is represented by



its refusal to bend to rules and the image of the vine enveloping the gnomes gives a clear picture of its potentially devastating power.

After abandoning nature, Baby Kochamma embraces another world, which she passively observes while it progresses before her eyes: «Blondes, wars, famines, football, sex, music, coups d'état—they all arrived on the same train» (pp. 27-28). She gives up the active role of mastering her own plants and becomes a spectator of life—not real life, of course, but a fake version of it. While her garden is wilting,

Baby Kochamma followed American NBA league games, one-day cricket and all the Grand Slam tennis tournaments. . . . All day [she] sat in the drawing room, . . . locked in a noisy television silence. . . . [She] entered all the contests, availed [herself] of all the discounts that were advertised and had . . . won a T-shirt and a thermos flask that [she] kept locked away in her cupboard. (p. 28)

Baby Kochamma gradually starts losing contact with reality locking herself in an ivory tower—the Ayemenem house—full of familiar objects and things of the past: «[She] cherished the furniture that she had inherited by outliving everybody else. Mammachi's violin and violin stand, the Ooty cupboards, the plastic basket chairs, the Delhi beds, the dressing table from Vienna with ivory knobs. The rosewood dining table that Velutha made» (p. 28). Not only does she live surrounded by memories inside her house, but she is also scared of the present and the outside world. Therefore, «she kept doors and windows locked, unless she was using them» (p. 29). What is interesting to note is that this return to the past is also reflected by her body, and the way she dresses and does her hair. As Rahel concludes after seeing her for the first time in twenty-three years, «*[s]he's living her life backwards*» (p. 23). When Rahel enters the house, she observes that the eighty-three-year-old Baby Kochamma is sitting at the dining table under which «she swung her tiny, manicured feet, like a small child on a high chair» (p. 21). Her name “Baby” starts to make sense for the reader, who can picture a sort of ageless caricature. The description through Rahel's eyes continues: «Her hair, dyed jet-black, was arranged across her scalp like unspooled thread. . . . [S]he had started wearing makeup. Lipstick. Kohl. A sly touch of rouge. And because the house was locked and dark, . . . her lipstick mouth had shifted slightly off her real mouth» (p. 22). When she was young, she had renounced the material life to impress the man she loved: a handsome Irish monk who was in Kerala for his seminary. Her desire for him remained platonic, but it had left her embittered and jealous of anyone who managed to realize their plans of love, like Ammu.

Now that she is elderly, she has abandoned the spiritual side of life, embracing the material world. For instance, she wears a lot of jewelry: «Winking rings. Diamond earrings. Gold bangles and a beautifully crafted flat gold chain that she touched from time to time, reassuring herself that it was there and that it was hers. Like a young bride. . . .» (p. 22). Her way of living backwards, against the physiological evolution of life, is an example of the physical and psychological degradation she shares with the other oppressors in the family. The mask she has created, made up of makeup and jewelry, reveals her extreme, vain attempt to defy time and its natural course. Her repressed rage gives her energy to mold reality as she pleases, but the result is a pathetic display of frustration and loneliness.

The last character I would like to examine, among the oppressors, is Chako, the twins' uncle and Ammu's brother. He openly admits that his family is Anglophile and he is the perfect embodiment of this love of Englishness. He was educated at Oxford and this makes him a pompous, self-important person: «Chako used his Reading Aloud voice. His room had a church-feeling. He didn't care whether anyone was listening to him or not. And if they were, he didn't care whether or not they understood what he was saying. Ammu called them his Oxford Moods» (p. 53). His Oxford books, which he brings back to Ayemenem when he returns to take over the family factory, are the symbol of his Anglophilia as well as his desire to master and explain things through purely theoretical knowledge. They will prove completely useless, however, when he starts running the pickle factory. He makes his mother a sleeping partner and invests in equipment and expands the labor force. He applies a capitalist system—which he studied in his books and witnessed during the years he spent in the West—unsuited to the context in which the pickle factory has developed. His bank loans and mortgages immediately cause a financial crash of the business, although he never admits his responsibility. Despite his apparently liberal education, he does not give up his male chauvinist view of the world, to the extent that he frequently repeats to his sister Ammu: «What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine» (56). Even the seven-year-old twins are surprised at his narrow-mindedness. Indeed, every month he receives an aeromodelling kit, which takes him about ten days to assemble. It never flies for more than a minute before crashing and the twins are asked to search for the remains in the fields. Chako's room «cluttered with broken wooden planes» (p. 55) mirrors his constant failures due to his dogmatic way of living life. Like all the members of his family, he needs to label things. It is Chako who christens the factory «Paradise Pickles and Preserves»

and has its labels designed and printed at a local press. He also has a billboard painted and installed on the Plymouth's roof to promote his business. But when the car is in motion, «it rattle[s] and [makes] fallingoff noises» (p. 56). The billboard he is so proud of is a concrete example of Chacko's cracked world: apparently intact, but upon a closer look, fragile and crumbly.

These qualities also reflect the mood of his marriage to an English woman, Sophie Mol's mother.

A year into the marriage, and the charm of Chacko's studently sloth wore off for Margaret Kochamma. It no longer amused her that while she went to work, the flat remained in the same filthy mess that she had left it in. . . . That he seemed incapable of buttoning up his shirt, knotting his tie *and* tying his shoelaces before presenting himself for a job interview. (p. 235)

Chacko's inability to be a responsible, self-sufficient man ruins his marriage, causing his wife to leave him for another man who is «everything that Chacko wasn't. Steady. Solvent. Thin» (p. 235). The physical and psychological degradation visible in Chacko's relatives is also confirmed in his case. After his divorce, he returns to the family home to be pampered by his mother, like when he was a young boy: «[His mother] fed him, she sewed for him, she saw to it that there were fresh flowers in his room every day. Chacko needed his mother's adoration» (p. 236). He grows fat and unattractive, frustrated, and lackadaisical: «Chacko was in his room. . . . Roast chicken, ships, sweet corn and chicken soup, two parathas and vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce. . . . Chacko often said that his ambition was to die of overeating» (p. 108). He does not die of overeating, but nothing good happens to him. After Sophie Mol's death, he moves to Canada where he runs an unsuccessful antiques business. Before leaving, though, he does one more thing just to confirm his chauvinistic character. As the man of the house who is supposed to protect the family honor, he repudiates his sister, thus condemning her to die of loneliness and starvation, and splits the twins, further ruining their already shattered lives. Despite their attempts to silence the weak members of the family, the oppressors in Roy's story do not manage to achieve their goal because the subalterns find many ways of speaking and raising their voices.

The historical silencing of the subaltern, as denounced by Spivak (1999), is the result of a failure of communication. Its foundations are the inability to hear as well as to find the right channels in which to speak. Commenting on a mysterious case of suicide by a seventeen-year-old Indian girl, Talu, who hanged herself in her father's small apartment in Calcutta in 1926, Spivak tells how the girl's

gesture was totally misinterpreted by both the community and her family. Everybody thought it was a self-immolation probably due to an unexpected pregnancy or offended honor. After doing some research, Spivak found out that it was neither of these. In fact, the girl had left a letter for her elder sister in which she told her that she belonged to a group involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence. She had been asked to carry out a political assassination, but unable to do it, she killed herself to show her good faith. Knowing that her death would be attributed to illicit love, she waited for her menstruation. Despite her efforts to give her suicide a precise meaning, her attempt failed to such an extent that her death was not only unemphatic, but also completely misunderstood: every member of her family was convinced that it was a case of illicit passion. Talu tried to speak by turning her body into a text, but she did so in vain. Spivak's pessimistic conclusion, then, is that no matter how much they may try, the subalterns cannot speak.

However, using one's own personal means of expression does not mean to fail in communicating, but simply to speak with a different voice. Bhabha, for instance, rejects the idea that power and discourse are possessed entirely by the oppressors. On the contrary, he argues that subalterns speak through their autonomous difference. More specifically, he believes that instances of transgression are performed by the oppressed, who produce their own discourse through hybridity. Bhabha focuses his theory of hybridization within a colonial context, but the same ideas can also be valid within a postcolonial context. What he has to say about the colonial presence, which is always ambivalent as a result of its ability to produce not only imitation, but also mimicry, can also be said about neo-colonial powers. Indeed, the presence of any form of authority can stimulate strategies of resistance based on the production of new subversive discourses. According to Bhabha, resistance

is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the 'content' of another culture, as a difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power—hierarchy, normalization, marginalization and so forth. (1994, pp. 157-158)

The concept of mimicry, then, refers to the misreadings and incongruities produced by the dominated people who reject transparency and enact «moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular

resistance» (p. 172). According to this view, an ongoing dialectic occurs between the oppressors and the oppressed to the extent that otherness is never entirely oppositional, but productive through deformation and displacement.

Those I have called «the subalterns» in *TGST* are characters who escape classification and refuse to be dominated by finding their own ways of speaking. Their main means of resistance is hybridization, that is, the production of a disturbing effect, a silent insurrection against the noisy command of authority. As Roy writes about her protagonists, «[t]hey all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much» (*TGST*, p. 31). What Ammu, Velutha, Estha, and Rahel do is to re-articulate authority, thus developing forms of self-expression through a series of material things. Instead of words, they use objects to estrange and undermine the scenario written by the oppressors. As a divorced woman, an untouchable, and children of an inter-faith marriage, they are not entitled to speak within Indian society, but by rejecting purity and crossing boundaries, they manage to raise their voices. Not only are they capable of defying authority, but, unlike the dominant members of the Ipe family examined above, they also undergo a significant psychological evolution. Their behavior suggests self-awareness and maturity which help them survive discrimination, violence, and death. Their little gestures can be interpreted in the light of the apparently insignificant things they use because they enact a series of meaningful consequences which disrupt the order imposed by external forces.

Ammu, the twins' mother, is a clear example of a hybrid self that cannot be bent to the rules imposed by society and family. When the author introduces her in the second chapter of the book, she does it in the following way: «What was it that gave Ammu this Unsafe Edge? It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The indefinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber» (p. 44). From the beginning, before knowing what happened to her, we are faced with a woman whose true nature is to cross limits and escape categories. Two different natures coexist within her: the loving divorced mother, ready to return to her family home and endure the abuse of her relatives for the sake of her children, and the woman who loves an untouchable regardless of social conventions. A representative object suggesting her double nature is the tangerine-shaped transistor she always has with her. It is a metonym of her complex world, the container of her wishes trapped between two worlds, that is, duty and free will, reality and dream: «On the days that the radio played Ammu's songs, everyone was a little wary of her. They sensed somehow that she lived in

penumbral shadows between two worlds, just beyond the grasp of their power» (p. 44). On these days, her uncontrollable side prevails and she stops being a mother, a divorced woman, a dishonored daughter, and beyond any classification, she just gives in to her own true nature. The transistor is the material means which enables her to escape from her oppressive world: «She spent hours on the riverbank with her little plastic transistor shaped like a tangerine. She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims» (p. 43). Something stirs inside her when she listens to the radio songs played by her transistor. As the author confirms, «there was something restless and untamed about her. As though she had temporarily set aside the morality of motherhood and divorcee-hood. Even her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk. She wore flowers in her hair and carried magic secrets in her eyes» (p. 43). Obviously, such behavior is not approved of by the members of her family, especially her envious aunt Baby Kochamma, who never had the chance to live her womanhood and takes all her frustrations out on her niece. Ammu's condition within her own family is very well expressed in a line of reasoning frequently explained by Baby Kochamma:

[A] married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter . . . she had no position anywhere at all. And as a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage—Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (p. 45)

This passage demonstrates how, very often, the main perpetrators of violence against women are other female members of the family who, instead of relieving the oppression of younger generations, make their lives even harder. Ammu has learned to live with this cruelty and «developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big» (pp. 172-173). Ammu's character has been forged through years of humiliation and compromise, but her desire for self-determination has never abandoned her. She is torn between the love for her children and the defense of her right to live a full and independent life. A case in point is an episode that occurs in the central chapter of the novel entitled «The God of Small Things», in which the transistor is catalyst of a fundamental change in Ammu's behavior. The scene depicts the young woman having an afternoon nap and dreaming while her twins look at her, puzzled by her deep sleep. In her dream, she is with a man, The God of Small Things, «who left no footprints in sand, no

ripples in water, no image in mirrors» (p. 206)—like untouchables are supposed to do—whom she identifies with Velutha. She is aware of the twins' presence but «[s]he waited, under the skin of her dream, not wanting to let her children in» (p. 207). When she wakes up, she switches her transistor on and starts singing softly with her children. Suddenly, she switches it off,

tired of their [her children's] proprietary handling of her. She wanted her body back. It was hers. She shrugged her children off . . . twisted her hair into a knot . . . swung her legs off the bed, walked to the window and drew back the curtains. . . . The children heard the lock turning in Ammu's bathroom door. (p. 211)

She wants to preserve her own space, both physically and emotionally, by excluding the children from her dream and looking for some privacy in the bathroom. This is not a demonstration of what a bad mother she is, but rather of her deep need to feel like a woman again. Going back to Ayemenem has meant resigning herself to the idea that «there would be no more chances. . . . A front verandah and a back verandah. . . . And in the background, the constant, high, whining mewl of local disapproval» (p. 42). However, as a twenty-seven-year-old woman, she is not ready to give up her life yet and is still open to love. The song on the radio is probably complicit in her reaction as it talks about a young woman getting dressed for her wedding to a man she does not love. The fact that Ammu wants her body back, even from her own children, means she is a woman striving for independence, which can be obtained by firstly regaining control over her own body. She does it this same night, when she goes to the river hoping to meet Velutha to touch him and be touched by him.

On this occasion, too, the transistor plays a key role. Near the riverbank, Ammu is listening to a song. She has not realized that she is there for a precise purpose, which is not simply to meet the man she has dreamt about in the afternoon, but to defy «generations of breeding» (p. 244). She is there to build up her own form of resistance. She pays close attention to the words of the song:

There is no time to lose  
I heard her say  
Cash your dreams before  
They slip away  
Dying all the time  
Lose your dreams and you  
Will lose your mind (p. 314)

Not only is the song speaking about a dream, but it is also making an explicit reference to the risk of losing one's mind, one's personality, and one's own self. These words make her think about how important it is to act here and now. The transistor, then, is a means through which she resists enclosure and embraces the future. Her instinctive reaction is to rise and «walk out of her world like a witch. To a better, happier place» (p. 314). She starts running and arrives on the banks of the Meenachal breathless, «[a]s though she was late for something. As though her life depended on getting there in time» (p. 314). It is clear that more than a love encounter, this was a moment on which her integrity as a woman depended. The fact that she is expressing her own anger and looking for someone to share it with is demonstrated by the thought she has in the afternoon, when she sees Velutha playing with her children: «She hoped that under his careful clock of cheerfulness, he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against» (p. 167). What her family judges as restlessness is just an inner development which goes through different stages before taking on a precise shape. Ammu's apparently impulsive gesture of melting her wedding ring, for instance, is a lesson she wants to teach her daughter: «[S]he made it [the wedding ring] into a thin bangle with snake heads that she put away for Rahel» (p. 43). For the years to come, she wants Rahel to remember the importance of being free from any constraint. Rahel, indeed, treasures the bangle—representing «[s]lim snakes whispering to each other, head to head» (p. 88)—throughout her life as her mother's moral heritage, as if the two snakes speaking to each other were them: a mother and a daughter.

As a very young woman and mother who has suffered incredible traumas, Ammu's character undergoes significant changes. She is always on the move and frequently changes her status. First, she leaves home to escape the condition of un-married daughter in the suffocating environment of Ayemenem; then, she gets married to a man who turns out to be a drunkard, thus becoming a bullied wife. When he starts beating her and wants to prostitute her, she asks for a divorce and goes back to her family home as a divorced single mother. Then, she becomes the lover of an untouchable and is repudiated by her family. Hence, she has to leave Ayemenem again and becomes a rebellious woman deemed to be ill and insane. All these transitions in her life are a series of necessary passages towards self-expression and self-determination. In every situation of her life, she transforms from being an obedient daughter, wife, and mother to assertive woman: «She did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it



could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them» (p. 173). The bravest demonstrative act she engages in is her open defiance of her family and the hypocritical Indian social system as a whole. On the day after Velutha's arrest, she goes to the police station asking to make a statement and to see the man she loves. Nobody expects her to publicly put her family honor at risk and declare her love for an untouchable. Although this gesture cannot change the course of events, it definitely leaves a mark on the memory of all those involved, especially the twins, who learn that to submit passively to injustice and remain silent is the same as to commit a crime in person. All in all, as a woman escaping classification, Ammu has become a real threat for both her family and for society in general. She has challenged sexual prohibitions and mixed unmixable aspects of a woman's sexuality—i.e. motherhood and eroticism—which Indian society and the caste system want to keep separate.

Velutha is another instance of a subaltern who refuses to remain silent. He rejects the idea of being treated as a Paravan and shows his action potential through his great craftsmanship. The things that best represent his way of expressing himself are the small wooden objects he makes as toys for the children and as pieces of furniture for the Ipe family. He soon becomes the most important worker in the factory, as Chacko also admits: «He's invaluable, he practically runs the factory» (p. 264). Unlike clumsy Chacko, whose bedroom is full of broken aeromodels, Velutha can build and fix anything: «He mended radios, clocks, water pumps. He looked after the plumbing and all the electrical gadgets in the house» (p. 72). His attitude is different from that of the other untouchables as «he offered suggestions without being asked. Or . . . he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel» (p. 73). This behavior greatly worries Velutha's father. As an «Old-World Paravan», he fears for his younger son, feeling that there is something insolent in his «lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head» (p. 73). Despite any stigmatizing social belief, Velutha is in search of an authentic way of living life, pursuing his passions and cultivating his talents. Indeed, as a young man, he left Ayemenem for four years, during which he worked for a building company, thus improving his skills and knowledge. When he returns home, he still has «the same quickness. The sureness. And Vellya Paapen fear[s] for him now more than ever» (p. 74). What disturbs his father is probably the presence of two incompatible entities in Velutha: untouchability and rebellion, invisibility and preponderant presence. Like with Ammu, Roy points out how hybridity has a highly disruptive potential. Starting from his name—which in the vernacular language of Malayalam means white,

although he has black skin—Velutha’s character escapes classification. His way of communicating through his material creations makes him an atypical untouchable. Not only does he have «his own set of carpentry and a distinctly German design sensibility» (p. 72), but his creative potential is what makes it possible for him to defy the discriminating rules set by the touchables. As they go on with the reading, readers get used to the innumerable little objects he makes for the twins, who deeply admire him. They «wonder how he always seemed to know what smooth shapes waited inside the wood for him. They loved the way wood, in Velutha’s hands, seemed to soften and become as pliable as Plasticine» (p. 75). Because of this, when the twins find a boat and want to repair it, they immediately go to look for Velutha. He helps them fix it: «“First we’ll have to find the leaks”, Velutha said. “Then we’ll have to plug them!” the twins shouted, as though it was the second line of a well-known poem» (p. 203). He does not know that the main users of the boat are not going to be the children, but rather their mother and himself. Indeed, they are unknowingly preparing the boat the two lovers are going to use to cross the river night after night, the same small boat that Vellya Paapen, Velutha’s father, sees leaving in the moonlight and returning at dawn. The boat is the means Velutha uses to make “the crossing” not only of the river, but also, symbolically, of thousands of years of discrimination.

His relationship with Ammu actually starts many years before when, as a child, he used to make

intricate toys—tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts. He would bring them for Ammu, holding them on his palm . . . so she wouldn’t have to touch him to take them. (p. 72)

These small things, made with tenderness and affection, are his instruments to live an authentic, free life. They also make him realize, years later, that they can be handed to Ammu without having to worry about being touched by her and that «he was not necessarily the only giver of gifts. That *she* had gifts to give him too» (p. 168). At the beginning, Velutha’s handmade little objects are what prevent the direct contact between them; then, they become the vehicle of their encounters. A passage describes how, their first night together, he even gives shape to his fear, which materializes in a rose: «He folded his fear into a perfect rose. He held it out in the palm of his hand. She took it from him and put it in her hair» (p. 319). The small things become the symbol of their love and,

paradoxically, of the greatness of what it represents. Roy, in fact, on the last page of the book writes:

[O]n the thirteen nights that followed this one, instinctively they stuck to the Small Things. The Big Things ever lurked inside. They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things. They laughed at ant-bites on each other's bottoms. At clumsy caterpillars sliding off the end of leaves, at overturned beetles that couldn't right themselves. . . . Stick to Smallness. Each time they parted, they extracted only one small promise from each other: Tomorrow? Tomorrow. (p. 321)

In this passage, the author uses capital letters for the expression “Small Things” (as opposed to “Big Things”) and the word “Smallness”. The use of repetitions—which is a formal choice recurring throughout the book—shows how certain terms are not just signifiers, but also enclose a deep meaning and, as if they had a hypnotizing force, capture the reader's attention. In this case, the adjective «small» is a paradigmatic semantic echo evoking the title of the novel, thus closing the circular narrative frame. It links the «small story» of ordinary people with the «big story», based on the great themes that transcend space and time, such as untouchability, gender discrimination, corruption, patriarchy, etc. By “sticking to smallness”, Velutha and Ammu try to find meaning in the simple things surrounding them that give them joy and a sense of reassuring ordinari-ness. The smallest things of nature provide them with the perfect setting in which to express their love. In this uncontaminated environment, the “big thing”—history, tradition, chauvinism—cannot intrude as there is no space for the past but only for the future. This is demonstrated by the novel's closing image evoked by the word «tomorrow», which Émilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas has defined as a liberating scenario, a «non-historic horizon of “small” hopes» (2002, p. 146). As represented in Ammu's dream, Velutha is the God of Small Things. He is invisible, like every God, because his footprints have been erased by the establishment. But his presence is massive and disruptive as an untouchable who dares to break the love laws and turn his back on the big things. He lives close to nature, values the little natural things, and shares his life with the world of insects and smaller creatures.

Like Ammu, he is depicted frequently on the move. His movements eventually bring him back to Ayemenem, as if a supreme duty called him here. Born as a Paravan, he leaves home for years, during which time he receives an education, learns a trade, and shapes his sense of self. Then, he returns home and joins the

communist party, participates in marches, and protests against discrimination and inequality. However, he ends up working for a family of Anglophiles who stigmatize and exploit untouchables. These different steps in his life lead him to a level of self-awareness that allows him to transcend historical values and lay his claim on them. In other words, if Paravans «were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian-Christians would not defile themselves» (*TGST*, p. 71), an opposite kind of reversal has been carried out by Velutha. By returning to Ayemenem, he has reversed the order of things both ideologically and structurally: he has touched and been touched by a touchable woman, taught the twins the constructive potential of small things—as opposed to the destructive potential of ossified traditions—and shown that resistance can emerge out of little ordinary gestures performed by little ordinary people who live in the interstices of society. To use Bhabha's words: «The “right” to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are “in the minority”» (p. 3).

Rahel, the female twin, undoubtedly belongs to the minority, but her intrinsic otherness is what allows her to defy categories. Hybridity has been a part of her since she was born. Indeed, as dizygotic twins, she and her brother have represented duality in all its forms: as female and male, developed from two separate eggs, born from an interfaith marriage (half Hindu and half Syrian-Christian), and children of divorced parents. Bhabha has claimed that «[t]his interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of . . . hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy» (1994, p. 5). Indeed, in the world built by Rahel and her brother Estha, no hierarchical division of reality is admitted and conventions are systematically broken. A case in point is their habit of reading backwards, regardless of their grand-aunt's recommendations to use perfect English. They treat words as objects that can be turned upside down, mystifying the rules imposed by the outside and developing their own way of expressing themselves. When an Australian friend of Baby Kochamma's, Miss Mitten, goes to visit her, for instance,

[she] gave Estha and Rahel a baby book—*The Adventures of Susie Squirrel*—as a present . . . [and] they were deeply offended. First they read it forwards. Miss Mitten, who belonged to a sect of born-again Christians, said that she was a Little Disappointed in them when they read it aloud to her, backwards. «*ebT serutnev.dA*

*fo eisuS lerruqS. enO gnirps gninrom eisuS lerruqS ekow pu». . . . Miss Mitten complained to baby Kochamma . . . about their reading backwards. She told . . . she had seen Satan in their eyes. (TGST, p. 58)*

As the ironic passage above suggests, through their innocent, ludic methods, the children defy authority and have fun transgressing the categories imposed by the members of their family.

Among the toys Rahel treasures, there is a wristwatch with time painted on it: «Ten to two. One of her ambitions was to own a watch on which she could change the time whenever she wanted to (which according to her was what Time was meant for in the first place)» (p. 37). This watch, which always tells the same time, represents Rahel's life until she returns, as an adult woman, to her family home, where everything began. It is as if her existence had remained frozen in time, stuck in the thirteen days of doom in December 1969. Although she goes on with her life—she moves to America where she unsuccessfully attends a school of architecture, changes many jobs, meets a man she marries and then leaves—she is emotionally paralyzed and unable to live fully any experience. In the first chapter, for example, we find out that: «Rahel drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge» (p. 19). For her, time flows but only literally, because symbolically she is still a hurt and abandoned child who suffered unspeakable traumas. Her husband notices the emptiness in her eyes:

[W]hen they made love he was offended by her eyes. They behaved as though they belonged to someone else. Someone watching. Looking out of the window at the sea. At a boat in the river. Or a passer-by in the mist in a hat. He was exasperated because he didn't know what that look *meant*. He put it somewhere between indifference and despair. He didn't know that in some places, like the country that Rahel came from, various kinds of despair competed for primacy. (p. 20)

Rahel is unable to feel anything or to get involved in any significant relationship. She is a passive spectator of her own life, as if she were looking at herself from outside. Her husband cannot know that a hole was carved in her self a long time before. There is a space within her that was left empty and can only be filled by recovering her hidden memories. Only then can time re-start. In the chapter titled «The History House», we find out that Rahel loses her wristwatch in the History House, the morning Velutha is beaten to death: «The watch . . . stayed

behind in the History House. In the back verandah. A faulty record of the time. Ten to Two» (p. 295). This is a highly symbolic fact because as the watch shows a frozen time, similarly the History House is a place in which history repeats itself: the weak are crushed by the strong, tradition hinders progress, the establishment erases humanity. They are both paradoxical cases of how time can actually be nullified: a watch for which time does not pass and a History House in which history does not progress.

Rahel's journey back home and back in time is a way to unbury unprocessed memories and make peace with the past. During one of her walks across the places of her childhood, she recalls her watch and realizes that «[s]omething lay buried in the ground. Under grass. Under twenty-three years of June rain. A small forgotten thing. Nothing that the world would miss. A child's plastic wristwatch with the time painted on it. Ten to two it said» (p. 121). Her toy watch represents all the painful things she has removed from her mind, voluntarily or otherwise. As the anthropologist Daniel Miller claims, certain things «remain peripheral to our vision, fade out of focus, and yet they are determinant of our behavior and identity» (2010, p. 50). This is the case of Rahel's watch—and the frozen time it represents—which has faded from her mind, but incarnates the psychic prison where she has lived all her life. When she enters her family home for the first time in twenty-three years, her whole world seems to make sense again: «Her life had a size and a shape now. She had half-moons under her eyes and a team of trolls on her horizon» (*TGST*, p. 148). After years spent living restlessly, she finally starts giving a shape to her unease. The trolls represent her memories which are becoming clearer and clearer thanks to the objects she sees around her: «A smooth seashell and a spiky one. A plastic case for contact lenses. An orange pipette. A silver crucifix on a string of beads. Baby Kochamma's rosary . . . » (p. 149). Material things stored in her old home help her contextualize her past as well as overcome her sense of alienation. As Miller also confirms, our home contains our biography and our biography is inscribed in things (2010, p. 97).

Rahel's wristwatch is not the only thing she owns that cause her to see a crystallized, altered reality. Among her possessions as a young girl, there is a pair of «yellow-rimmed red plastic sunglasses [which] made the world look red» (*TGST*, p. 37). This image immediately suggests a vision of the world seen through a child's eyes made up of over-signification in perception and a proliferation of colors and things. When Rahel wears her sunglasses, for instance, the world becomes «angry-coloured» (p. 81). In the child's world, red is the color associated with rage. Indeed, in many circumstances in which anger is involved, Rahel is

wearing her sunglasses, such as when Rahel becomes jealous watching everyone greet Sophie Mol upon her arrival, as if they were all acting in a play:

Rahel put on her sunglasses and looked back into the Play. Everything was Angry-coloured. Sophie Mol, standing between Margaret Kochamma and Chacko, looked as though she ought to be slapped. Rahel found a whole column of juicy ants. They were on their way to church. All dressed in red. They had to be killed before they got there. (p. 176)

Although she expresses her jealousy in a very childish manner, Rahel's anger is the result of her family's hypocrisy. She is conscious of the fact that they are celebrating her cousin's Englishness, which makes her feel offended and neglected.

Another significant moment in the novel is also seen through Rahel's red lenses, when she sees Velutha carrying a red flag marching with a group of communists in the city of Cochin, as she is on her way to the airport to pick up her cousin. On that occasion, Rahel's grand-aunt, Baby Kochamma is laughed at and annoyed by some of the marchers. As a result, she develops a feeling of disdain and rage towards communists, particularly Velutha, who becomes a sort of scapegoat for her humiliation. Besides playing on the symbolic meaning of the color red, linked to the communist party, Roy is also introducing the idea that the twins' vision of reality is deeply influenced by their grand-aunt. As explained above, she distorts facts in the twins' eyes, thus using them for her evil purposes. The red lenses of Rahel's sunglasses represent a filter between herself and the real world. From this perspective, it is no coincidence that the other character who always wears sunglasses in the novel is Mammachi, the twins' grandmother, whose attitude towards Velutha is totally influenced by Baby Kochamma. Baby Kochamma directs her actions from behind the scenes and convinces Mammachi to punish the untouchable in an exemplary way.

The filter which prevents Rahel from seeing reality in its true colors gradually disappears during her return journey to Ayemenem, when she comes to terms with the past and unearths real history. Therefore, as in the case of the other characters analyzed so far, she, too, undergoes a deep process of change. Her journey back to India is a psychic journey from innocence to growth and self-realization. In the place where it all began, Rahel finds signs of herself and manages to re-elaborate past traumas. Going through the places and the things of the past and evaluating them in a new light is like psychoanalytic therapy for her. Hence, the incestuous embrace with her twin brother can be interpreted as the

final act in a process of self-discovery. Roy describes it with a simile based on the features of the twins, that is, quietness (Estha) and emptiness (Rahel):

Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons. Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief. Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. (p. 311)

Finally, Rahel has merged with her other half and is able to see the world through her own eyes, without any filter:

There is very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened next. Nothing that . . . would separate Sex from Love. Or Needs from Feelings. Except perhaps that no Watcher watched through Rahel's eyes. (p. 310)

While, on the one hand, Rahel tries to fill her emptiness by following a spiritual path in the present, on the other hand, her brother Estha's quietness seems to be a point of arrival, a final condition which cannot be changed.

The male twin's quietness becomes absolute silence, which he reaches gradually over time, after the terrible events of his young life. As Roy writes in the first pages of the book,

Estha had always been a quiet child, so no one could pinpoint with any degree of accuracy exactly when (the year, if not the month or day) he had stopped talking. Stopped talking altogether that is. The fact is that there wasn't an "exactly when." It had been a gradual winding down and closing shop. A barely noticeable quietening. As if he had simply run out of conversation and had nothing left to say. (p. 12)

Estha is the last character I am examining within the category of the subalterns. He shares the same characteristics of hybridity as his twin sister, and also from the point of view of gender, he is beyond classification. On several occasions, his effeminacy emerges through his attitudes, but also as a result of the traumas he lives. A case in point is when he is abused by the Orangedrink Lemondrink man at the movie theater. His first sexual experience, at the age of eight, is with a man who not only takes his childhood away, but also his gendered identity. This is demonstrated by the fact that, before the movie begins, Estha goes to the men's toilets, while after the sexual abuse, a few minutes later, he feels sick



and enters the «Princess Circle bathroom. HERS» (p. 103). Another example are the games he plays with his sister and his English cousin, which he leads as the «draping expert» (p. 180). Wearing saris, bindis on his head and kohl on his eyes, he «pleated Sophie Mol's pleats. Organized Rahel's pallu and settle[s] his own» (p. 180). As anticipated in section 1.1., when he grows up, he embarrasses his father by behaving like a housewife and taking care of the cleaning and shopping for the house. These and other signs show that Estha, from many perspectives, has a hybrid identity, which make him a disturbing element within the Ipe family.

The material things that best represent him are some notebooks he jealously kept when he was a child entitled «Wisdom Exercise Notebooks». In the homonymous chapter of the novel, adult Rahel is moving around her grandfather's office when she accidentally comes across «a flat packet wrapped in clear plastic and stuck with Sellotape» (p. 149). The packet contains Estha's wisdom exercise notebooks, the cover of which immediately conveys his inner conflicts. In the space for the surname, «he had rubbed out his surname with spit, and taken half the paper with it. Over the whole mess, he had written in pencil Un-known» (p. 149). From a very young age, he is aware of the consequences of having mixed blood and is not able to identify himself precisely. The content of the notebook is a series of stories he wrote to practice English grammar and writing skills and include all his mother's corrections. Besides revealing the tender relationship between himself and his mother, Estha's writings also suggest he has always preferred expressing himself through unspoken words. The notebooks represent his way of communicating through the manipulation of language and reality. By means of his writing, which might be seen as a sort of therapy, he reflects on what happens around him and to the people he loves. As the title he gives to the notebooks states, he is developing his wisdom. And it is because of his habit of thinking that one day he has two thoughts that are going to change his life forever:

[T]he Two Thoughts he thought, were these: (a) Anything can happen to Anyone. And (b) It's best to be prepared. Having thought these thoughts, Estha Alone was happy with his bit of wisdom. (p. 191)

He is terrified that the man who abused him might come and find him and he also feels that something is going to happen in his family and that he and his sister might need to be ready to escape. These thoughts reasoning, which he shares with his sister, convince them to find a boat in case they need to cross the

river. His fears come true, but the events that follow are too big for him to be ready to face them.

The only way Estha finds to figure them out is to retreat into silence. Paradoxically, silence may actually represent his voice, that is, his way of crying out his rage and pain.

As I argued at the beginning of this section, in a logic of resistance to an oppressive power, the subaltern's way of acting cannot (only) be speech. Silence, in fact, is not always a signifier of subalternity. Being only silence, its content cannot signify, but its space, temporality, and facticity bring it into existence, thus transforming it from absence to presence. The absence of words around Estha suggests the presence of a boundary between himself and the rest of the world. As Roy says,

[o]ver time he had acquired the ability to blend into the background of wherever he was—into bookshelves, gardens, curtains, doorways, streets—to appear inanimate, almost invisible to the untrained eye. It usually took strangers a while to notice him. . . . Estha occupied very little space in the world. (p. 12)

For him, silence becomes an expression of self and a barrier to any knowledge of self. A case in point is represented by Baby Kochamma's inability to interpret his silence, which annoys her very much. In a comic scene, Baby Kochamma shows Rahel—who has just arrived at the Ayemenem house—how Estha lives in a permanent state of dumbness:

«Here he comes», she announced to Rahel, not bothering to lower her voice. «Now watch. He won't say anything. He'll walk straight to his room. Just watch!» . . . «Watch!» Baby Kochamma said. She seemed excited. «He'll walk straight to his room and wash his clothes. He's very over-clean, . . . he won't say a *word*!» . . . He walked to his room. A gloating halo appeared around Baby Kochamma's head. «See?» she said. (p. 86)

This passage suggests that Estha's silence is an operation of power rather than powerlessness. He is completely impenetrable to his grand-aunt. Behind her satisfaction at being able to predict all his moves, there is a sort of vexation due to her lack of control over her nephew's thoughts. Silence, here, is an index of heroism as it is not a socially imposed condition, but a freely chosen refusal to speak. As Rajan has pointed out in her book, *Real and Imagined Women*, «[s]ilence as withheld communication produces mystery and enigma; it expresses displeasure;

it retains secrets; it demonstrates self-discipline or resistance. . . .» (2005, p. 87). Estha's silence is a form of action, a punishment for those, like his grand-aunt, who made him speak when he was not supposed to say anything. It is Baby Kochamma who forced him to answer «yes» when the policeman asked whether Velutha was the man who kidnapped him and his sister: «The Inspector asked his question. Estha's mouth said Yes. Childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt» (*TGST*, p. 303). Unlike what Spivak argues, then, here the subaltern does not speak because he does not want to.

His psychological development, therefore, parallels his progressive turn inwards. Silence is the only possible reaction to unspeakable violence. Like Rahel, he takes long walks along the river, but since he is never the focus of the narrative, we do not know whether his walking is a catalyst of memories and therapeutic experiences as it is for his sister. What we do know is that, like the other traumatized marginalized characters, Estha has chosen the self over society. He has chosen not to bend to the rules of a social system which he does not understand. Speaking has destroyed him, while being quiet has allowed him to construct a new self.

In conclusion, as I have shown in this analysis, the perpetrators in Roy's book share a common obsession for naming, classification, and categorization. As representatives of a neo-colonial authority, they have a deep impulse to control and set limits as well as a cold instinct to neutralize any attempt at crossing boundaries. However, this proves to be sterile and even damaging for them, as they all experience forms of psychological and physical degradation. Their lives end up being purposeless and empty. Nothing valuable is saved by time and all that remain are Pappachi's decomposed insects, Mammachi's dismissed factory, Baby Kochamma's decaying body, and Chacko's broken wooden model airplanes. On the other hand, those whom I have called «the subalterns», that is the characters pushed to the peripheries by social injustice, find their own ways of reacting to and resisting marginalization. They all embrace hybridity over categorization, escape classification, and reject purity. They inhabit the boundary, which according to Bhabha, is the place where «presencing» begins (1994, p. 13). Ammu challenges social and sexual constraints; Velutha (a black man whose name means «white») is an atypical Paravan choosing the self over the other within a society that wants his identity erased; the twins embody the double, both biologically and socially. On the margins, they find energies to assert their own identities. Quadri Ismail, in his contribution to a Subaltern Studies volume dedicated to community, gender, and violence, argues that «inherent in the logic of dominant history's

repression[s]»—which manifest themselves «through a process of incorporation, subordination, and expulsion of social groups»—«is the possibility of its own subversion» (2000, p. 216). The small things which Roy has foregrounded, based on a choice that is as ideological as it is aesthetic, give the subalterns the possibility to express their emancipatory potential. Ammu, through her transistor, escapes from an oppressive reality and finds strength to challenge hegemonic powers; Velutha and his little wooden crafts represent the disruptive power of small things, which are not only full of expressive potential, but, in their simplicity, are also signifiers of life's meaningful values; Rahel's toy wristwatch and sunglasses show how high power structures, such as family, tradition, religion, etc., can entrap one, but can also be the starting point from which to elaborate new narrative strategies; and Estha's notebook shows how resistance is not necessarily expressed through a violent subversion of existing norms, but also by using unconventional means such as silence and dissonance. Unlike the oppressors, characterized by immobility and psychic involution, the subalterns are identified by movement and change as well as personal growth and development.

A close reading of *TGST* from the perspective of things reveals that the material world is an essential part of narrative and is invested with meaning and ideology. Roy's celebration of the small is expressed through a detailed illustration of material things, which are traditionally relegated to the background, and their engagement with the protagonists of the story. Both elements of context, like the river, and objects with which characters engage in their daily lives represent vital materiality which affects the physical and mental development of the characters. The things associated with the oppressors demonstrate how their distinctive feature is an obsession for classification and control, which makes them instances of a neo-colonial power developed within the context of post-independence India. Their material environment, however, shows that they are condemned to a backward process of bodily and emotional degradation. On the contrary, the things that characterize the subalterns are instances of their ways of producing their own discourses and moving forward. In other words, they defeat silence by expressing their otherness through material things which are incredibly subversive in their ordinariness.

Hypocrisy and power destroy those who do not submit to the established and dominant norms. However, mixedness and impurity have political validity to the extent that they are forms of rebellion carried out by people living on the borders of history. As Bhabha has noted, «[f]orms of popular rebellion and mobilization are often most subversive and transgressive when they are created through

oppositional cultural practices» (1994, p. 29). Through the material entities they engage with, Roy's marginalized characters develop oppositional cultural practices based on «the violation of a signifying limit of space, [which] permits . . . a counterdivision of objects, usages, meanings, spaces and properties» (Barthes 1972, p. 246). The things that best represent them, then, acquire specific meanings in the contexts in which they are used, thus becoming metonymies of resistance and signifiers of otherness. They represent the capacity of the marginalized to move away from the singularities of class, caste, and gender, and assert their presence beyond limits. In Bhabha's words, «there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the "beyond"» (1994, p. 2) as it suggests distance from a center as well as transgression of safe borders. However, in *TGST*, transgression, i.e. the violation of limits, acquires a positive meaning as it allows the articulation of «subaltern agency to emerge as relocation and reinscription» (p. 277). Although being in the beyond may be painful and problematic, as Roy's characters' traumatizing life experiences have shown, it «becomes a space of intervention in the here and now» (p. 10) in which the structuring divide between the big and the small is dissolved and small things become powerful revisionary entities.

## (UN)HOMELY THINGS

Can a woman live without a home?  
Can there be another four walls  
    apart from the home  
within which to stay, eat, live happily,  
within which the woman will remain a woman  
    and the home home?  
(Katyayani, *Woman and Home*)

A new idea of home is emerging from contemporary Indian literature by women writers. Home is no longer a fixed and immutable location associated with patriarchal power and women's effacement. On the contrary, it begins to be represented as a mutable psychic-inhabited place replete with possibilities of openness and resistance as well as an ideal space from which women can draw sustenance and creativity. In this chapter, the primary concern that has fueled my analysis is the examination of the things that contribute to the perpetual exchange between the homely and the unhomely within the domestic environment inhabited by Indian women. More particularly, I am examining Anita Nair's novel *Ladies' Coupé* (2001) with a specific focus on the way the women protagonists cope with unhomeliness—i.e. a traumatic state which goes beyond the simple sense of not belonging and involves a condition of disillusionment and estrangement in a suddenly defamiliarized environment (Freud 1919)—experienced within their homes.

In the present era, characterized by globalization and the ceaseless movement of people across borders, the notion of home has occupied a central position in epistemic discourses, as both a living territory and an integral part of people's psychical life. As Michel Foucault had anticipated, our epoch «will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. . . . The anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time» (1978, p. 23). Since the

1980s, a considerable increase in migrations across the globe has been registered, as Avtar Brah has pointed out (2005, pp. 194-195), and those dispersions of people embody the very idea of center, that is, a home from which the movement occurs. As a combination of architectural settings and social practices, home is a problematic concept both in terms of commodity—including the complex spatial dynamics it encompasses—and as a discursive formation linked to the «homing desire» of individuals (p. 32), i.e. their need to feel at home. From the perspective of Bill Brown's «Thing Theory» (2001), the house is an objectification of the thingness of the home—where «thingness» refers to an array of human sensibilities like memory, meaning, emotion, etc. Both aspects feed into the politics of home and identity formation, but the discourses around such a complex notion have demonstrated a universalizing tendency to tackle it from an unmarked and normalizing male perspective. However, on the one hand, the growing feminization of migration, and, on the other, the inextricable bond between women and the domestic sphere in most cultures, require a gender perspective when discussing the idea of home and the social and cultural dynamics surrounding it. As Marangoly George underlines in her book, *The Politics of Home*, the issue of home and the private sphere is usually embedded in discourses on women (1996, p. 19). Indeed, while for men home is a refuge of cultural security as well as a site for escape and respite, for women it often connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy and oppression. The same geographical and physical place, then, comes to articulate different histories so that home can be simultaneously a place of safety and terror, a conflicting site of belonging and becoming, both limiting and liberating.

Such a duality is particularly evident in the literature produced by contemporary Anglophone Indian women writers, who point out how Indianness and womanhood are not placeless, but rather formed and informed by place. Home, both as a geographical and a metaphorical site, is crucial in the construction of the Indian woman. Hence, the domestic sphere is foregrounded not only as the primary arena of social life, but also as a patriarchally-designated space which women have internalized to such an extent that it shapes their individual identities. Sanjukta Dasgupta notes how, in the Indian public debate and common understanding, women are equated with home and, within this private sphere, they have the symbolic function of preserving tradition, desi culture, and national values (2007, p. 77). Lisa Lau has also observed that South Asian women authors provide detailed descriptions of the domestic spaces in which the women's lives unfold and their identity negotiations take place (2006, p. 1098). The physical

structure of their homes usually reflects their status in the social system as the domestic sphere is the preeminent site where women can contest patriarchy and acquire a positionality in the family. However, as George also points out (1996, p. 20), paralleling the style of a woman's dwelling with the development of her psyche is a problematic association which suggests a static, basic, and even primitive way of interpreting the inner world of women. Moreover, even though the idea of home moves along different axes, in fiction «it is usually represented as fixed, rooted, stable—the very antithesis of travel» (p. 2). In recent writings by Indian women authors, however, a new idea has been added to the notion of home as a static physical site where women defend, contest, and search for their identity. What emerges from these narratives is a more fluid concept of home that transcends the physical boundaries, thereby becoming a subjectively experienced place in which multiple subject positions are possible. James Clifford, in his essay, *Traveling Cultures*, has stated that it is necessary to reconceive dwelling as «no longer simply the ground from which traveling departs, and to which it returns» (1992, p. 115). Such a perspective suggests reading not only more than the domestic into representations of the home, but also imagining home different from a single geographical place. If we consider the literature of the diaspora, for instance, the idea of home acquires blurred characteristics in the tension between here and there, present and past, local and global. Borders become the very location in which identity formation takes place, opening up multiple semiotic spaces in which individuals can develop a sense of self through encounters and exchanges. Hence, in the postmodern world, home cannot be reduced to just a thing, but becomes an emotional determinant in the construction of identity. As our boundaries expand, instability enters the idea of home, challenging its assumed notion of purity. The ideal homogeneity of the domestic sphere gives way to ambiguity and fluidity to such an extent that home ceases to be a real place associated with roots. It becomes instead increasingly connected with the idea of routes, with a specific emphasis on travel and multiple locations. As Malashri Lal and Sukrita Kumar claim in their introduction to the volume they edited, *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature*, it is necessary to stretch the conventional boundaries of home and «comprehend the new shapes and contours of human identity locating itself in new mental and physical homes» (2007, loc. 157). The progressive elision of boundaries between the real and unreal home can cause such a disturbing ambiguity that the familiarity of the home suddenly becomes disillusionment and estrangement. It is within this context, formed by the mingling of mental projections and spatial characteristics, that Indian women



develop a feeling of uncanniness due to a «disturbing unfamiliarity of the evidently familiar» (Vidler 1992, p. 18). Their homes become mental spaces of silence, solitude, internal confinement, and suffocation. The place that used to be familiar, hence, becomes a strange land, thus causing women to experience homelessness in the psychical, if not the physical, space.

In the following sections, the widely praised novel *Ladies' Coupé* by one of the most well-known contemporary Indian writers, Anita Nair, is examined. After presenting Nair's book as a transcultural women's novel, I will deal with the new concept of home—as something fluid and in transit—which emerges from this narrative. More specifically, I will explore the setting of the novel—a train compartment for women in India—which is a relatively new trope in Indian English literature. On the one hand, I will show how through deterritorialization and reterritorialization via narration, women challenge a stable idea of home, which becomes a mental place taking shape in memory, imagination, and desire. On the other hand, I will point out how the transitional space of the coupé enables forms of resistance within a male context. Finally, I will focus on the critical analysis of the (un)homely things that populate women's domestic lives. In other words, I will examine the things that transform the coziness of home into dread and contribute to the imperceptible sliding of familiarity into alienation, orientation into estrangement. I will show how the perpetual exchange between the homely and the unhomely is represented through a series of objects that the women manage to transform from suffocating entities into tools of struggle and resistance. The aim of this chapter is to examine Indian women's ways of inhabiting the realm of the unhomely and coping with the feeling of estrangement from that which they consider (or used to consider) as home.

### ***Ladies' Coupé*: a transcultural women's novel**

Translated into more than twenty-five languages, Anita Nair's second novel *Ladies' Coupé* (hereafter mentioned as *LC*) has been defined as «one of the most important feminist novels to come out of South Asia» (*Daily Telegraph*). It foregrounds the story of six women of different ages and social classes who question the deep meaning of their feminine identity in contemporary India. The events take place over one night when the six passengers, strangers to one another, share a coupé reserved for women only. Each woman tells her own story freely as they know they will never see each other again. The protagonist realizes that «she

could tell these women whatever she chose to. Her secrets, desires, and fears. In turn, she could ask them whatever she wanted» (*LC*, p. 21). The central character, Akhila, is a forty-five-year-old clerk at the Bangalore income-tax office who has devoted her whole life to her family after her father's premature death. In order to look after her mother and younger brothers and sister, she has put aside her own happiness, but as time passes she starts feeling the need to recuperate her true self as a woman. She leads an ordinary life with military precision, as her sari «heavy with starch» (p. 82) perfectly represents. When the starch which holds her self together becomes so heavy that it prevents her from moving, she decides to do what nobody would expect of a respectable Indian woman: to set off alone on a train journey.

By boarding that train, Akhila and the other passengers enter what Avtar Brah has called the «diaspora space» (as opposed to the diasporic space), i.e. «the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of “us” and “them”, are contested» (2005, p. 226). The dialectical conversations and exchanges between the women passengers make it a site for contestation in which «the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native» (p. 226). Brah's definition implies that the native can also experience displacement and alienation within his or her homeland, thus living a condition of exile not so much as a physical circumstance as a state of the mind.

Anita Nair, like her characters, embodies a dweller of the diaspora space. Indeed, despite being a stay-at-home writer currently living in Bangalore, she decided to leave her natal region—Kerala—because of its social injustices and contradictions. Torn between the affection for her place of birth and a feeling of unease towards a home that does not feel quite like home, Nair lives the problematic condition of the indigenous experiencing culture as a «site of travel» (Clifford 1992). It is from this perspective that Brah claims that the diaspora space as a conceptual category is «“inhabited” not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous» (2005, p. 32). In the introduction to the book *Where the rain is born*, Nair writes that Kerala is «a package wrought of colour, traditions, dainty foods, coconut lined lagoons and marvelous beaches . . . », but also plagued by «total lack of industry, high unemployment, a competitive and conspicuous consumerism, bureaucracy, corruption, . . . [and] stifling conservative attitudes . . . » (2002, p. ix). Memory, nostalgia, but also disillusionment accompany her life to such an extent that, although she is not a diasporic writer, the issues of home, borders, and dis/location have become integral parts of her inner life.

Similarly, despite not being set in a foreign land, *LC* can be considered as a trans-cultural novel for its clear focus on the search for identity based on displacement as well as border crossing.

According to Sissy Helff's study (2013), transcultural novels depict characters whose actions contribute to a more individualized construction of home. Hence, a traditional notion of home is disputed and experiences of border-crossings are foregrounded. Moreover, Helff continues, transcultural narratives challenge the collective idea of a particular community while negotiating alternative realities and cultural practices (p. 33). As a layered text—in which Akhila's story is intertwined with five short stories told by the other women passengers—*LC* rejects a collective idea of a community of Indian women in contemporary India, focusing instead on each life account as an individual experience drawn on different everyday situations among different social strata. In *The Telegraph*, they write:

Like a ragpicker with an eagle eye, [Nair] observes the ordinary lives of maidser-vants, masseurs, vendors, and other women who course through daily life. It is the strength and resilience of the everyday woman that Nair brings out. . . . Nair's women are fleshed out to the last detail. You can visualise them clearly—their faces, their bones, their desires. . . . (online)

The perspective adopted by Nair—enacting women's locationality from different subject positions—works at a number of different levels and is part of a critical strategy that enables her narrative to reject reductive representations from a feminist viewpoint. In other words, Nair's commitment to unraveling operations of power that naturalize identities makes *LC* not only a transcultural text, but also a feminist account that discovers local histories of exploitation and struggle. Unlike the literary fiction by women writers published in the 1970s and 1980s which, as George has also argued, did not provide much of a contribution to the women's struggle, this kind of narrative tackles feminine desire and creativity from an entirely different angle. Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Gita Saghal's fiction, for instance, usually depicts upper-class women who leave their homes after a domestic crisis (caused less by rebellion than boredom), but finally return without changing much of their lives. After analyzing their works, George states that «[t]he failure of these expeditions in search of the self present us with a situation in which we have to acknowledge the limited usefulness of literary texts as political tools for social transformation» (1996, p. 38). Nair's novel, on the other hand, significantly reworks this dynamic by focusing on what Anjali Verma and Perna Jatav have defined an «emotional journey» towards self-

realization (p. 126). Akhila is self-consciously transgressive as she chooses to relocate herself.

In a 1989 essay titled *Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness*, bell hooks suggests that political struggle «can be experienced . . . [when] one transgresses, moves “out of one’s place”. . . . Moving, we confront the reality of choice and location» (p. 15). Akhila’s reterritorialization via narration and community with other women—which critics like Cassandra Bausman (2014) and Nandana Dutta (2013) have recently examined—cannot be fully understood unless we consider home as a backdrop providing occasions for resistance and escape in various ways. In *Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse*, Caren Kaplan writes:

We must leave home, as it were, since our homes are often the sites of racism, sexism, and other damaging social practices. Where we come to locate ourselves in terms of our specific histories and differences must be a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new» (1987, pp. 194-195)

In this respect, literature has the power to refashion alternative worlds which might be read as counter-narratives to the real world as well as to achieve the compromise between past and future envisaged by Kaplan. Hence, although Nair does not consider herself a feminist writer, she tackles women’s issues in contemporary India by revising the association of an adequate home with an adequate self. Her attempt at re-writing the traditional idea of home reveals an ideological struggle because, as George also states, imagining a home is a political act (1996, p. 6). By placing her characters in a transitional space and by making them question their homes, the author relocates the political positioning of home as a secure, familiar, and safe place. She also demonstrates that the “Indian woman” is not a clear, distinctive, or homogeneous form, as Clara Nubile underlines in her introduction to the book *The Danger of Gender* (2003). Instead, as Kanchana Natarajan writes, an important factor that creates a connection among all Indian women is «a segregated, gender-specific and highly gender-coded way of life» (2002, p. 15). This condition emerges notably from Nair’s narrative by looking, for instance, at the setting she has chosen for her story, i.e. a segregated, gender-specific space within a typically male environment. The author has said that the inspiration for *LC* came when one night she was traveling in one of those trains and the rest of the women in her compartment were all middle-aged

women. They started talking about their lives and they swapped stories with complete abandon. After this personal experience, she decided to develop the theme of women's community in a work which has inevitably become a women's book.

The main theme of the novel is also central to feminist discourses as it relates to the menacing presence of the home as a site in which women are absorbed both physically and mentally. This issue is expressed through the doubt that Akhila tries to resolve during her journey: «“All I am trying to do is convince myself that a woman can live alone”» (*LC*, p. 22). For Akhila, to live alone means to feel free to express her own identity without bending to the suffocating rules of family or society. It also means to stop feeling at one with home—as an object among objects—and to instead feel its inhabitant. Akhila's question resonates in the lines of the poem *Woman and Home* by the Indian poet Katyayani, who writes:

Can a woman live without a home?  
Can there be another four walls  
apart from the home  
within which to stay, eat, live happily,  
within which the woman will remain a woman  
and the home home?  
So she would be not part of the home  
but its inhabitant. (p. 69)

Akhila's deterritorialization leads her to question a deeply ingrained Indian idea according to which the home is a site of patriarchal oppression in which a woman inevitably loses herself. A passage of the laws of Manu, which I have commented on in chapter 1, states very clearly that a woman can never be left alone, nor be given any independence: «In childhood a woman should be under her father's control. In youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead under her sons'. She should not have independence» (1991, p. 5148). The stories of the women passengers in Nair's novel dramatically reflect this condition, but, interestingly, they also show how home can acquire a centrifugal force, triggering both a physical and psychical journey. As a gendered spatiality at the core of women's subjectivities, home progressively loses its phenomenological characteristics, thereby assuming a metonymic significance.

As a central point of interaction for many different disciplines, “home” has been given multiple definitions, shifting from the private to the public sphere. On the one hand, as Sara Ahmed has pointed out, home can be where one usually lives, where one's family lives, or one's native country (2005, p. 340). This idea

refers to the very physical and geographical aspect of a place where one's roots lie. George also underlines that one of the primary connotations of home is of the «“private” space from which the individual travels into the larger arenas of life and to which he or she returns at the end of the day» (1996, p. 11). The “ritual of return” is also at the center of David N. Benjamin's viewpoint on home, which he defines as a descriptive term used in social, scientific, humanistic, and architectural literatures to describe a place of regular residency or origin (1995, pp. 295-296). On the other hand, George writes, home can be an imagined location «more readily fixed in a mental landscape than in actual geography» (1996, p. 11). David Morley also focuses on a more figurative meaning of home arguing that it is “not necessarily (or only) a physical place”, but rather a rhetorical construction (2000, p. 17). It is, therefore, a site of both belonging and becoming, where various discursive formations converge. On the changing nature of home, bell hooks argues that «[h]ome is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference» (1989, p. 148). Heidi Armbruster confirms the fluidity of this concept by claiming that «[home] may involve an actual place of lived experience and a metaphorical space of personal attachment and identification» (2002, p. 120). In the same vein, Avtar Brah develops a double notion of home as «the lived experience of a locality», in which everyday life takes place, but also as a «mythic place of desire» (2005, pp. 209-210), thus subverting its stability and situating it at the level of psychical life. This critical shift from physical location to psychical interpretation is also represented in Chandra Talpade Mohanty's formulation in which «being at home» refers to «the familiar, safe, protected boundaries», whereas «not being home» is a matter of realizing that home was «an illusion of coherence» (1986, p. 169). Emotion, illusion, and desire enter the definition of home, which consequently becomes a timeless and spaceless category inhabited by the unconscious. The humanist geographer Gillian Rose, for instance, claims that it is impossible to make sense of a place «full of human significance» (1993, p. 41) unless academics listen to the interpretations of those who lived in it. Hence, home is neither natural, nor neutral, but socially constructed and deeply linked to human experience, as Juhani Pallasmaa also notes: «As well as being a symbol of protection and order, home can, in negative life situations, become a concretization of human misery: of loneliness, rejection, exploitation and violence» (1995, p. 134). The difficulty in framing home precisely means that it is defined more by what is outside it than inside it. In George's terms, «[the] distance from the very location that one strives to

define is . . . intrinsic to the definition that is reached» (1996, p. 2). As a result, one tends to look for a meaning based on separation, and reconciliation is only possible through narrative and memory. Commenting on the condition of being away from home, Sara Ahmed claims that home is a far too purified space of belonging in which «the subject is too comfortable to question the limits or borders of her or his experience» (2005, p. 339). Consequently, to leave home is to suspend the boundaries in which identities are trapped and represents a challenge to both physical and psychical confinement. Ahmed argues that home is where the self is going and, therefore, internalized. In her view, then, home does not coincide with a stasis of being or a model of familiarity, but with a narrative journey during which the self experiences a spatial reconfiguration. Another dimension, according to Ahmed's argument, adds to the notion of home, that is, affect or, in other words, the way in which one feels or fails to feel within the domestic environment. As a result, the boundary between self and home, inner and outer world, becomes permeable to such an extent that «being-at-home suggests that space and subject leak into each other» (p. 341). Adopting Ahmed's perspective for reading the works under consideration means observing that all the oppositions which have traditionally characterized the idea of home are inevitably deconstructed. Indeed, by boarding a train, the women protagonists of the novel examined in this chapter transcend the binary division between private and public, thereby entering a third dimension free from borders, limits, or barriers.

Given the story's setting in a train compartment for women, Nair's novel represents the opening up of a space, both literal and figural, within a patriarchal system. This space, neither private nor public, represents a transitional site with a strong transformational force. Indeed, the idea of transitional space as an obscure zone and unformed model of spatiality suggested by Malcolm Miles in his essay, *After the Public Realm: Spaces of Representation, Transition and Plurality* (2000), should not be associated with a negative image of instability or confusion. On the contrary, it is in its vagueness that all its liberating potential lies. Its transitory nature allows for a suspension of identity as well as a revision of what is meant by home. Consequently, the dwellers of that locus find the conditions «to produce their own mutable spaces» (p. 256) and create a new personal notion of home. Within the annihilating environment of her natal home, for instance, Akhila develops a desperate need to escape: «She would go. She had to, or she would go mad confined within the walls of the house and the life she was expected to live» (*LC*, p. 4). Her reaction suggests that, paradoxically, a woman has to lose home—to become homeless—in order to acquire identity. As Marian

Aguar writes in her book, *Tracking Modernity*, the chronicles of women on the railway represent a way to depict change brought on through their movement out of the home (2011, p. 121). Besides a transformation of the self, the train journey engenders changing relationships to family, new sexual possibilities, and different forms of emancipation.

The idea of liberation offered by the train journey dominates from the very first page of the book, which opens as follows: «This is the way it has always been: the smell of the railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape» (*LC*, p. 1). For a while, all her responsibilities as a caring woman are suspended and she is the one being taken care of. Boarding the train also represents an opportunity for Akhila to feel part of something bigger than the domestic sphere: «[She] has always dreamt of this. Of being part of such a wave that pours into compartments and settles on seats, stowing baggage and clutching tickets. Of sitting with her back to her world, with her eyes looking ahead. . . . Of a train that trundles, truckles and troops into a station» (p. 1). Akhila's journey is, therefore, not only a form of escape, as it also provides the ideal conditions for constructing a new identity through narrative and memory. This future orientation closely associated with the re-fashioning of self is represented by her forward-facing seat. Talking about the train journey, Michel de Certeau points out that «[it] is necessary for the birth . . . of unknown landscapes and strange fables of our private stories» (1984, p. 88) because «from a train car one can see what one is separated from» (p. 114). As Geetanjali Singh Chanda comments on the transformation potential of segregated spaces, the compartment becomes a transformative «womenspace» (2008, p. 309) as well as a place of retreat and community. While reflecting on her fellow travelers' stories, Akhila thinks: «They could be her. . . . She could be them. Each confronting life and trying to make some sense of its uncertain lines» (*LC*, p. 97). When asking the other women questions, Akhila is surprised at her own eloquence: «[T]his evening, she had behaved so unlike herself. Eager to spill her secrets. Anxious to probe into lives. Willing to talk» (p. 65). As a catalyst of women's «talking cure», that hybrid and transitional place is ideal for raising questions about what it actually means to be at home. The idea that emerges from the passengers' stories is that, paradoxically, one's «real home» is the very space in which women feel alienated, estranged and unsettled. In this respect, Ahmed has observed that sometimes the most comforting and comfortable place is the in-between, not because one has nearly arrived, but because «one has the security of a destination» (2005, p. 330). Metaphorically speaking, the women protagonists are following an itinerary of their own choice, which is not



dictated by external authorities, but by the confidences and conversations they exchange in the intimate space of the coupé.

Breaking the silence of their private spheres, the women exchange their experiences, question their homes, and share strategies of identity survival. Their spoken fears, hopes, and thoughts are powerful tools. In his respect, Foucault highlights the great strength of discourse, which transmits and produces power, but also «undermines it, exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it» (1978, p. 101). Moreover, the women's detached position allows for a full understanding of the self and what they have left behind. As Aguiar underlines (2011, p. 122), the anonymity of the train represents a way to loosen the social strictures of the home and the audience of suddenly intimate strangers allows reflection upon the outside world. According to Carole Boyce Davies, «[h]ome can only have a meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it» (1994, p. 84). Not only is reality depicted in the women's narrations, but their very movement across borders—both physically and figuratively—expands their vision and develops their ability to see more. Home, therefore, becomes a place the leaving of which is a source of speech, reflection, and understanding. Such a «poetics of dislocation», as Susan Stanford Friedman defines it (2004, p. 207), by giving voice to those who are silenced by society, represents a means of re-claiming territory and recuperating a female selfhood. On the therapeutic effect of narration, Akhila reflects:

All these women . . . are trying to make some sense of their own lives by talking about them. And I thought I was the one trying to define the reality of my life. They need to justify their failures as much as I do. And by preying on the fabric of each other's lives, and seeking in it a similar thread that in some way will connect our lives, we are trying to feel less guilty for who we are and what we have become. (*LC*, pp. 144-145)

Interestingly, the passengers' stories of dislocation help the protagonist relocate: they give a shape, a contour, a meaning to the past itself. Memory, therefore, becomes a collective act which leads to the creation of a community of strangers linked by a common bond: the symbolic lack of a home. The passengers' stories show that they have all experienced the feeling of being «homeless at home» (Dickinson 1960, p. 653), alienated in a place which they perceive as unfamiliar and even threatening.

The experiences they narrate form a single overarching story of women's search for independence, but also of homesickness, that is, sickness of (and not

for) home. The most natural means the women travelers find to overcome their feeling of displacement is to recollect their past and tell their personal stories. Paul Asbury Seaman, in his contribution, “Rediscovering a Sense of Place”, argues that «to connect more fully with the present—to feel at home—[one has] to reconnect with [one’s] past» (1996, p. 38). Storytelling, thus, becomes a methodology to address narrations of reality, but also to promote a process of inventing new spaces while challenging existing realities. The setting of the storytelling is the “dead time” of railway travel, which traditionally functions as background to the main events, but in *LC* is generative and recuperative. By putting together fragments of memory, the six women are making an attempt at shaping a new identity. In this respect, Salman Rushdie’s metaphor of the «broken mirrors» is quite pertinent as he claims that «pieces» of memory have an incredibly creative power as «fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols [with] numinous qualities» (1991, p. 12). New knowledge and new ways of seeing can be constructed out of the myriad of combinations of “scraps” of memory emerging from the past. Consequently, figuring out the real meaning of self is an interactive process between imagination and memory.

As a result, memory is not only reflexive, but also productive as the recuperation of the past leads to the projection of a future self. The women protagonists’ journey of self-discovery becomes an exploration of their most intimate desires. The central female character, more than all the others, is looking for a way to express these intimate desires freely for the first time in her life. She remembers her mother’s mantra: «Women never offered their bodies to men before their union was sanctified by marriage. Women never went away with men who were not their husbands. Women never knew what it was to desire» (*LC*, p. 160). During the train journey, Akhila subverts this oppressive thought into an ability to look at the future and give voice to her most intimate secrets. A case in point is represented by the erotic dream she has during the night, protected by the intimacy of the berth. She dreams of a man who can see the woman she has hidden for a long time: «“You are Akhila”, he says and comes to stand by her. “You are Akhila the woman. Everyone else might have forgotten about the woman within you. But I see her. I see the desire in her eyes, the colours in her heart”» (p. 98). That scene represents Akhila’s need to simply feel like a woman and free herself from the constraints imposed by society as someone’s daughter, sister, aunt, sister-in-law, provider, employee. This desire to openly express her own femininity materializes as soon as she reaches her destination, arriving at the seaside town of Kanyakumari.

There, Akhila seduces a boy, ignoring any judgment the people around her might pass. Evidently, the train journey was the catalyst for this process of self-discovery and the coupé proved to be the creative space in which she was able to review her past, question her present and conceive a different future.

The very final scene of the book shows Akhila looking at her return ticket, determined to «wrest the reins of her life back» (p. 290). Hence, home is both the starting point and point of arrival of her journey, but with two completely different meanings: at the beginning, it embodies the nest/prison duality, while at the end, it becomes the site for experimenting a new way of being a woman. As Akhila reflects, «within me is a woman I have discovered» (p. 284) and «[s]he has no more doubts about what her life will be like if she lives alone» (p. 285). Interestingly, in a story about travel, such as *LC*, home—and the life of women within the home—is the central force that triggers their reflections and consequent reactions. For Akhila, home takes shape on the move, thereby becoming the place to which the self is going, not a paralyzing remembrance. Rather than a fixed entity, home is, therefore, a projection of her own imagination and desire. Her idea of it is future-oriented and not weakened by nostalgia of the past. Instead, it is empowered by the possibility of creating counter-narratives to the present world. Moreover, Akhila, like her fellow women passengers, has chosen the household as the primary battlefield upon which to negotiate a new identity and subvert the traditional idea of women being a part of the home. The change they envisage is not a revolutionary disruption of old norms, but resistance from within a male space through a smooth transition. As one of the travelers observes, they should look for «the middle path, the golden mean» (p. 199), that is, a compromise to cope with patriarchy. Indeed, the coupé is just a temporary «breathing space» for the women, allowing only momentary alliances. By its very nature, it is open and yet closed. Its liberating potential is counterbalanced by a condition of restriction, the sense of escape is neutralized by that of enclosure. Hence, what Nair is suggesting is that home—conceived beyond its physical confinement—may, in fact, be the place where the oppositional forces represented by the coupé can adjust and stabilize.

At this point, it is interesting to examine more in detail the ways in which the women protagonists cope with the tension between the homely and the un-homely experienced within their homes.

## Inhabiting the realm of the (un)homely

In order to define the complex notion of the unhomely, Homi Bhabha uses an example taken from Henri James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. In particular, he refers to the protagonist, Isabel Archer, suddenly taking the measure of her dwelling «in a state of incredulous terror» (James 1975, p. 360). In that moment, Isabel realizes that her world has been reduced to one high, mean window, as her house of fiction becomes «the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation» (p. 361). At this point, Bhabha explains, the world shrinks and then expands enormously. In other words, the private and the public become one «forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as disorienting» (1994, p. 13). Consequently, the history of an individual starts being perceived as the consequence of a wider History to the extent that «[t]he recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions» (p. 13). The same sudden manifestation of the unhomely—as a traumatizing merging of private and public—is experienced by the women protagonists of *LC*. The distinctive feature of all their stories is that, at a certain moment in their lives, they realize the true meaning of their condition not so much as individuals as women in a broad sense.

The concept of the “unhomely” has been examined thoroughly by Anthony Vidler in his book, *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992), given its intimate link with the domestic environment. Vidler talks about the unhomely as a feeling of unease, «a domesticated version of absolute terror, to be experienced in the comfort of the home» (p. 3). In other words, it is a sense of anxiety based on the feeling of not being quite at home in one's own home. The privacy and safety of the interior is simply a spatial delusion. The house, in fact, pretends to afford the utmost security while opening itself to the secret intrusion of terror. This is especially true when it comes to women, whose figure is deeply linked with the unhomely because of the ambivalent structure of private/public, safe/unsafe, on which it is based. In this respect, a central factor in the production of the unhomely is intellectual uncertainty, that is, a disorientation arising when one does not know one's way about. This is explained by Sigmund Freud, who in a 1919 essay entitled *The Uncanny*, he links the notion of the unhomely to psychology, thus shifting the point of view from the interior space of the domestic to the interior space of the mind. In his work, Freud focuses on the effect of introversion caused by the “uneimliche” (literally meaning the “unhomely”), which produces a distancing from reality forced by reality itself. In other words, home can turn on its owners and suddenly become defamiliarized, and consequently,

frightening. The sensation of “uncanniness” is particularly difficult to define precisely. As Freud writes, «[t]he subject of the uncanny . . . is undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what exercises fear in general» (1919, p. 339). The result is a state of neither absolute terror nor mild anxiety, the nonspecificity of which causes a detachment from reality, a condition between dream and awakening.

As a mental projection, the unhomely is not a property of certain buildings or places in the home but a combination of psychic and spatial characteristics. Hence, the house, which in feminist discourses has often been associated with women’s alienation, acts as representation of the uncanny not so much because of its physical characteristics as of historical and cultural habits. As Freud argues, «the uncanny is uncanny because it is secretly all too familiar» (qtd. in Adorno 1984, p. 262). This familiarity of estrangement can only lead to solitude, confinement, silence, and repression. A feeling of claustrophobia creeps up within the most familiar environment—the home—which Freud exemplifies through the image of a person lost in a dark room colliding time after time against the same piece of furniture (1919, p. 359). This metaphor conveys very well the sense of helplessness as well as involuntary repetition within an unhomely environment. Reflecting on the link between the concept of the uncanny and the repressed, Freud adds another nuance to his definition of the “unheimlich” by claiming that it is «nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which had become alienated from it only through the process of repression. . . . The uncanny [is] something that ought to have remained hidden but has come to light» (p. 64). Hanna Arendt, in her book, *The Human Condition*, agrees with Freud on this idea, but she also stresses «how rich and manifold the hidden is under conditions of intimacy» (1958, p. 72). More specifically, following a logic of reversal, she focuses on the profound revelations of the unhomely moment. What is hidden from sight, like the domestic sphere, forgotten in the distinction between the private and public sphere of civil society, is replete with possibilities of growth and self-discovery. Feminism, for instance, by making visible the forgetting of the unhomely moment in society disturbs the symmetry of private/public, thus redrawing the domestic place as the place where the personal is political, «the world [is] in the home» (Bhabha 1994, p. 15). It is from this perspective that Bhabha concludes that the unhomely moment «relates the traumatic ambivalence of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence» (p. 15).

According to this view, each unhomely house reflects a deeper historical displacement. Hence, the unhomely houses represented in *LC* are actually representations of the displaced everyday life of Indian women in contemporary India. Private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an «interstitial intimacy» (p. 19) to the extent that women's daily lives mirror a borderline existence, a strangeness, and a duality which inevitably lead to the unhomely. As Nadine Gordimer claims, in the unhomely world «the banalities are enacted—the fuss over births, marriages, family affairs with their survival rituals of food and clothing. But it is precisely in these banalities that the unhomely stirs» (1990, p. 243), as the violence of a gendered society falls most enduringly on the details of life. In Nair's women protagonists' houses, a great social event has erupted, that is, gender discrimination. And although they are houses of fiction, the critic must attempt to fully realize the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical (albeit fictional) present.

Therefore, I will examine each woman's story in order to identify the ambivalences and ambiguities of their unhomely worlds starting from the observation of the things which make them experience the uncanny. Although it is a non-specific state sharing qualities with a number of allied kinds of fear—such as the strange, weird, grotesque, caricatural, disturbing, suspect, sinister, or distorted—we may however expect «that a special core of feeling is present which justifies the use of a special conceptual term. One is curious to know what this common core is which allows us to distinguish as uncanny certain things within the field of what is frightening» (Freud 1919, p. 339).

A close look at the different individual experiences will show how, in the lives of Indian women, the homely slowly unfolds into the unhomely. But thanks to creative and brave acts of resistance, the uncomfortable sense of haunting turns into a new orientation towards domesticity and the world at large. To use the words of Freud, «[t]he better oriented in his [or her] environment a person is, the less readily will he [or she] get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it» (p. 341).

## Akhila

The first character I am going to examine is Akhila, the protagonist of the novel as well as the main focus of narration. There are numerous instances in which it is clear that she is a dweller of the unhomely, a spectator of an emotionless life which goes on repetitively and pointlessly. A clear symbol of this are her spotless saris, all dull-colored and starched, perfectly ordered and ironed. For years,

«[d]awns diminished to dusk and Sundays dwindled to the day when she washed, starched, dried and ironed the six cotton saris that comprised her entire office-going wardrobe» (*LC*, p. 82). The third-person omniscient narrator explains that «[t]hat was the only way Akhila knew how to preserve order and keep her family from floating away from its moorings» (p. 82). The big responsibilities she inherited from her father's death make her a prisoner of her own home, which paradoxically, in her mind, is the only safe place in which she can be. The image of imprisonment is conveyed by her clothing which wraps her up as if to impede movement: «[H]eavy with starch and sunlight, the sari rustled around her as though someone were turning the sheets of a newspaper» (p. 82). For Akhila, the morning ritual finishes «[w]hen she tucked the last pleat in at the waist and flung the pallu over her left shoulder [and] Padma [her sister] [crouched] at her feet and [taught] the sari the laws of gravity. . . . [W]hat goes up has to come down and stay there» (p. 82). Anything which goes out of control needs to be put back in place. The unhomely—as a state between dream and awakening, a progressive estrangement from real life—slowly enters Akhila's being like the starch she uses with her dresses: «It was perhaps in those years that the starch entered Akhila's soul. Imbuing her every action and word with a delicate film of stiffness that soon became her natural way to talk and be» (p. 82). Her only way out is represented by the train which, however, at first is complicit in her ordinary life as a commuting clerk of the income-tax office:

She took a train into work in Madras every morning from Ambattur. . . . In the evenings, she took the same route back and was home by seven. Her mother would wait for Akhila to arrive before she put the pressure cooker on. They ate, listened to the radio, and by a quarter to ten they were in their beds. They lived quiet, starched and ironed lives where there was no room for chiffon-like flourishes of feeling or heavy zari-lined silken excesses. (p. 84)

Although she realizes that her life is «[j]ust seamless travel from day to day» (p. 175), she is dramatically unable to react due to a deep sense of helplessness. This feeling is a typical condition of those who experience the unhomely, who are well aware of an alien presence in their lives—at a psychological level—but a fundamental insecurity prevents them from taking action. The space of silence is the same space in which Akhila finds herself trapped, that is, within her own home. For instance, when Akhila's sister tells her that she is going to move in Akhila's home, together with her husband and two children, Akhila is unable to express her discontent: «Akhila wished she had spoken then. Akhila wished she

had admitted to herself this overwhelming desire and told Padma how much she preferred to be on her own. Instead, she retreated into silence» (p. 170). The result is that a general sense of unease starts pervading the woman who feels repressed as if she was the impotent spectator of her own double. In a moment of reflection in the train compartment, Akhila «saw herself as a serpent that had lain curled and dormant for years. She saw life as a thousand-petalled lotus she would have to find before she knew fulfillment. She panicked. How and where was she to begin the search?» (pp. 41-42). Panic is a typical manifestation of the uncanny, as Vidler has pointed out (1992, pp. 22-23), and in her process of psychic development, Akhila lives this phase: «Panic fans the flames of fear. Panic dulls. Panic stills. Panic tugs at soaring dreams and hurls them down to earth. Panic destroys. Akhila felt panic dot her face. She had escaped. But from what to what?» (*LC*, p. 41).

The approach to reality as twofold dimension is represented very well by Akhila's rose-colored spectacles. Although they create mere illusions, Akhila can see the world in colors, with hope and desire. Then, however, she abandons her colored spectacles and «switched to metal-framed glasses that remain plain indoors and turn photo-chromatic outdoors. Even the sun ceases to shine when Akhila's glasses turn a dusky brown» (p. 2). Clearly, this is a turn inwards, a closure to the rest of the world in a claustrophobic environment full of dull colors. Akhila's clothes reveal much of her interiority as «she had long ago ceased to wear bright colors, choosing to hide herself in drab moth tones» (p. 4).

The claustrophobia which Akhila increasingly feels is not only a condition depending on her inner state. It is also originated by the space, both physical and cultural, in which she lives. The Brahmin ghetto, in which all the members of the Brahmin caste, like herself, live, is depicted as a suffocating place:

In the brahmin ghetto . . . even air is allowed entry only through narrow passages; . . . vermilion stripes anointing the lime-washed walls of the house exteriors suggest a rigidity of thought and a narrowness of acceptance; . . . the intricate rice powder kolam on the doorway prevents the arrival of any new thought, and all aberrant behaviour is exorcised by censure and complete isolation. (p. 89)

This description can be commented on using a chapter of Vidler's book entitled *Buried Alive*, in which the author focuses on some places representing loci of the literary or artistic uncanny. Their main characteristic is the general impression they give of history suspended, of the past frozen in the present. Here, in



the Brahmin ghetto, for religious and cultural reasons, it seems that nothing can be touched by the passing of time or the evolution of society, and estrangement becomes a familiar feeling among its inhabitants. The pervasive feeling of unhomeliness of this quarter is also reproduced in its houses.

A cultural sign of estrangement which Akhila perceives as a dreadful imposition is the kolam every respectable Brahmin woman is supposed to draw at the front and inside of her house. Her mother used to repeat that «[t]hat's how a home is judged. . . . A true wife is she whose virtues match her home» (p. 52). According to her mother's reasoning, a woman and her house are one, they share the same qualities, and their value is based on the same parameters:

A sloppily drawn kolam suggests that the woman of the house is careless, indifferent and incapable. And an elaborately drawn one indicates self-absorption, a lavish hand and an inability to put others' needs before yours. Intricate and complicated kolams are something you reserve for special occasions. But your everyday kolam has to show that while you are thrifty, you are not mean. It should speak of your love for beauty and your eye for detail. A restraint, a certain elegance and most importantly, an understanding of your role in life. Your kolam should reflect who you are: a good housewife. (p. 53)

Not only is this quotation confirmation that when it comes to Indian women there is no distinction between the private and the public—in other words, the realm of the domestic actually includes a series of political issues—but it is also demonstration of how the unhomely has silently become part of Akhila's everyday life. A comment on Akhila's disposition towards kolams clarifies how a clear feeling of unhomeliness—as displacement and detachment from real life—has penetrated Akhila's soul: «Akhila hated all kolams: the outer and inner ones. She hated this preparation, this waiting, and this not knowing what her real life would be like» (p. 54). For her, as a young girl, the borders between the home and the outside world become confused, the private and the public become part of each other, thus causing a disorienting vision. When she looks at herself in the mirror, for instance, she does not recognize herself. All the symbols that her mother invested with such importance—as they are those which make a woman complete and authentic—are not present on her body:

Who was this creature in whose thighs age crawled in green-blue bands? . . . This was not her. The real her. . . . Akhila saw the stranger. A quiet creature with little life or spirit. Barren of all the marks that proclaimed she was a wife—no thali

sparkling on her bosom, no kumkum bleeding in the parting of her hair, no glistening toe rings bonding her to connubial bliss. A colourless insignificant woman. . . . (pp. 209-210)

The unease associated with these cultural signs is in line with the anxiety of the historical period in which the novel is set, that is, about forty years after independence. The historical reference to the death of the revolutionary leader Puraichi Thalaivar helps us situate the time of the fiction at the end of the '80s, when the nationalist fervor of post-independence was a thing of the past and the new generations wanted to look to the future with hope and a desire for change (Ahscroft 2013, pp. 30-31). In this period, the euphoria brought by the liberation from colonialism is replaced by a diffuse need to build a new Indian identity, freed from the British influence, but also renewed with respect to the pre-colonial period. As happens after every traumatic event involving a nation, the great anxiety of the period is expressed through attempts to «imagine impossible futures or return to equally impossible pasts» (Vidler 1992, p. 5). Hence, a number of cultural habits, myths, traditions, and beliefs are questioned by the younger generations, who do not recognize themselves in their parents' values. The result is a sense of estrangement caused by the symbols that, as in Akhila's case, represent a past which has lost its power, but, at the same time, hinders future changes.

Akhila is not good at drawing kolams. She cannot follow the absolutely straight lines her mother recommends and cannot faithfully reproduce the patterns illustrated in Tamil books. She follows her own lines, the directions her instinct suggests, and the pattern her creativity shapes. In this respect, it is interesting to note that in architectural landscaping they use the term «desire lines» to refer to unofficial paths, those marks on the ground left by the everyday comings and goings of people who deviate from the paths they are supposed to follow. Their deviation leaves a trace on the ground, a «trace of desire», showing the different routes certain people have preferred to take in order to reach a certain destination. Akhila, by drawing her imperfect kolams, is leaving her own mark on the ground, deviating from the straight lines that society—embodied by her mother—has prepared for her.

As if part of a sort of liberation struggle, Akhila progressively manages to transform the things responsible for her unhomely feelings into tools to establish a new contact with both her home and, more in general, with her own self. A case in point is represented by the train, which from an alienating means of transport becomes a means of escape, growth, and emancipation. An intense

homely feeling is experienced by Akhila when she is at the station, ready to board a train all by herself:

All railway platforms look alike. The puddles of water near the occasional dripping tap. The passengers with clenched faces and feverish eyes. The piled up suitcases. The occupied benches. The porters. The vendors with coffee and tea urns, packets of biscuits and glossy magazines. The garbage bins stuffed with litter. The cigarette butts. A crumpled plastic coffee cup. A chocolate wrapper. A banana peel. The pink and green plastic bags caught between the railway tracks, ballooning with the breeze, deflating in stillness. The once white but now silvery-grey stakes fencing the station in. (pp. 175-176)

The dozens of objects that Akhila sees around her are not vehicles of the uncanny, but familiar presences in a familiar environment. They actively contribute to laying the ground for a redrawing of an unhomely realm. Within the space of the train, Akhila explores all the possibilities hidden beneath the condition of intimacy it offers. The first example of this is when, in one of her daily travels to work, she meets a boy much younger than her, Hari, who will become her partner in spite of social prejudices. On the train, she takes a step forward to being an independent woman by deciding to start a love story with him:

«Does this mean you have changed your mind?» he asked. Akhila nodded, still unwilling to put into words what she felt for him. «So where do we go from here?» . . . She really had no idea what they were going to do or where they were heading. . . . Their relationship had moved on to another plane. (p. 156)

The train becomes a place of sexual contact and experimentation allowed by the proximity with other bodies. At this point, Akhila is not worried about the direction of her life, but after some time, the social pressure is too great for her to bear so she decides to split up with the boy, despite her feelings for him. The train, however, gives her a second chance to escape social prejudices. The moment she gets on, she is a woman «[s]ans rose-coloured spectacles. Sans husband, children, home and family. Dreaming of escape and space. Hungry for life and experience. Aching to connect» (p. 2). Thus, the train journey gives her the opportunity to disavow her past and revise the uncanny space of her home. A very simple question asked by one of the other passengers while choosing food for breakfast opens up a world of thoughts for her: «[W]hat is the point in coming to a new place if we do everything the way we do it at home?» (pp. 176-177).

This is an encouragement to move beyond the borders of home through small gestures as well as to remember that every choice can be performative in the process of liberation from the unhomely.

This exhortation is not new in Akhila's life experience. The train also helps her to recuperate hidden memories and make some sense of them. In particular, she recalls the last gift her father bought for her just before dying: a pair of strapped Bata sandals. What strikes her is the writing on their box: «*Quo vadis*» (p. 41). Her father explained the meaning of this question coming from Latin, which can be translated as «Whither goes thou?» (p. 41). He also adds a reflection that Akhila does not understand immediately, but which acquires meaning in the light of her future life: «I like the conceit of a pair of sandals that dares to ask this question. Something I haven't asked myself for a long time» (p. 41). As a state employee, frustrated by a corrupt system and a monotonous life spent commuting six days a week, her father is a depressed man who dies after being hit by a car on his way to work. The idea that his death was not an accident sneaks into Akhila's mind in the days after the accident: her father might have decided to end his own life, without motivation or any means of escape. However, only when she is on the train, does she actually realize the true meaning of that pair of sandals. The idea they symbolize is a sort of moral heritage left to her by her father, an invitation to move, walk, discover, and embrace life fully. In the space of remembrance of the train, «*Quo vadis?*» Akhila asked herself. Then in Sanskrit: *Kim gacchami*. Then in Tamil: *Nee yenga selgirai*. Akhila didn't know any more languages but the question dribbled through the boundaries of her mind in tongues known and unknown» (p. 41). Her father wanted to warn her never to lose sight of the purpose of her life, probably because he understood she was different from her brothers and sister. While they dreamt of toys, books, skirts and blouses, she sat on her front porch with her ball of gunny thread, feeling «a strange restlessness echoed by the long-drawn out moan of the swing as it moved this way and that» (p. 48). She longed for movement, an expansion of horizon, and answers to find by herself rather than in other people's dogmas.

The gunny thread is an important symbol recurring in the most significant moments of her life. As an adolescent, she used to collect every scrap of gunny thread she could find; she would unravel the knots and tie broken ends until she formed a giant ball. This ritual, performed in front of her house every Sunday afternoon, represents Akhila's need to untangle the knots that fasten her own self. Despite her mother's ceaseless reproaches like: «If you used this time every Sunday to write "Sree Rama Jayam" a thousand times, you would at least collect

enough blessings to find you a good husband» (p. 49), she goes on with this habit. She is the only one in the family who needs to question the way things are. She does not accept reality as it is, but needs to examine it and give it her own meaning. The painful events of her life, however, force her to abandon her ritual, and consequently, her propensity to question things. Many years later, as an adult woman, when her mother is dead and she is about to move with her sister, she collects her few possessions and finds her gunny thread among the other things:

[H]ere it was; a reminder of her past. She unrolled a length and tugged at it. It held and Akhila smiled. The thread still had some life in it. Should she throw it away or keep it, she wondered. She decided to put it into the box in which she was taking her few possessions. It would come in useful one day or the other. (p. 165)

This is a cathartic moment in her personal life as she has the opportunity to untangle an unresolved issue: to settle down alone as an independent woman. However, once more, the pressure exercised by her family is too strong to the extent that they convince her that «[a] woman can't live alone. A woman can't cope alone» (p. 16). The gunny thread, then, remains forgotten for many years until it appears in Akhila's mind at the very end of her journey. After reflecting much on the new woman she has begun to be thanks to her trip away from home,

Akhila wakes up with her old ball of gunny thread on her mind. She thinks of how she spent hours disentangling the knotted thread. And of how carefully and methodically she wound it, tying one end to the other so that it ran as a single thread from its core to the final inch. (p. 290)

She understands the role of this apparently trivial object in slowly transforming the unhomely feelings which haunted her into propellants for reflection, growth, and resistance. She also realizes that «one unresolved tangle» remained, «[t]hat one knot she had severed rather than unraveled. And she thinks, I must sort that out too» (p. 290). She is referring to Hari, the boy she loved, but left for fear of social judgment. Nothing will stop her from achieving personal fulfillment now that she has accomplished the healing process she had started when she was a young girl, «[sitting] with her back to them [her family], untangling the thread and winding it around her finger; an unwilling witness to this Sunday noon ritual of loving, giving and healing» (p. 50).

Another significant symbol which embodies Akhila's psychological shift from the realm of the unhomely to that of the homely is a food she has always been attracted by, but has never tasted: the egg. As a member of the Brahmin caste, she is not allowed to eat eggs<sup>1</sup>. The day her colleague brings some eggs for lunch is an amazing revelation for her:

Akhila had never seen an egg so close before. . . . She watched as Katherine removed the fragments of the shell and it seemed to Akhila that it must be the most pleasurable thing anyone could do. Then, like a Russian doll, the shell gave way to yet another layer of white. What lay inside that? What did the inside smell of? What did it feel like to touch? (p. 94)

She is offered a taste and as soon as she eats the egg, she feels a sensation of pure delight and surprise: «She had actually eaten an egg» (p. 95). Since then, for a whole year, Akhila secretly eats this forbidden food not only because of over-indulgence, but also because it gives her the pleasure of transgression and a general feeling of liberation. At first, she eats eggs only at work, but one day she finds herself taking a bag with eggs home with her. Surprisingly, «she was turning into her street and she knew that she was taking the eggs home. And she was going to tell her mother about it» (p. 96). She tells her mother about her new habit and starts cooking eggs in her kitchen. This simple gesture gives her the power to make choices on her own and suppress the uncanny feeling of living in a home ruled by others. As the narrator also states, «[a]ll of Akhila's wondrous explorations and magical discoveries were locked within the fragile shell of an egg» (p. 96). This power to explore as well as to express her own desires also helps Akhila overcome the sense of estrangement she experiences when she goes to live with her sister's family. At the beginning, she hides her habit fearing that this liberty would upset her sister. After a while, however, she realizes that feeling not quite at home in her own home is something she can no longer accept. Hence, the first

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<sup>1</sup> The egg appeared very early in Hindu mythology as one of the first elements of its cosmogony. Linked to the "brahman"—the essential energy, the absolute principle—"the cosmic egg" is considered as a source of life which brings male and female principles together. Divided into two halves—the sky and the earth—it represents the whole of the universe. As for the consumption of eggs, vegetarianism holds an important place in Hinduism, especially among the highest castes like the Brahmins. However, not all Hindus are vegetarians. Even among the castes that respect this diet, the list of permitted and forbidden food can vary considerably from one region to another, from one caste to another, with the exception of the widespread taboo with regard to beef.

thing she does is to «resurrect her everyday egg» (p. 171). Despite her sister's shock and disdain, she continues eating eggs. This is just the beginning of her process of liberation, which reaches its culmination when one morning she wakes up with «a queer itinerant sensation» (p. 3). It is in that moment that she realizes her desire to board a train to a precise destination: the seaside city of Kanyakumari.

The sea is the last symbol I wish to examine as far as the protagonist is concerned. The destination chosen by Akhila is highly symbolic for both geographical and cultural reasons. At Kanyakumari, located at the most southern point of India, «three seas meet. The Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. A quiet male ocean flanked by two restless female seas» (p. 3). This is the place of compromise, in which male and female coexist pacifically, calm and restlessness find their balance, and limits blur in a huge extension of water. Moreover, there is a legend that a headstrong and restless god, Narendra, swam there to «wait for the answers that had eluded him all his life» (p. 3). The legend tells that when he left the rock where he had been seated for years, he had found the joy of wisdom. Akhila also happened to read that the seaside place got its name from a goddess who «like her, had put her life on hold, condemned to an eternal waiting» (p. 4). Hence, this location also symbolizes the value of time, the importance of waiting, and the answers that come after a period of suffering and meditation. The sea, which Akhila reaches after inhabiting two prison-like spaces, that is, her family home and the train coupé, embodies a liberating place. Its openness is opposed to the closed environments in which Akhila had to struggle for identity. Indeed, although the specter of patriarchal culture temporarily disappeared in the uncontaminated world of the coupé, that is in fact a limited and limiting space. As Shivelbusch also argues (1986), the space of the train offers both freedom and seclusion, solidarity and individuality. In the wide open space offered by the sea, Akhila finally finds the conditions to overcome her spatial fear, i.e., a paralysis of movement which prevented her from exiting the realm of the unhomely, both literally and symbolically. The result is that she is ready to go back home as «nobody's daughter. Nobody's sister. Nobody's wife. Nobody's mother» (*LC*, p. 218), but with a whole and strong self. This is demonstrated by the very last sentence of the book, in which the protagonist uses, for the first time, her full name—representing her fully-recovered identity—«“This is Akhila. Akhilandeswari”» (p. 290).

## Janaki

The second character I am examining is the eldest passenger on the train, Janaki, the protagonist of the chapter entitled *A Certain Age*. She is the first to tell her story. Janaki was brought up in a very traditional manner, believing that a woman's duty was to get married and have children: «All through her girlhood, she had been groomed for it» (p. 26). At the age of eighteen, she is married to a twenty-seven-year-old man she had never seen before. He behaves like a good and kind man, but builds a protective shell around her to the extent that she never has the opportunity to show her true value to either others and herself. As a result she grows into a weak, insecure woman, who is totally dependent on her husband.

The thing which best represents Janaki and her journey through the unhomely is undoubtedly her bed. The quietness of her life is disrupted one night, when she experiences what Sigmund Freud called the «unhomely moment», that is, a revelation of something that should have remained hidden in the interstices of the mind, but as an important part of the self, comes sharply to light (2019, p. 64). Like every night, she is lying on her side awake, waiting for her husband to come to bed after his bathroom routine and trying to drown the noises that «she had heard almost every night for the past forty years» (p. 25). In that moment, a thought, as simple as it is disorienting, occurs to her: «Do I really hear these noises? Or, is it just what I know? . . . Have we really lived together for thirty years?» (p. 25). From this question, it is evident what Freud meant when he argued that the uncanny is uncanny because it is secretly all too familiar. Janaki is astonished at the time she has spent with her husband, which also corresponds to the time she has spent living through him, in a reality which was not real. The bed, in fact, also represents the liminal space in which dreaming and waking slip into each other. Real and unreal merge and a disturbing feeling of panic arises.

Janaki recalls the first time she felt this way, which was the first night she slept with her husband. She remembers asking herself: «What am I doing here? What have I let myself in for?» (p. 26). Their marriage remained unconsummated for more than two months until she «conquered her revulsion» (p. 27). The night of their first intercourse, her husband repeats again and again a phrase which has resonated in Janaki's ears for all her life: «You are my wife. You are my wife» (p. 27), as if to underline a sort of possession which, however tender, imprisons her. The effect of her husband's words is immediate, as her thought demonstrates: «Nothing else mattered then» (p. 27), she told herself; her duty as a good wife was accomplished. With the passing of time, Janaki retreats into an unhomely



world, alienated from society, and limited by the walls of her house. The presence of her husband becomes so cumbersome for her that she cannot even stand his presence in bed beside her. Hence, when her husband settles for the night, he

[arranges] his body so as not to intrude into her space. . . . He knew that she didn't like the sheet rucked or the blanket tangled around her legs. So he kept his distance with a separate blanket. . . . In the morning, when they woke up, it was as if they had slept in separate rooms in separate beds (p. 27)

This need for distance from the body of her husband in an intimate place like the bed shows how the familiarity of estrangement is responsible for the uncanny feeling which marks Janaki's life. In other words, her husband has become all too familiar to her, to the extent that she does not know where her own identity ends and his identity begins. For instance, she is deeply bothered by her husband's habit of putting a tablet of soporific with a glass of water on her bedside table. His attentions suffocate her as she has the feeling that he is the one who runs her life, who knows what her needs are, and what is best for her. Once their son is born, «[i]n bed, their conversations dwindled to—Is the nappy wet? Did you check the teddy lamp? I thought I heard a cry. Did you?» (p. 30). Once more, Janaki's life is lived through another human being, and as a woman, she has to face her husband's preponderant role as «husband, father and provider» (p. 33).

Years pass by, until their son gets married and has a child. On that occasion, Janaki and her husband are invited to stay a couple of weeks at their son's home. At night, in an unfamiliar bedroom and unfamiliar bed, the uncanny manifests itself to Janaki as something repressed in the recesses of her mind, yet very much alive. There, in a room that «makes her feel uneasy» (p. 34), she recalls a comment of her daughter-in-law, who told her: «Mummy, you are so lucky to have a man like Uncle for your husband. He helps you in just about every way he can, doesn't he?» (p. 35). Not only does she realize that it was true, but also that it made her feel terribly inadequate: «Are you saying that I am a weak, helpless creature, she wanted to demand» (p. 36). Overwhelmed by fury and humiliation, she is struck by a sudden thought while waiting for her husband to come to bed after his bathroom routine: «What would it be like to sleep alone in a bed and to wake up in a room all by herself? Early mornings, nights. Alone, alone» (p. 37). She starts looking at her life from a different angle. She has shared a life with a man she despises because he has neutralized all her needs and adjusted her orientation in the world for her. This has produced an «intellectual uncertainty» (Vidler 1992, p. 23) about her actual role in life as well as the nature of their relationship. It is

in this uncertainty, however, that she finds what Hanna Arendt called a «rich and manifold» opportunity to question herself (1958, p. 72). At first, she thought that «if [she] were to lose it all, [she] would cope. If [she] ever became alone, [she] would manage perfectly. . . . [She] . . . was tired of being this fragile creature» (*LC*, p. 24). Now, however, in her fragility she finds something beautiful and precious, that is, «friendly love» (p. 40) for her husband, the fear of losing him, and even the jealousy of sharing him with others. When he comes to bed, that night, she tells him «slowly, because she had never said these words before, . . . “I am tired of sharing you with everyone. I want you to myself”» (p. 40). She also understands that to feel like a complete woman does not mean to have no weaknesses. Indeed, after many years, she feels the pleasure of the «warming of her senses. . . . She moved closer and fitted the length of her body to . . . [her husband’s] side» (pp. 39-40). Eventually, then, it is in bed that she recovers from her feeling of unease. In the condition of intimacy provided by the bed, she negotiates the traumatic disjunction between the view of herself as a symbol—a woman who has to preserve her own identity in a patriarchal world— and as an individual—a woman who loves her husband and finds comfort and shelter in him. She concludes that «even if [she] can cope, it isn’t the same if he [her husband] isn’t there with [her]» (p. 24). She can finally surrender to sleep: «Under one blanket everything was possible, she thought as her eyes closed and his warmth slipped into her» (p. 40).

## Sheela

The next passenger Nair introduces is a fourteen-year-old girl, Sheela, who is travelling back to her home after her grandmother’s funeral. While all the other women in the berth are sleeping, she starts talking to Akhila about the “uncommon” woman her grandmother was and the fundamental lesson she taught her.

This very brief chapter, entitled *Go, Grandmother, Go*, is focused on uncanniness as an aesthetic category and, more specifically, on how an unusual appearance from the outside can surprisingly be the vehicle of homely feelings, safety, and resistance. As the title suggests, the actual protagonist of this part is not Sheela, who is, however, an active spectator of her grandmother’s life. Sheela talks about her «Ammumma» as a woman «unlike most grandmothers» (p. 68) with a particularly intimate relationship with things—especially jewelry and make-up. She «was sixty-nine years old, owned several houses in Alwaye, an acre of teak trees and several paddy fields. She also had six grey strands growing on her chin that she meticulously plucked out every few days» (p. 68). She loved

adorning her body with golden jewels and abundant make-up as if that was a physical need more than a fancy habit. At first glance, her grotesque aspect arouses a sort of uncanny feeling about her. A case in point is her ritual before going to bed, which Sheela describes as follows:

Every night before Ammumma went to bed, she stood by the mirror in her room and splashed her face and neck with calamine lotion. Then she dusted her still smooth face, her lined throat, her plump shoulders and her huge pendulous breasts with talc that smelt of lavender. Finally she opened her jewellery box, caressed the gold and gleaming gems, put on her favourite piece and went to sleep with the weight of her jewellery on her naked skin. (p. 73)

Her children dismissed her efforts to always look her best as an eccentricity caused by aging. However, as the psychology of empathy of the late nineteenth century theorized, the sensibility to objects mirrors the state (rather than the aspect) of the body. Hence, the uncanny is a phenomenon at once both physical and aesthetic to the extent that familiarity and strangeness simultaneously manifest themselves. This idea was applied to literature, art, and architecture in order to show how the unfamiliar appearance of a house—be it fictional or not—often corresponded to an interior arrangement which aroused a special feeling of ease and familiarity. In other words, as Vidler explains (1992, pp. 30-32), moving around a house permits us to «cross over the threshold» of the structure which «coincides with the mood of the story and proposes thereby a method for its interpretation» (p. 32). Talking about her grandmother's home, Sheela says that «Ammumma hated imperfections of any kind. In her home, there was no room for a cracked plate, a blotched towel or a faded cushion» (*LC*, p. 72). This same longing for perfection is reflected on her body. In this respect, Vidler's comment on the exterior of houses can be applied to the body, which lends itself to an examination based on the ambivalence between the inside and outside. The mask of madness worn by the grandmother is actually a way to achieve inner peace and composure. Lying on the hospital bed, for instance, she asks Sheela to pluck the strands on the underside of her chin. Sheela remembers her mum laughing: «“Who do you think is going to look at you?” Ammumma gave her a cold look and said, “That's not the point”» (p. 73). What the elderly woman is trying to do, with the help of her granddaughter, is to preserve her dignity as well as the control of her own body in spite of her family's arrogance. Indeed, if we are to examine the state and not the appearance of Ammumma's body, what we discover is that she lives with rage for being left alone and ignored by her sons and

daughters all of her life. Unlike traditional Indian women, she refuses to comply with social norms and efface herself to please others. The result is isolation and solitude. Nevertheless, the affirmation of her own self as a woman is more important than anything else and the precious lesson she teaches her granddaughter is: «You mustn't become one of those women who groom themselves to please others. The only person you need to please is yourself. When you look into a mirror, your reflection should make you feel happy» (p. 73). The ambivalence inside/outside, which is a privileged *topos* of the uncanny, here manifests itself as a tension between an apparently uncanny exterior—the woman's grotesque body—and a safe interior—her own principles of emancipation and dignity. In other words, the woman strives to keep familiarity and homeliness within her inner world.

This life lesson helps Sheela come to terms with her problematic relationship with her father, whom she defines as a «hideous beast» (p. 75). He scolds her incessantly, making her feel inadequate and in constant need of approval. Her grandmother's words, however, make her reflect on the patriarchal pressure of the world they are living in as well as the importance of daily acts of resistance, starting from their own bodies. Bodies are the primary receptors of ideology, but also a powerful means they can control directly. Hence, when the grandmother comes home from hospital, unconscious and with a devastated body, Sheela does something which her family is never going to understand. She feels her grandmother's body is in danger, her dignity threatened, her weaknesses exposed: «How could they rob her of her dignity, of her grace?» (p. 79). Hence, she enters the van of the ambulance where her grandmother's abandoned body is lying and takes care of her for the last time:

She plucked the wiry strands from her chin, carefully brushed the almost brittle hair on her head and braided it into a plait that she fixed in place with a glittering rubber band. Sheela rubbed her aunt's foundation into her grandmother's face, shoulders and chest. And dusted her aunt's expensive talc just the way Ammumma liked to do it. On her face, neck, over her shoulders, and under her breasts that hung limply like empty pouches. When she was covered in a patina of fragrant chalky grey, Sheela rimmed her eyes with a kohl pencil and touched her eyebrows with feathery strokes in the manner her make-up book advocated. Sheela's aunt had already confiscated all of Ammumma's jewellery. So Sheela adorned her with costume jewellery. A crescent moon rested on her flaccid bosom. A waterfall of crystals cascaded from her ears. (p. 79)

This gesture, which is an extreme act of love, might be interpreted as a ritual of fetishization of a (quasi-) corpse, through which the boundaries between the organic and the inorganic world are suppressed. Her grandmother's jewels and make-up finally become part of who she is and that image is the memory everyone will always have. To her family's great shock, Sheela has transformed what her grandmother would have considered an unhomely body—with the «mouth half-open, its lips cracked and dry. Its skin . . . creased into multiple folds . . . and its hair [like] . . . fronds of steel wool» (p. 78)—into a homely, familiar body. The effect on the members of the family is, obviously, the opposite. They feel they are confronted with the uncanny, i.e., a strangeness evoked by the return of something presumed lost, but still active and alive. The ambivalent image of the grandmother — at once familiar and grotesque—represents the complexity of the concept of the «*heimlich*» explored by Freud, who concluded that it finally coincides with its opposite, «*unheimlich*» (p. 347). In other words, starting from the idea of «homelike», that which belongs to the home, a sentiment of security and freedom from fear, the idea of the homely gradually takes on the ominous dimension of its apparently opposite. *Heimlich*, in fact, may refer to something concealed from the eyes of strangers, secret. As regards knowledge, it means mystic, unconscious, obscure, thus hidden and occult. Indeed, almost all the paragraphs in the chapter contain the expression «Sheela knew», in order to underline the completion of a process of discovery which is at once both illuminating and destabilizing. A deep awareness has grown in Sheela, that is, a woman's body is not a screen between things and herself, but a mirror of her own individuality. Bodily things—like make-up and jewelry—do not serve an instrumental purpose, but transmit the force of aesthetic sensibility, thus becoming agents with a therapeutic function and power of resistance.

## Margaret

The next to speak is Margaret, a school teacher of chemistry. She starts her story by saying that «a woman doesn't really need a man. That is a myth that men have tried to twist into reality» (*LC*, p. 101). In some way, as happened with Sheela, in her experience the body can become a powerful instrument for resistance and change. She is on that train because she is returning from Bangalore, where she dropped her husband off at a health clinic. She explains to Akhila that he has to go there every year to get a hold on his weight. The effects last just a few days, as she makes sure he puts on all the weight he lost so, he «becomes of no consequence» (p. 102). However diabolic this sentence might sound, from the very

beginning of the chapter we get to know that the motivations behind it are very serious. This part, entitled *Oil of Vitriol* opens as follows:

God didn't make Ebenezer Paulraj a fat man. I did.

I, Margaret Shanthi, did it with the sole desire for revenge. To erode his self-esteem and shake the very foundations of his being. To rid this world of a creature who, if allowed to remain the way he was, slim, lithe and arrogant, would continue to harvest sorrow with a single-minded joy. (p. 103)

Therefore, this is a story about slow, calculated revenge, which is carried out through a specific thing: food. From a source of anxiety and discrimination, for Margaret food becomes a means to survive her marriage and disrupt the power balance between her and her husband. As with all the other women, the dramatic change begins when the protagonist experiences an epiphanic moment of estrangement, which coincides with the manifestation of the unhomely: «Where was I in all this? Margaret Shanthi, the woman» (p. 118).

In this story things play a fundamental role as active participants in the protagonist's development from a submissive wife to an imperturbable, self-satisfied woman. It is interesting to note, for instance, that as a chemistry teacher, Margaret reads the world through metaphors referring to chemical elements and substances. She introduces herself saying: «Among the five elements that constitute life, I classify myself as water. Water that moistens. Water that heals. Water that forgets. Water that accepts. Water that flows tirelessly. Water that also destroys. For the power to dissolve and destroy is as much a part of being water as wetness is» (p. 103). Water might seem a trivial element, transparent, adaptable, tasteless, calm, and familiar. This is the mistake that Ebe, Margaret's husband, made when he married her: «He dismissed [her] as someone of no significance», (p. 103) who could be bent, directed, and mastered easily. He did not consider that water has various forms and manifests its power everywhere around us. As Margaret explains to Akhila, as in one of her lessons of chemistry, water «configures the earth, atmosphere, sky, mountains, gods and men, beasts and birds, grass and trees, and animals down to worms, flies and ants. . . . [A]ll these are only different forms of water. . . . [W]ater is to be weighed carefully or it will weigh upon you!» (pp. 103-104). Nothing can compete with water and its capacity to change, adapt to the different situations, and resist. Margaret confesses that, at first, she was water in a solid state, frozen in an immutable form and with limited capacity of movement. She «let [herself] float on the surface of time» (p. 104).

She fell in love with her husband the first time she saw him. She was an excellent student at university and was thinking of starting a doctorate or maybe moving to America. But when she met Ebe, he started corroding her ambitions as he wanted her to be a teacher just like him. Hence, she drifted into marriage with the conviction that a new life of romance and passionate love would begin for her. He seemed to be the perfect match, handsome, educated, and with an important job as headmaster of a local school. All she wanted to do was to please him, everything else was unimportant. But, soon, she bitterly discovers that «[l]ove is a colourless, volatile liquid. Love ignites and burns. Love leaves no residue—neither smoke nor ash. Love is a poison masquerading as a spirit of wine» (p. 111). Eight months after their marriage, Margaret gets pregnant, but her husband convinces her to have an abortion as it was not the best time to have a baby. Humiliated and devastated by the experience of abortion, the unhomely starts to sneak into her as a condition of disillusionment and claustrophobia. As usual, the feeling of uncanny manifests itself all of a sudden, as a revelation within a familiar environment which discloses all its hidden unfamiliarity. One morning, at her husband's school, where Margaret teaches, she finds herself watching him «as he surveyed his kingdom. The cane was his scepter; a symbol of the power that he wielded» (p. 105). In this moment, she realizes that «she hated him more than [she] had ever hated anyone» (p. 105). She realizes that her world has become a stranger to her because everything is controlled by her husband:

What's the point in working for a doctorate? Do your B.Ed. so you can become a teacher and then we will always be together. Long hair doesn't suit you. Cut it off. You'll look nicer with your hair in a blunt bob. Do we really have to go to church every Sunday? I don't think it is wise to eat bhelpuri from these roadside stalls. We could always go to a restaurant. . . . Let's wait till we're both settled in our careers before we have our baby. We have each other. What more do we want? (p. 112)

The husband controls every aspect of Margaret's life, from the most banal to the most important decisions of her life. She does not put up any opposition, also because she had been blinded by her mother's recommendations about how a good wife was supposed to behave. She used to repeat that «it is a woman's responsibility to keep the marriage happy. Men have so many preoccupations that they might not have the time or the inclination to keep the wheels of a marriage oiled» (p. 119). But the irritation that Margaret could once conceal now begins to show in her speech, tone, and attitude towards her husband. She feels

that a chemical change is occurring, turning her into «supercritical water», capable of dissolving just about anything «with a vehemence that could burn and destroy poisons» (p. 104). She begins noticing all the little things that make her husband a bully and a tyrant within their home as well as a self-centered man occupying, metaphorically, all the space in their home. A case in point is represented by the certificates of every competition he has won in his life, which occupy a whole wall of his study. He complains that Margaret does not dust them often enough, the glass looks opaque, and the frames filthy. He complains about the food she cooks, which he judges too basic, and the spider webs she fails to detect. But, when the signs of Margaret's transformation begin to show, she does not reply or protest; she just smiles back slowly turning into «[t]he universal solvent» (p. 125). She takes advantage of his personality, watches him silently and progressively elaborates a strategy to survive.

Margaret notes that he takes a book with him everywhere he goes: Alan Sillitoe's *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*. He keeps a copy of the book on the bookshelf at home and another one on his table in his office. Margaret realizes that he did not care much about the content of the book, but he liked to be seen with it as well as liking the image of himself running. He usually runs where there is an audience that can give him its complete attention—at the school playground for instance—because he loves his body and the idea of people watching it. The same is true about his passion for classical music. All his CDs and recordings of the masters of Western classical music show that what he really likes is not the music itself, but the idea that principals of prestigious schools, like him, ought to listen to this kind of music. Crosswords are another facet of the mask worn by her husband. On the day he invites the schoolteachers to dine at his home—once a week—he wakes up early in the morning, sits with a book of phrases and a dictionary and completes the crossword for the evening. When his colleagues arrive, all he has to do is to finish the crossword easily in front of them and receive their praise, to which he answers: «I just have a natural aptitude for crosswords, I suppose» (p. 133). His only weakness, Margaret finds out, is food. Being obsessed with his own physical aspect, he is always very careful about what he eats, never takes a second helping, and avoids sweets and chocolates. Margaret, on the other hand, finds her only comfort in food. She eats to despise her husband, to have something out of his control, to allow herself a pleasure she cannot get from her marital life. However, she soon understands that this is not the solution which will free her from her suffocating feeling of estrangement.



The idea that will change her life dramatically comes one night when, looking at the goldfish bowl, her husband finds out that one has died because it got too greedy. Food, her husband's weakness and her own secret enjoyment, can now have a purpose. It will no longer be Ebe's instrument of tyranny, but Margaret's means of revenge. Hence, she starts cooking huge meals and flattering him: «'You're a big man. And you need to eat a big meal. And it isn't as if you don't exercise. Besides, you need your strength, don't you'» (p. 141). The result is that «Ebe ate. Breakfasts. Lunches. Dinners. An evening snack as soon as he came home from school. A late night snack as he worked on his files» (p. 141). Slowly fat finds its home in his body, which progressively loses its athletic shape and becomes a shapeless depository of fats and sugars. Triumphantly, Margaret states: «What was mine became his. The sleek lines began to blur. The breath shortened and the pace slowed. Folds appeared around the neck. A second chin. A belly that jiggled» (p. 141). Her insecurity and self-effacing attitude is replaced by confidence and determination. Food, which used to disorient her and make her feel inadequate, is now the means by which she transforms her home into a homely place. Indeed, her husband loses his strength, and, consequently, his harmful potential: «He no longer strutted. He waddled. When he climbed a staircase, he gasped. He no longer roamed the corridors of the school. . . . Ebe slowly became a fat man. A quiet man, an easy man» (p. 142). Moreover, as his wife is the one who appeases his appetite, he needs her and seeks her as never before. Margaret gets pregnant for the second time and, thanks to her ability to feed her husband's hunger and greed, she turns her displaced everyday life into a silent struggle. As silent as water. As Margaret coldly concludes, «[w]hen you add water to sulphuric acid, the acid splutters at first. But soon it loses its strength; it loses its bite. The trick is to know when to add it, and how much» (p. 143). She is only apparently calm and submissive because, beneath the surface, the disruptive force of water can erode the hardest of rocks. Represented as a feminine trope, in this story water is awake, it is an obstacle to overcome as well as a threatening image which challenges the idea of purification often associated with it. It flows underneath and its instability is no longer a synonym of fragility, but of dissidence and agency.

### Prabha Devi

When the night turns into dawn, the first person to wake up, together with Akhila, is Prabha Devi, an apparently self-confident and independent woman. When Akhila tells her that this is the impression she gives people, Prabha Devi

answers that it took her a long time to become the woman she is now. Her story, entitled *Afloat*, tells about her life, lived mostly underwater, with a sense of suffocation and numbness of movement. As the title suggests, water is the thing which best represents this passenger of the coupé. However, unlike the previous story, here the cleansing potential of water is celebrated. Water is no longer exalted for its destructive power, as, instead, its healing nature is foregrounded.

At a certain point in her life, Prabha Devi realizes that she has become a voiceless person. One week after her fortieth birthday, she wakes up struck by a sudden revelation: she has forgotten the sound of her own voice. As is the case with all the other women passengers who have spoken so far, a striking manifestation of the unhomely hits her like a punch. Disorientation is the predominant feeling of the unhomely moment: «Where have I been all this while? She asked herself. At first quietly, tremulously and then furiously. What was I doing all this while?» (p. 79).

Prabha Devi was born into a rich family, but her birth was not welcomed by her father, a jeweler, who would have preferred a son to carry on his business. Her mother, on the contrary, was happy to have a daughter to whom she could leave her recipes, jewelry, and advice on how to run a household. The first thing her mother teaches her is that «a woman with an opinion was treated like a bad smell. To be shunned» (p. 180). Prabha Devi grows up as a replica of her mother, docile and well-mannered, womanly and obedient, until her father finds her a husband, the son of a rich diamond merchant. For the following years, her main purpose is to act like the perfect wife, waiting «[f]or Jagdeesh [her husband] to come home. For the babies to be born. For their first step, their first word, their first triumph. . . . Waiting for something to happen while her life swished past in a blur of insignificant days» (p. 182). Every emotion that could disrupt her image of a submissive, well-behaved woman is repressed. The result is that she becomes familiar with an image of herself which, however, does not correspond to her true nature. As a sort of mantra, she repeats to herself: «How lucky I am to be me», but what is hidden from sight will soon manifest itself. Indeed, her existence develops on two levels: the public level—which is what society and her family expect of her—and the private level—of which she is not yet aware, but which is present and alive. As Freud's study on the uncanny demonstrates, however, the repressed will inevitably come to light.

Water is undoubtedly the element that makes the true nature of Prabha Devi emerge. A first clue is represented by her reaction at the sight of a pond in her father-in-law's garden. Behaving unlike herself, she closed the door behind her

and, «pulled up her sari to above her knees and stepped into the pond» (p. 183). Her behavior as a submissive woman, preoccupied with conventions and others' opinions, are replaced by an abandon she has never experienced before: «The water moved, splashed, rippled and lapped against the boulders heaped to one side of the pond . . . Prabha Devi was oblivious to everything but the delight of the water that crept between her toes and pressed itself against her with a reckless abandon» (p. 183). When her husband joins her, astonished at her behavior, she invites him to enter the pond with her. She wants him to be part of her excitement, but the man's first thought is that «wives often lead their husbands down the wrong paths» (p. 184). Hence, any deviation from the expected behavior by a woman is seen as an alarm of rebellion. However, Prabha Devi's liveliness experienced at the pond continues when her husband decides to take her to New York with him. This trip changes her considerably as she comes into contact with Western women with «swinging hair and a confident stride. They seemed to know exactly where they were going and once they got there, what they had to do» (p. 188). Back in India, she starts wearing Western clothes and make-up on, and imitating American girls' ways of walking and talking. She even asks her husband to wear condoms because she is not ready to have a baby yet. Her husband's shocked reaction as well as the heavy advances of a man at her husband's tennis club upset her so much that she becomes, once again, the woman her mother hoped she would be, «with eyes forever downcast and busy hands» (p. 194). Years pass by and Prabha Devi forgets who she is, lets life take control of her to the extent that her hours and thoughts are filled by family matters and nothing else. Until one day, while waiting for her son's tennis training to finish, she is attracted by the restless spray of water coming from the sprinklers placed along a path near the tennis court. She follows them and arrives at a gate in a wall which reminds her of Alice in Wonderland and the adventures she lived after crossing that door. This vision evokes old memories of freedom and excitement that she had forgotten for a long time. After crossing the gate, she finds herself in front of a pool. She feels an immediate need to touch it and dangle her feet in the water. In that moment, she decides she will learn to swim and her process of liberation begins.

Prabha Devi now has a purpose in life, which has much to do with the symbols linked to water. She wants to start breathing again, emerge from beneath the surface, and master the current, instead of being driven by it. She has never had this determination to achieve a goal before and repeats to herself: «You are doing this for yourself. For the first time in many years, you are doing what you want and not what everyone else thinks you ought to want» (p. 198). Until then, it was

as if water had surrounded her, preventing her from seeing and hearing clearly. She reflects that, as if underwater, she was anchored to her husband, who prevented her from floating: she «was the keeper of his home and the mother of his children. She listened. She obeyed. She lived on the outposts of his life» (p. 201). Now it is time to set out into the deep, and learn to stay afloat by herself. Hence, after watching a group of children's lessons for a few weeks, she finally decides to enter the pool. For seven days, she tries to get familiar with the touch of water on her body. At first, clinging firmly to the bar, then holding it with just the tips of her fingers. Her increasing confidence inside the water parallels her transformation as a woman. Panic is replaced by control, helplessness by action, the fear of drowning by the desire to stay afloat. In bed with her husband, she finally feels like a woman again, she is no longer afraid of voicing her own desire or of using her own body as a means of giving and receiving pleasure. She is surprised at her own change and wonders: «When would this body that had spun and whirled through corridors of pure feeling learn to stay afloat?» (p. 205). As the narrator tells us, «[o]n the seventh day, Prabha Devi rested» (p. 204). This sentence recalls the passage from the Bible which says that God rested on the seventh day of creation from all his work. This parallel gives the idea that Prabha Devi has gone through a process of creation of a new woman as well as a new homely world. The next morning she is finally ready to swim, without any help or hesitation.

She took a deep breath and pushed herself forward. . . . The water was like silk, curling around her with a quiet swish. She felt the years slip away from her. This body that had been the cause of much unhappiness, first with its excessive demands for gratification and then with an abrupt deadening of nerve ends, now melted. She was the blue of the pool and the water was she. (p. 206)

Water, then, becomes a place of empowerment for Prabha Devi, a space in which to recover a lost voice as well as a grip on life. It is also a site of transformation because every contact with water has, in some way, changed her. It acts as a sort of mirror which confronts her with the dual vision of herself: the woman she is supposed to be and the woman she actually is. Water has also revealed feminine properties, such as of its ability to heal Prabha Devi's inner wounds, which had made her passive, silent, and dutiful to the detriment of her own personality. The communicative capacity of water also plays an important role in her life. It teaches Prabha Devi how to express herself by means of her body, which is not something to be suppressed, but an important part of a woman's identity.

Water also performs an emotional function because it provokes a series of feelings—desire for freedom and independence, self-esteem, confidence, passion—which Prabha Devi had repressed for far too long. Moreover, Prabha Devi's evolution has followed the water cycle: first, before getting married, when she lived with her own family and her parents decided her life, she used to live below the surface, in a state of total isolation from both her own self and the rest of the world; then, when she got married, she moved above the surface, detached from everything that happened to her, while her life was going on beneath her; finally, she manages to reach the surface and stay afloat, as the title suggests. This means that she has established contact with the woman within her who was disturbingly unfamiliar—uncanny—but has eventually turned into an integral part of her being.

### Marikolanthu

The last passenger Akhila speaks to is Marikolanthu, a thirty-one-year-old woman who has not participated in the other women's conversation until then. Her story is undoubtedly the most dramatic of all, as she herself claims, referring to the other women's experiences: «What do they know of life and the toll it takes? What do they know of how cruel the world can be to women?» (p. 221). Unlike the previous story, in which the main symbol was water, Marikolanthu's life is undoubtedly characterized by fire. Akhila, even before listening to what her fellow passenger has to say, asks herself: «Who was this woman from whom anger poured forth like a stream of lava?» (p. 221).

Fire, in this chapter, has a strong metonymic significance and performs an important cathartic function in the life of the protagonist. However, it is not the only symbol of this story entitled «Sister to the Real Thing». Indeed, there are a number of things which characterize Marikolanthu's life and show how the uncanny has dominated her world. In this case it is helpful to recall Vidler's explanation of the unhomely as a feeling experienced at the psychological level when one's life is based on a doubling and perceived as a replica of the self. Reality, then, appears to be distant, home appears «to be not quite . . . home» (Vidler 1992, p. 4), and one's body not quite one's own body. In my view, this is the meaning hidden behind the title of the last passenger's story. Indeed, Marikolanthu's identity has always manifested itself as the surrogate of a woman, a mother, a worker, a lover, a friend. Feeling «not quite» right for any role life has reserved for her, she alienates from her own self and lets paralysis and numbness prevail.

Marikolanthu comes from a poor family in a small Indian village. Her father is a farmer who lives on his own plantations of flowers, which he sells to local vendors. He is the only man in the village whose work does not depend on the Chettiar—the richest man in the district—who makes his fortune from the silk he gets from silkworms. Nature, the type of relationship people establish with it, and the reaction nature has in return is the first aspect I wish to examine concerning the role of things in this story.

The first interesting element to consider is that, given his love of nature, Marikolanthu's father names her after a plant with green leaves. The girl is not happy with it because «marikolanthu» is not the name of a proper flower, but just a «spike of green leaves» (*LC*, p. 225). The father's answer to her comment resonates all through the chapter not only because it introduces the concept of being «the sister to the real thing», but also because it highlights the importance of what is only apparently in the background: «“Haven't you seen how a few marikolanthu leaves are always woven into kanakambaran garlands? Without the fragrance of the marikolanthu, the kanakambaram is a dead flower”» (p. 225). He, unfortunately, dies soon after and his lesson is forgotten. The poverty in which the family find itself forces Marikolanthu and her mother to start working for the Chettiar as, respectively, a babysitter and cook. The Chettiar's rich family was always despised by Marikolanthu's father, who used to criticize their way of making money based on the unspeakable torture inflicted on the poor silkworms. As Marikolanthu explains to Akhila, the head of the family

bred them, stuffing them with mulberry leaves till they grew so fat that they burst out of their skins. To hide their shame the poor naked worms spun silk and wrapped it around themselves. But the Chettiar wouldn't let them be even then. He boiled them and stripped their silk off them. Skeins of silk, ounces of silk. (p. 223)

The cruel treatment endured by the silkworms very much resembles Marikolanthu's destiny after a life spent serving the Chettiar's family. As happens with the worms, which are bred and fed abundantly, she is welcomed and spoilt by the Chettiar's daughter-in-law. Marikolanthu, who is supposed to look after her child, becomes her special friend and receives gifts, money, beautiful dresses, and jewels. As a young girl, she feels flattered and her manners are strongly influenced by this woman, who knows little of the challenges a poor girl has to face. Marikolanthu admits that she «tossed her head when [she] talked. [She] developed a

sidelong glance. [She] swayed [her] hips as [she] walked» (p. 249). This is dangerous behavior for an ingenuous girl living the fantasy of a life that does not belong to her. Indeed, one January night, on the occasion of a party held in the Chettiar's mansion, a cousin of the family waits for her in the mango orchard flanking their property and rapes her. His words hit her for their cruelty: «It's time someone reminded you of who you are. . . . You might think you are our equal but you are not» (p. 252). A significant gesture he makes can be interpreted in the light of the study of things. In that tragic moment, he instinctively snaps her watch bracelet and flings it into the wood. This object represents a privilege the girl has acquired, but which, in her perpetrator's opinion, she does not deserve. As «only the cook's daughter» (p. 252), her body has no value, but is a mere instrument to be used to satisfy a man's pleasure. In that moment, the natural course of life stops for her. Time, represented by her watch, is frozen and all the events that will mark Marikolanthu's life in the years to follow will circularly refer back to this night's events.

The mango orchard—the ominous setting of the rape—is an example of the unhomely presence of nature in Marikolanthu's life. Instead of protecting her from the threats coming from the Chettiar's house, it exposes her to the worst thing that can happen in an Indian girl's life, especially if she is poor. Instead of hiding her, the fruit trees offer her rapist a sheltered place in which he can abuse the girl. The darkness and isolation of this place, which hosts the moral—if not physical – death of the young girl—contrasts vividly with the surrounding environment, which is full of beauty and life. As Marikolanthu tells us,

[i]n January, the village was at its beautiful best. . . . The trees were dense with leaves and there was grass growing everywhere. A cool breeze winnowed through the fields and hair left loose. Flowers bloomed; thousands of them. This was the season of the jasmine—plump, rounded gundu-mallis, the fragile narrow-petalled mullai . . . . The houses newly whitewashed gleamed in the moonlight. (p. 250)

In this familiar place, the young girl does not find motherly protection, but pure terror. Similarly, fire, another significant natural element in the story, favors the despicable act of the rapist. Indeed, the bonfire lit by the peasants who are celebrating the festival nearby, creates the perfect context of confusion and noise that allows the man to act undisturbed. Marikolanthu's cries go unheard while people are dancing and singing around the fire. For them, fire is the symbol of past worries and problems to burn away forever and the flames, which joyfully engulf the old things that people throw on the bonfire, represent the hope of a

prosperous year and better future. The good omen associated with fire according to the village's traditions has a completely opposite value for Marikolanthu. Not only her past, but also her present and her future are being destroyed this night. She observes bitterly: «The sparks would fly as the bonfire was set alight and the night would crackle with the sound of dried logs and twigs waking up. With my past, my future too had been torched alive» (p. 253). Her hopes, dreams, and projects are burnt forever. Once the fire dies out, «an acrid smell of burning [hangs] over the courtyard» (p. 254). Although Marikolanthu wants to pretend that nothing has changed and her life can go on as if nothing had happened, the remains of the fire around the Chettiar's mansion—the smell of smoke and the burnt pieces of wood—show her that the consequences of a blaze manifest themselves, whether she likes it or not.

A few weeks later, Marikolanthu finds out she is expecting a baby. Her mother's contempt and disbelief at her version of the facts makes her feel guilty and dirty. She hates her baby with all herself, but her efforts to abort—by means of unconventional remedies—fail and she gives birth to a baby boy. Like the Chettiar's silkworms, which to «hide their shame . . . spun silk and wrapped it around themselves» (p. 223), she builds a shield around herself, refusing to love the baby. She, therefore, leaves him to her mother and goes back to work at the Chettiar's house. But, as if she were one of their silkworms, she does not find peace, not even now that she has lost her youth, dreams, and family. As quoted above, «the Chettiar wouldn't let them [the silkworms] be even then. He boiled them and stripped their silk off them» (p. 223). Similarly, Marikolanthu is stripped of the last bits of dignity left to her. Indeed, as the assistant of the Chettiar's daughter-in-law, she is supposed to take care of her every need, including her most intimate desires. She becomes her mistress whose only purpose is to «give her pleasure and in her pleasure lay [her] reward» (p. 274). She loses every hint of self-respect and self-preservation. As if this were not enough, the woman's husband also starts visiting young Marikolanthu every night and abuses her.

Her body, then, becomes a mere object of desire for the sake of other people's needs. For Marikolanthu, on the other hand, it is a prison from which she is unable to escape. Her body has been the cause of all her sufferings: home for a baby she did not want, temptation for evil men, an instrument of pleasure for privileged women. After the rape, it has turned from a temple into a tomb, from blossoming beauty to decaying flesh. The negativity associated with her own body shows itself through a disease which grows in Marikolanthu's womb. She explains: «Flesh within my flesh that fed on my body and grew. A hundred tiny



children devouring me alive. I had to have the womb, their home, removed» (p. 278). She is not sorry about this. On the contrary, the flames of anger which burn inside her make her happy to be breaking this physical link between herself and her illicit son. With a sense of relief, she claims: «I would destroy the house and the bond that wove our lives together» (p. 278). In order to pay for the operation, she sells her son to a local factory run, ironically, by Murugesan, the man who raped her many years before. After a year, however, the man dies and she feels a great desire to go and see his body burn during the funerary ceremony. What she finds, however, is a vision that turns her anger towards the dead man into infinite tenderness for her own son. Indeed, as an employee of the factory, the young boy is in charge of lighting the pyre in which his legitimate father is about to burn. She admits: «I felt a great sadness wash over me. . . . He [her son] didn't deserve this. Or any of what had happened to him. As the flames leapt, my hate burned with them» (p. 281).

Fire, then, reappears at the end of the story as a completely different symbol. From metonym of negative feelings, infernal sufferings, and burning anger, it now performs a cathartic function, thus purifying Marikolanthu's unhomely world. The feeling of estrangement towards a part of herself, like her son, has disappeared before these flames. Maternal love grows inside her, which she also feels on a physical level: «I felt a quickening in my phantom womb. My child was about to be born» (p. 282). Her desire to be a real mother makes her finally reflect on an expression that has resonated like a refrain throughout the chapter, that is, that she has always been «sister to the real thing». She is named after marikolanthu, not quite a flower, but a green plant; she is not quite poor, spoilt by the Chettiar's family who, eventually, ruin her; she is not quite a friend to the Chettiar's daughter-in-law, who treats her like her forbidden object of desire; she is not quite a woman, because after the rape she starts believing her body is a mere instrument for anybody's pleasure; and she is not quite a mother as she is linked to her son biologically, but not emotionally. After enduring dreadful hardships, which split her own self, Marikolanthu is finally willing to wrest control of her own destiny and be a complete woman, as her last statement suggests: «For so long now, I had been content to remain a sister to the real thing. Surrogate housewife. Surrogate mother. Surrogate lover. But now I wanted more. I wanted to be the real thing» (p. 282).

The Chettiar's house is the backdrop against which the main events of Marikolanthu's life unfold. Its centripetal force has repeatedly attracted the girl to a place she considered as familiar, but which was actually a place of perdition.

The unhomeliness of this place manifested itself through terror, loneliness, and loss of identity. This chapter illustrates more than all the others the sliding of coziness into terror that underlies the notion of home. More precisely, as Marikolanthu's story shows, home can become a much too unfamiliar place for a woman and in order not to lose herself she has to lose her home. To lose an unhomely home, obviously, does not mean to become homeless, but to escape from a disorienting and alienating site that has nothing to do with the idea of safety traditionally associated with the domestic sphere. By distancing herself from the Chettiar's home, for instance, Marikolanthu regains familiarity with her son, thus making her feel like a complete woman for the first time.

As far as her relationship with her son is concerned, the idea of home is often associated with womb in the story. Since the boy is an unwanted child, the womb is represented as an uncanny place, a source of unhappiness and unhomely feelings. It is a place of repressed anger and infertility not so much in a physical as in an emotional sense. It is also a place in which disease roots itself to the extent that an ideal proximity develops between home, womb, and tomb. Finally, however, a new life grows there, albeit not biologically, thus allowing the woman's body to become a homely home to inhabit.

The critical analysis of *LC* has shown that in contemporary Indian feminist fiction, home is not represented as a fixed spatiality with a centripetal force, but as an unstable concept with a centrifugal force. The modern home for Indian women is in transit and is constructed and questioned not so much as a physical as a mental space. Moreover, in feminist accounts like Nair's novel, the private is public to the extent that issues arising within the home involve a whole community of women. From this perspective, it is difficult to establish where home—and therefore the individual—ends and community begins. As the protagonists of *LC* have shown, women draw sustenance and strength from each other because, as George has also pointed out, «home stands not just for one's representation of oneself but for what others see of one» (1999, p. 24). In other words, they constitute mirrors for each other and see themselves through others' experiences. Another conclusion which can be drawn from the critical analysis of *LC* is that the equation of home and self is destroyed because the self is built outside of the home. Home, therefore, is not so much the starting point as the point of arrival after a journey in one's inner self.

The literary implications of such feminist readings of the home involve the concept of unhomeliness embodied by a series of things which, at first, are metonyms of the estrangement experienced within an unfamiliar environment, but,

then, after a process of introspection and revision, change their meaning substantially. Certain domestic things transform domesticity into a place in which women can express themselves. They also act as a means of resistance, thus performing their agency as instruments of comfort, self-expression, and rebellion. Therefore, the unhomely is never repressed altogether, but transformed through a process. Its negative potential is subverted and turned into positive potential. Home, then, is never rejected, forgotten, or demonized, but always rehabilitated not so much at a physical as at an emotional level. This preference for compromise over abrupt rupture is in line with the Indian interpretation of feminism based on the search for the «golden mean» (*LC*, p. 199) between the values of tradition and the opportunities offered by a changing modernity.

## DIASPORIC THINGS

To be rooted is perhaps the most important  
and least recognized need of the human soul.  
(Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*)

Indian diasporic writing constitutes a great force in world culture. The literary field, however, has privileged the heterosexual male experiences of migration for a long time and, until recently, the intersection of gender and diaspora has been a less explored literary manifestation. Women writers, who form a majority of Indian writers who have emigrated to the West, play a fundamental role in the representation of diaspora as a gendered (and not general) phenomenon. They deal with the different experiences of alienation, acculturation, and assimilation in Western countries (mainly the United States and Canada) lived by women as such. Moreover, they focus on strategies of identity negotiation that women can adopt in order to cope with, on the one hand, individual anxieties and, on the other, familial expectations. As Marangoly George has also noted (1996, p. 170), in women's fiction of migration the baggage carried over by women in the new land, both cultural and physical, is crucial in the narrative as it deeply influences the shift from one culture to another. In this chapter, I will look at the materiality of diaspora and unpack the relationship between things as cultural anchors and migrants as gendered subjects. To this end, I will focus on two short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer-price-winning collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999): "Mrs. Sen's" and "The Third and Final Continent".

Over the decades before and after the turn of the twenty-first century, diasporic literature has become one of the main facets of recent India writing. After a period of nationalist fervor which continued until Independence and a phase of apparent modernization and national triumph during the post-independence era, a sense of rebellion and optimism spread through the population, who opened up to globalization, mobility, and transnational migration (Ashcroft 2013,

p. 30). Indian literature of the diaspora represents the experiences of a new generation of people who seek a future world beyond the restrictions of the nation. The rigid construction of identity promoted by postcolonial nationalism comes to imprison rather than liberate Indian citizens because it inherits its model of governance from the colonial state. Hence, as the proliferation of South Asian diasporic writing shows, there has been a growing need to question the traditional idea of the nation as an imagined community. The boundaries of the subcontinent start to blur and a second phase of the Indian diaspora, characterized by hybridity and transcultural encounters, begins. Monbinder Kaur has highlighted a fundamental difference between the first and the second wave of the Indian diaspora due to historically-motivated discontinuities (2015, p. 68). Unlike the “old” diaspora, which originated from the colonial experience and was characterized by a break with the homeland, the “new” Indian diaspora, which started out of India’s globalization, is based on a connection with the homeland. Amitav Ghosh has defined this new phase as a «genuine historical anomaly» (1989, p. 76). He has acknowledged that Indian migrants who belong to the modern diasporic wave maintain a close relationship with their motherland not so much through the reproduction of social and political institutions, such as language and religion, as through culture and imagination. This is the reason why writers—«the specialists of imagination» (p. 76)—play an important part in the context of the diaspora-motherland relationship. Fakrul Alam, in his essay, *The Mythos of Return and Recent Indian English Diasporic Fiction*, has explained that while in the first phase of Indian English fiction its writers were nearly all rooted in the Indian subcontinent and focused almost entirely on the daily experience of Indians, in the second phase, an increasing number of writers began to make the life of diasporic Indians their main subject (2013, p. 248).

As Ruth Maxey also confirms, the years between 1970 and 2010 reflect the modern explosion of South Asian immigrant literature, both novels and short stories (2012). The writers located beyond the borders of India do not position themselves out-of-place, but in-between two cultures, which is a privileged standpoint and a locus of potential. On the one hand, they never leave their homeland completely because the spaces of India travel with the migrant and remain alive through imagination. As Ghosh puts it, «[e]ventually the place and the realities that accompany it vanish from memory and only the words . . . remain. The place, India, becomes in fact an empty space, mapped purely by words» (1989, p. 77). On the other hand, despite being deeply rooted in the Indian consciousness, diasporic writers show a significant engagement with the world as they deal with

the hyphenated identities of the migrant subjects and «the bodily, psychological, and spiritual effects of belonging fully nowhere» (Friedman 2004, p. 191).

The discourses around such a prominent force of world culture as the Indian literature of diaspora, however, have demonstrated a universalizing tendency in tackling the diasporic phenomenon from an unmarked, normalizing male perspective. In other words, until recently, the intersection between diaspora and gender has been overlooked. Aparna Rayaprol, in her book, *Negotiating Identities: Women in the Indian Diaspora* (1997), draws attention to the lack of social sciences research on the gendered aspects of migration and Sandhya Rao Mehta, in her introduction to *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, a volume she edited, also writes that the concept of diaspora has been examined mainly according to overarching definitions and theories aimed at linking the experiences of diverse groups, especially male ones, since the choice to move from one physical location to another is primarily seen to be a male decision (2015, pp. 1-2). However, associating diaspora with a patriarchal dimension, thus analyzing the mobility of masculine subjects as primary agents of the formation of diaspora, would mean overlooking the specific individual experiences of women, and, consequently, ignoring the fact that the onus of retaining memories of home, reproducing them within the new place, and acting as cultural custodians is typically feminine. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has also contributed to the debate around women's experiences within the diaspora by focusing on the difference between the experience of the «“Woman”—a cultural and ideological composite Other» and that of «“women”—real, material subjects of their collective histories» (p. 334). The «patriarchal and heteronormative underpinnings» of diaspora advocated by Gayatri Gopinath in her book, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Culture* (2005, p. 5) and the consequent primacy of patriarchal interpretations of the term have also been challenged by Stuart Hall, who rejects the monolithic interpretation of diasporic identity. He points out that diaspora is neither a phenomenon nor a historical fact, but, rather, a process and the resulting cultural identity is better defined by fluidity than fixity:

The diasporic experience as I intend it here is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite difference, by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (1990, p. 235)

In other words, Hall defines diaspora as a human phenomenon, lived and experienced differently depending on the contexts and the personal histories of the people involved, including their gender. Thus, in his view, cultural identity is not an essence, but a positioning and is always constituted through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. Unlike transnationalism, which speaks to more impersonal forces, such as globalization and capitalism (Brazier and Mannur 2003, p. 8), diaspora refers to a dispersion of subjects. And this dispersal is based on the metaphor of the scattering or sowing of seeds—as the Greek origin of the noun «diaspora» suggests—which is traditionally interpreted from an androcentric perspective that emphasizes «active male procreation and patrilineal descent» (Kosnick 2013, p. 123). This view, however, ignores the home-making role of women in the new land. Hence, it is imperative to draw on Hall's study of the phenomenon and understand it as a gendered—and not general—process. As such, it needs to be looked at not only through the examination of different contexts, but also from the point of view of gender, which is a central organizing principle of the migrant's life.

Therefore, a number of questions must be answered, such as: what role do women play in the process of travel and migration in the new land? Do differences between the sexes produce a different perspective on diasporic identities? Can we speak of «gendered diaspora»? Pablo Shiladitya Bose writes that «the range of diasporic transnational practices is not monolithic but instead governed by differences in class, gender, race, sexuality, and a host of other distinctions» (2008, p. 125). As James Clifford argues, despite the tendency to talk about travel and displacement in an unmarked, normalizing way, in the foreign land women live the painful duality of gaining independence through work, while struggling with the insecurities of exile (1992, p. 313). In addition, Kaur has noted that women are supposed to bear the burden of preserving memories of home, reproducing Indianness by recreating it within new contexts and acting as custodians of their homeland culture (2015, p. 68). This is also confirmed by Nira Yurval-Davis, who acknowledges how diasporic women are transmitters of culture, tradition, customs, songs, cuisine, etc., and patriarchies charge them with the responsibility for assuming codes of «proper» cultural traditions and appropriate behavior (1993, p. 627). In this respect, talking about the different gender experiences in the diaspora, Anne McClintock has argued that while men occupy the dimension of time, being future-oriented, linear, projected towards change and progress, women occupy the dimension of space as they are linked to the past, local traditions, and the static environment of the household. The fact that

women are bound to the idea of home also reflects their collective response to migration as opposed to the more individualistic response of men. Women find themselves to be a member of multiple cultures at the same time. Not only are they members of their ethnic group, but they are also new members of the main culture of the host country. While playing both roles, they negotiate gender positions within each sub-group. The expectations of behavior from self and other fluctuate, creating a great balancing effort for diasporic women. Trapped between duty and self-fulfillment, diasporic women risk developing confused identities as they are supposed to cope with cultural adjustment as both individuals and as members of communities. Through clothes, food, and traditional customs, women must preserve the family's national identity and are considered as symbols, totems, signifiers of their national group, and cultural custodians. Under these circumstances, women are far from being free to build a new life and a new personal identity. On the contrary, as Kira Kosnick has pointed out, within the diaspora they are often responsible for the «cultural-biological reproduction» of their native collectivity (2013, p. 125).

If we draw a parallel between the creation of the postcolonial Indian nation and the Indian diasporic experience in the West, we will notice that both are based on gendered and familial norms. After the British colonial era, the new nation-state had the opportunity to reclaim its cultural integrity and recover its identity and that was done by using gender as a formative element of the new nation—a male-constructed space, ruled by male leaders. Commenting on the gendered configuration of the postcolonial nation, Elleke Boehmer claims that the role of women was highly symbolic as women embodied traditional values such as motherhood, home, a nurturing attitude, family, hearth, roots, and birth (2005, pp. 37-38). Despite their important ideological value, women's actual status was that of symbols as they stood for the national territory and values, which were re-established and kept safe by the sons of the nation. This ideological construction shows the extent to which gender was the formative medium for the constitution of nationhood and how nationalism overlaps with gender and patriarchal legacies. In this regard, Boehmer explains that «the nation as a body of people was imagined as a family arrangement in which the leaders had the authority of fathers and, in relation to the maternal national entity, adopted the positions of sons» (p. 46). Hence, the gender hierarchies in force within the family were applied to the structure of the new nation as they were taken as being given naturally and, therefore, unquestionable, and the family was the vehicle for social organization and the primary carrier of gender ideology. According to this view,



women are both the symbolic center and the boundary marker of the nation conceived as «home» and «family». Women's bodies, then, become crucial to nationalist discourse in that they serve not only as the site of biological reproduction of the nation, but also as the embodiment of the communal past and tradition.

However, as independence did not empower mothers, despite privileging them as symbols, diaspora did not empower women despite transcending national boundaries. In the nation-state, as well as in the land of diaspora, the patriarchal presence has remained unchallenged and gender policies have been manipulated to reproduce the principles of the patriarchal family. On the one hand, women experience what Edward Said has defined as «metaphorical exile» (1994), which is to say a state of mind that both men and women experience in the host land, where they construe themselves as outsiders. On the other hand, as Gopinath has underlined, women in the diaspora must also face a physical displacement as a result of a sudden and radical change of location after their husbands' personal or professional decisions, and this adds to their sense of exile. The result is a «double displacement» (Sur 2015, p. 38), both metaphorical and physical, originating from the fear of the new culture and the experience of a forced exile.

While the social sciences have increasingly focused attention on the individual experiences of migration, in literary studies the intersection of gender and diaspora is a relatively unexplored terrain. While literary studies of diaspora concentrate on the problems and predicament of the diasporic community, the problems faced by the women affected by these geographical shifts remain comparatively uninvestigated. Diasporic literature, therefore, requires analysis in terms of specific ethnicity and gender—of author and/or primary characters.

An increasing number of women writers have been dealing with the implications of being female in the diaspora. For Indian women writers, who form a majority of the Indian writers who have emigrated to the West, a change of location is an opportunity to break with the past and build a new space, thus challenging and revising women's traditional roles. In postcolonial India, women have been pushed to the margins of society, despite the national ideals of freedom and self-regulation. Therefore, the rise of a transnational horizon has opened up new possibilities for them to claim their space in the new geographical location. Avtar Brah, in her book, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, has claimed that «diasporas are . . . potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings» (2005, p. 193). In the same vein, Clifford has argued that the new land either offers new roles for women or creates a new patriarchal structure (qtd. in Kaur 2015, p. 86). This reflects what he called the «empowering paradox of diaspora» (p. 322), that is,

the experience of simultaneously belonging here and there. According to Clifford's view, in the foreign land diasporic subjects experience possibilities of creative construction of new homes and identities, but they face the risk of not fully belonging anywhere, thus failing to cope with a disturbing in-betweenness.

Over the last two decades, there has been a flowering of novels and short stories in English by women of the Indian diaspora who show their socio-cultural bond with their homeland. In their writings, they deal with aspects of gender consciousness and female sensibility and, as Anu Celly also notes (2002), the women characters act as role models for women readers as they show the correct way of coping with a hyphenated identity through a syncretic negotiation of their double selves. Moreover, women writers depict a change of location as an opportunity to break with the past and build a new space, thus challenging and reviewing women's traditional roles. However, does the distance between the homeland and the new home offer an opportunity to break with the past and tradition? Or does it exasperate women's alienation? Does the diaspora actually provide contexts in which previous gender norms can be challenged? Or does it only reproduce and, possibly, even harden existing gender ideologies and relations? Among the numerous Indian women writers who have emigrated to the West, such as Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kiran Desai, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Anita Rau Badami, the author on which this chapter is focused, Jhumpa Lahiri, is one who fictionalizes the multiple cultural tensions of diasporic life through a sensitive and realistic insight into the complications of being feminine. Moreover, as a second-generation Indian-American writer, she explores the diasporic experience from a perspective which differentiates her from first-generation authors. She deeply explores diaspora dilemmas without idealizing women's experience in the new culture and is fully aware of the connection between identity and everyday life. Lahiri was born to a Bengali family from Kolkata<sup>1</sup> in 1967 in London and moved to the United States when she was just three years old. As a second-generation immigrant, she has personally experienced what it feels like to be Indian growing up in a foreign land while maintaining a strong link with the family's native culture. In an interview entitled *My Two Lives* (2006), Lahiri discusses the difficulties of having a hyphenated identity and the importance of writing as a way of embracing her Indian-American identity. She

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<sup>1</sup> In 2001, the government of West Bengal decided to officially change its capital city's name from Calcutta (the Anglicized version of the Bengali name "Kalikata") to Kolkata, in order to reflect its Bengali pronunciation. Here, I am using the new name of the city, while Lahiri, in an interview focused on her childhood, uses the old version of the name.

has travelled several times to Kolkata, which she describes as «a bustling unruly city, so different from the small New England town» where she was raised (in Jha, 2008, p. 139). Her recurrent visits to Kolkata initiated her talent for fiction writing, as she has stated herself: «Calcutta nourished my mind, my eyes as a writer and my interest in seeing things from a different point of view» (p. 139). She was the first South Asian writer to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000 with her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*. This collection combines stories set in the United States with others set in India, unlike her second collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), that is set entirely in the West.

*Interpreter of Maladies*, published in 1999, obtained great popularity in both India and the United States. It focuses on Indian migrants' problems of adaptation, integration, and assimilation in the West and portrays characters dealing with identity crises, the trauma of loss, and the struggles for the negotiation of a new identity. Although it has been traditionally considered as a collection of separate and independent short stories, a more accurate way of describing the genre of Lahiri's work is by defining it as a composite novel (or short story cycle, as some critics call it)<sup>2</sup>. According to the definition provided by Dunn and Morris, «[t]he composite novel is a literary work composed of shorter texts that—though individually complete and autonomous—are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles» (1995, p. 2). In other words, the composite novel is characterized by a grouping of autonomous pieces that together achieve whole-text coherence. First, all of its parts should be identifiable—that is, they should have titles—and memorable. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, each story has its own title and can be experienced independently by the reader. Second, the composite novel should offer the reader the possibility of making connections through the repetition of motifs and «rhythm», as E. M. Forster would claim (1927, p. 213). In *Interpreter of Maladies*, although there is not a single location or recurring characters in all of the stories, a number of patterns bind the stories together and a series of themes are repeated throughout the book. Among the themes tackled most frequently there are: barriers to and opportunities for the creation of community, marital, extra-marital, and parent-child relationships, and the diasporic sense of exile. Another essential characteristic of the short story cycle pointed out by Susan Garland Mann is «the simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence of the stories which make up the whole» (1989, p. 17). This holds true for *Interpreter of Maladies*, in which a perfect balance exists between its

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<sup>2</sup> On the differences between composite novel and short story cycle, see the volume *The Composite Novel. The Short Story Cycle in Transition* by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris (1995).

individual components and the unity of the whole. In other words, the book depicts an entire community—that of Indian diasporic subjects—by balancing a variety of representations rather than offering the single representation provided by the novel or the individual short story. Additional layers of meaning are produced by the dialogue between the stories, which allows for a more diverse and nuanced depiction/interpretation of members of the South Asian diaspora. To use Raman Selden's words, Lahiri's text is «an organized whole», a «configuration of elements [and/or] themes» whose sum is more than its parts (1985, p. 106).

According to Noelle Brada-Williams (2004), the common theme that links all nine stories together—a fundamental characteristic to distinguish the short story cycle from a simple collection of short stories—is the frequent representation of extreme care and neglect demonstrated by the characters. I would narrow Brada-Williams's statement by arguing that the recurring theme is more precisely the carefully executed rituals that mark the relationships between the characters. This will be the focus of the examination of the short stories "Mrs. Sen's" and "The Third and Final Continent", which are the object of the critical analysis in this chapter. More specifically, I will look at the material world through which the rituals are performed by the protagonists—a woman and a man, respectively—within the diasporic context.

The two stories lend themselves for comparison because of the common focus on the diasporic experience of first-generation immigrants who moved from India to the West. One depicts a woman protagonist, the eponymous Mrs. Sen, engaged in a difficult marital relationship and faced with the hardship of integration in a new country. The other depicts a man with a happy marriage who experiences a successful process of integration in, first, England and, then, America. Another reason why I have chosen to relate the two stories is because, within the scope of the short story cycle, they balance each other by presenting, on the one hand, homesickness and separation and, on the other hand, adaptability and cosmopolitanism. In other words, they offer balanced representations of how women and men live migration. The two stories are also in conversation with each other interrelated because of the particular engagement of the protagonists with material artifacts. Their different ways of inhabiting the phenomenological space of the diaspora suggests a completely different disposition towards the old and the new culture. In this respect, I argue that things can be considered as orientation devices, especially within the diasporic space. In this respect, an interesting viewpoint to interpret the context in which Mrs. Sen and the unnamed protagonist of "The Third and Final Continent" develop their diasporic selves is

by thinking of space through orientation. Which orientation devices do they use to make the strange familiar? How do they occupy new places in order to overcome alienation? In both cases, it may be claimed that different processes of inhabitation of a certain space are enacted through things. Things determine our way of living with others. They make us orientate towards something and make us who or what we are. As Martin Heidegger put it in an example in *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity* (1999), people who are at the table are part of what makes the table itself. Or in other words, the table is not merely «a thing in space—. . . a spatial thing» (p. 68), but a thing which allows us to do something and that «doing» takes the object out of itself and makes us align with a specific state of being. Hence, the things we use or look for reflect a certain identity or a search for an identity.

Another fundamental property things develop when they come into contact with people is that they provide orientation, thus acting as anchoring points. From the perspective of a migrant, this is a quality of paramount importance. Indeed, what directs us towards or away from certain things is not rationality but our conscience. As Ahmed's study of a phenomenological model of emotions has pointed out (2006), emotions determine distance from or proximity to things and shape how our bodies are moved by the things we approach. Phenomenology implies an orientation towards objects and focuses on the worldly aspect of our consciousness. As a feminist interested in phenomenology, Ahmed turns towards things and the space they inhabit traditionally, that is, the background. In her book, *Queer Phenomenology. Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), she examines how people are affected by what they come into contact with as well as how the experience of inhabiting a certain body in a certain space is significantly regulated by the material environment around that body. This view is particularly relevant from a diasporic perspective. Migrants face their condition differently depending on the degree of attachment/detachment towards the metonymic things which embody either the native or the foreign culture. Commenting on people's ways of inhabiting space, Ahmed has asserted that we find our way in the world by situating ourselves in relation to certain things. Consequently, in the diasporic land, things become «homing devices» (2006, p. 34) which can have a twofold orientation: either towards the lost home or the place which is not yet home. As far as orientation is concerned, Heidegger claimed that it signifies familiarity, that is, to feel at home (1973, p. 144). This feeling primarily manifests itself within the sensory environment through the experience of smells, tastes, air, sounds, and landscapes, which are necessarily conveyed through things. Orientation,

therefore, means to feel a sense of familiarity among these things. A lack of orientation, on the contrary, occurs when person and object do not face each other in the right way or when the person surrounds him- or herself with the wrong objects. Clearly, the use of the adjective «wrong» here does not refer to a moral evaluation of the object itself, but to the (in)capacity of the object to make the person feel orientated in the space he or she inhabits.

Ahmed claims that the objects we find within our bodily horizon are not casual, but show the direction we have taken in life. As a consequence, «bodies come to “have” certain orientations over time and . . . they come to be shaped by taking some directions rather than others and toward some objects rather than others» (2006, p. 34). This is especially true for migrant subjects who, as a result of a nostalgic process, fill their sphere of action with objects which point to the past and inevitably increase the sense of estrangement. It is interesting to note that the words «strange/stranger», included in the noun «estrangement», refer to someone who «is physically close while remaining culturally remote» (Sarup 1994, pp. 101-102). Hence, the inhabitants of a new land who fail to develop a sense of home remain close to their home country in spite of the distance that separates them from that place. The physical landscape in which they live also reflects this condition and the objects which populate it become fetishes of the past, metonymies of a past life, and as Seyhan explains, «re-presentation[s], making present that which once was and no longer is» (2001, p. 16). We are moved by things not only metaphorically, but also literally. Their material presence puts in place what Ahmed, in her article, *Happy Objects*, defines the «drama of contingency» (2010, loc. 402), which determines «how we are touched by what we are near» (loc. 402). In other words, in our near sphere we find certain objects and not others depending on the orientation we have taken in life. If the things we include in our near sphere are imbued with memory, we remain stuck in the past and alienated rather than aligned with the new world and its culture. Although these things may convey feelings of reassurance, ease nostalgia, and overcome disorientation in the foreign land, the risk is that they act as anchors to the past, which becomes a trap rather than a refuge.

Interestingly, Ahmed's excavation of queer orientations leads her to parse multiple meanings of «orient» and to distinguish between being «orientated toward» and being «orientated around» (2006, pp. 112-117). For Ahmed, being orientated toward something is «to take up» that thing as thing, but being orientated around something is «to be taken up» by a thing, so that that thing becomes the very «center of one's being or action» (p. 16). In diaspora, the migrant subject

can either take up things of the local culture, thus orientating towards the material world of the new context or construe themselves around diasporic memories embodied by things of the past, thus being taken up by them.

When discussing things in the diaspora, memory inevitably occupies a prominent position. As Femke Stock argues, at the core of the concept of diaspora lies the image of the remembered home, far both in space and time (2013, p. 24). The past continues to speak to the displaced subject who enacts an «imaginative rediscovery» (Hall 1990, p. 224) of his or her previous life. This means that memories of home are not factual reproductions, but «fluid reconstructions set against the backdrop of the remembering subject's current positioning and conceptualization of home» (Stock 2013, p. 24). In other words, diasporic people are involved in what Aristotle defines as «anamnesis», that is, the active reproduction of the past, as opposed to «mneme» or simple evocation of the past (in Jain 2015, p. 7). The acts of remembrance performed through photographs, places, re-enactments of past events and people, in fact, play a crucial role in the way identity and selfhood are reconstituted in diaspora. Keya Ganguly, for instance, conducted a study on the role of memory in Bengali middle-class diasporic families (like the one portrayed in “Mrs. Sen’s”) and discovered that the recalling of the past often involves a selective appropriation of certain memories as a cure for the painful fragmentation of the present (2001, p. 17). However, while the narration of memory evoked by things can be very positive since they activate processes of self-analysis, self-discovery, and relocation, its impact on the perception of the present can be problematic, especially for women. In her study, Ganguly noted that memories act differently for men and women. For men, the past functions only as an affirmation of how much better off they are in the present and as a reiteration of how migration has liberated them. Women, on the other hand, dwell on the comforts of their pre-immigrant lives and idealize the past:

Re-making the past . . . serves at least a dual purpose. It is a way of coming to terms with the present without being seen to criticize the status quo; it also helps to recuperate a sense of the self not dependent on criteria handed down by others—the past is what the women can claim as their own. The past is seen as autonomous and possessing an authority not related to the privileges acquired through marriage and emigration. (p. 107)

What women recall with particular fondness, Ganguly adds, are the memories of a female community, kinship, communal ties, and a certain authority that they had in the household, which is lost in the immigrant context. Maurice Halbwachs

defines it as «collective memory» ([1952] 1992, p. 38), which is not based on things that happened to oneself personally, but on the remembrance of events, languages, and attitudes that reflect one's membership of a group. Memory, then, is never self-contained or isolated, but embedded in a continuum of events, people, or environments, and is often intermixed with imagination. Moreover, since memory works differently according to the individualal perception of events, different mediums of remembering are involved depending on the subject who remembers as well as the context of remembrance. The things through which memories work within homes, landscapes, and innerscapes offer an important clue to understand the role of the past for a diasporic subject, its relationship with the present, and its impact on the future.

A critical analysis of the diasporic things in “Mrs. Sen’s” and “The Third and Final Continent” will help understand whether the emotional and physical baggage they represent in the hostland facilitates or impedes belonging. By examining the material objects the protagonists orientate themselves towards, an evaluation of their different processes of identity construction in the West is possible. In a situation in which home needs to be reimagined, much of what the subject carries over is refashioned to facilitate a sense of belonging. Immigrants have to come to terms with the spiritual, material, and even linguistic luggage they carry or inherit. Salman Rushdie, in his novel *Shame*, explores the nature of this luggage:

When individuals come unstuck from their native land, they are called migrants. . . . what is the best thing about migrant peoples and seceded nations? I think it is their hopefulness. . . . And what's the worst? It is the emptiness of one's luggage. I'm speaking of invisible suitcases, not the physical, perhaps cardboard, variety containing a few meaning-drained mementos: we have come unstuck from more than land. We have floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time. (1984, p. 91)

While Rushdie talks about the symbolic luggage migrants carry over to the new land, Said, in *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (1986), writes of the objects «heavy with memory» cherished by the Palestinians living in exile (p. 14):

[A]lbums, rosary beads, shawls, little boxes. . . . We carry them about, hang them up on every new set of walls we shelter in, reflect lovingly on them. Then we do not notice the bitterness, but it continues and grows nonetheless. Nor do we acknowledge the frozen immobility of our attitudes. In the end, the past owns us. (p. 14)



Exilic subjects' identity, then, is embodied by the objects they carry with them to every land they inhabit. They are elements of cultural signification, and, as Bhabha defines them, «contingent and arbitrary signs and symbols that signify the affective life of the national culture» (1994, p. 203). Said, however, also points out a significant risk posed by the attachment to these objects of memory, that is, to remain trapped in a past life which is no longer real.

In the critical analysis that follows, I investigate the things onto which the diasporic protagonists of the two selected short stories project their identity in order to understand whether they lead their existence in the present or in the past. Through my object-oriented close reading I also intend to highlight how diaspora—and the processes of estrangement and integration it implies—is not only lived at a spatial and emotional level, but is also materialized in a mutual constitution of things and socio-cultural processes.

### **"Mrs. Sen's"**

"Mrs. Sen's" is the sixth short story included in Lahiri's collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). It occupies a unique position in her corpus of writing as it is a piece about a first-generation female immigrant based on her mother's personal experience of babysitting American children after arriving in the United States. Jhumpa Lahiri's short story focuses on the process of adaptation of a young Indian woman who has moved to the United States because of her husband's decision to work abroad. Although the protagonist is a woman, the story is told by a third-person narrator whose point of view coincides with that of an eleven-year-old boy, Eliot, who is looked after every afternoon by Mrs. Sen. Given their relationship of mutual sympathy, Eliot progressively senses Mrs. Sen's state of unease and disorientation due to a condition of constrained displacement. The woman indirectly admits her disapproval of her husband's decision to leave India through comments such as «[h]ere, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence» (Lahiri 1999, p. 115). Through Eliot's eyes and his acute sensitivity, we are provided with a clear picture of the Indian woman's psychological life, dominated by feelings of stasis and entrapment. Indeed, although women's deterritorialization may lead to a questioning of home as a site of patriarchal oppression, in the diaspora, many women are faced with the double burden of preserving the family's national identity while adapting to the new life. Commenting on the painful duality of the female diasporic

experience, Clifford (1994, p. 314) has underlined that women often gain relative independence and control through employment, but they also have to struggle with the insecurities of exile, the demands of family, and the claims of patriarchy. The result is an existence trapped between past and present, in a state of physical and mental isolation. Ruth Maxey, when talking about South Asian American fiction including Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, points out that writers representing domesticity-as-female «are interested in anatomising the collision between . . . women and the outside world» (2012, p. 58). Indeed, several critics have focused on Mrs. Sen's lack of mobility as a result of her obstinate recreation of India in the American context. Chakraborty, for instance, defines her as the victimized and pitiable exemplar of the immigrant woman who cannot cope with humiliation and exclusion in the foreign land (2008, p. 236). Brada-Williams also argues that the lack of community and participation in the lives of others is the main cause of Mrs. Sen's homesickness (2004, p. 459). Bidisha Banerjee, in her essay, *No Nation Woman: The Diasporic Woman's Quest for Home* (2007), has pointed out that Mrs. Sen tries to attach herself to the collective meaning of being Indian through food and Indian artifacts, which become fetishes evoking memories of female community and kinship. The same idea is shared by Williams (2007), who notes how Mrs. Sen uses food to engender agency and memory as she has no real community to speak of. However, I would argue that Mrs. Sen's alienation is not only due to her yearning for her authentic home, but also to the progressive recognition of the inauthenticity of all homes. In other words, by trying to recreate her first home, India, Mrs. Sen ends up being «unhomed», deprived of any real home. The criterion I have applied in order to select the central objects of my analysis is based on the inextricable bond between Mrs. Sen and India. I have chosen the things which represent active agents, and are de-materialized in the narrative, and transformed into signifiers of India, sense of community, and belonging. The things I will comment on offer a psychological and aesthetic portrayal of Mrs. Sen, thus revealing her inner as well as everyday struggle for a re-definition of her own identity. The most significant things can be divided into semantic areas: food and cooking, clothes and body ornaments, and home. These three semantic areas include respectively: fish and blade, sari and vermilion powder, and cassettes/letters from India and furniture.

### Food and cooking: fish and the Indian blade

Food is the symbolic center of diasporic experience as it is one of the main entities onto which the migrant projects his or her memories of home. By cooking

their traditional food, people away from home aim to recreate tradition as something unchanging and frozen in time. As Muthumal Assella writes in her essay, *Kitchen Politics and the Search for an Identity: The Mango Season* (2015), food is an identity marker for women characters as it is a metaphor for their emotional development as well as identity expression. Moreover, it is deeply connected with memory as it recalls past times by establishing a continuity with the mother culture and the motherland. Speaking about the importance of food for immigrants, Lahiri said in an interview in September 2003:

I come from a very food-oriented family. Like most children of immigrants, I'm aware of how important food becomes for foreigners who are trying to deal with life in a new world. Food is a very deep part of people's lives and it has incredible meaning beyond the obvious nutritional aspects. My parents have given up so many basic things coming here from the life they once knew—family, love, connections—and food is one thing that they've really held on to. (online)

Another reason why food is a significant element in diasporic narratives is because it is a means of exploring women's space within the diaspora and replaces unspoken emotions, thus giving voice to women's silenced stories. Cooking grants cohesion in psychological terms as it is a form of agency in the midst of a new incomprehensible environment. However, it also plays a controversial role because it does not only evoke the happy old times, but also anger and shame. This is the case of Mrs. Sen, whose engagement with food and the imaginary linked to it is very relevant.

The food that primarily represents the emotional bond between Mrs. Sen and India is fish, which is not merely her favorite food or the delicious ingredient she uses in the dishes she cooks for her husband, but also represents an essential source of cultural sustenance. What she desires so intensely is not the thing in itself, but the extremely pleasant sensation it gives her. Indeed, the preparation and consumption of food become a sort of ritual, which allows her to maintain a link with her past, when fish was an integral part of her daily life:

Mrs. Sen said she had grown up eating fish twice a day. She added that in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky. They ate the tail, the eggs, even the head. It was available in any market, at any hour, from dawn until midnight. (Lahiri 1999, pp. 123-124)

Paradoxically, fish is also what makes her realize that India is incredibly far away, as the quality of the fish she finds in America cannot compete with what she could find in Calcutta:

Mrs. Sen served her a tuna croquette, explaining that it was really supposed to be made with a fish called bhetki. «It is very frustrating», Mrs. Sen apologized, with an emphasis on the second syllable of the word. «To live so close to the ocean and not to have so much fish». In the summer, she said, she liked to go to a market by the beach. She added that while the fish there tasted nothing like the fish in India, at least it was fresh. (p. 123)

The memories of joyful abundance linked to fish in India contrast vividly with the images of desolate scarcity in a Western fish shop: «At the fish shop the ice beds were nearly empty, as were the lobster tanks, where rust-colored stains were visible through the water. A sign said the shop would be closing for winter at the end of the month» (p. 132). Fish also has a function in Mrs. Sen's interpersonal relationships, within both her marital life and the social one. Within the very cold relationship she has with her husband, fish represents the only point of contact between them. Their lives seem to be parallel except when it comes to buying and eating fish: «It was Mr. Sen who asked whether the fish was fresh and to cut it this way or that way . . . They sat at a picnic table and ate two baskets of clam cakes» (p. 129). However, even the joy brought by this symbolic food is not under Mrs. Sen's control, but under her husband's, like everything else in her life. He has both the power of making her happy and that of depriving her of her cultural sustenance: «No more fish for a while. Cook the chicken in the freezer. I need to start holding office hours» (pp. 123-124). Tired of depending on Mr. Sen, the woman decides to take the car and drive alone to the fish market, causing an accident which will mark the end of her babysitting and, probably, also the end of her attempts at integrating into the new culture. What is interesting to note is that while for Mr. Sen fish is just a delicious food, appreciated for its sensuous, tasty presence, for his wife it transcends mere objectification, becoming a means by which she can reinvent herself in a new context and «herstory». In terms of social life, fish is at the center of the very few social interactions entertained by Mrs. Sen. On each occasion, the great distance between the young woman and the local culture is highlighted. A case in point is when Mrs. Sen is on a bus, on her way back home after buying some fish at the market:

The driver turned his head and glanced back at Mrs. Sen. «What's in the bag?» Mrs. Sen looked up, startled. «Speak English?» The bus began to move again, causing the driver to look at Mrs. Sen and Eliot in his enormous rearview mirror. «Yes, I can speak». «Then what's in the bag?». «A fish», Mrs. Sen replied. «The smell seems to be bothering the other passengers. Kid, maybe you should open her window or something». (pp. 132-133)

By addressing Eliot directly, the man looks down on Mrs. Sen and denies her any subjectivity of her own, making her feel clearly out of place. Given this condition of social disorientation, Mrs. Sen finds confidence and strength only when, in the privacy of her home, she surrounds herself with familiar objects reminding her of India.

One of the most important things owned by Mrs. Sen is a blade she had brought from India «where apparently there was at least one in every household» (p. 115). It represents a very strong cultural element and Eliot immediately notices the relevance it has in Mrs. Sen's daily life, as she uses it in her ritual of cutting vegetables into pieces on the living room floor. In that moment of the day, Mrs. Sen transforms herself into a confident woman mastering perfectly the art of handling the cooking tool:

Facing the sharp edge without ever touching it, she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices, and shreds. She could peel a potato in seconds. At times she sat cross-legged, at times with legs splayed, surrounded by an array of colanders and shallow bowls of water in which she immersed her chopped ingredients. While she worked she kept an eye on the television and an eye on Eliot, but she never seemed to keep an eye on the blade. (p. 114)

This scene is repeated every day and because Mrs. Sen is actively engaged with Indian culture through her blade, this is the only circumstance when she looks comfortable, totally at ease, and in full control of the situation. As fish provokes a sense of frustration because of the sharp differences from Indian fish, the same happens with the blade, which in Mrs. Sen's memories is associated with the moments of joy and sharing she lived in India, surrounded by the chatter of her family and neighborhood women while cooking vegetables:

«Whenever there is a wedding in the family», she told Eliot one day, «or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the

neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night». (p. 115)

This image of community life contrasts vividly with the loneliness in which Mrs. Sen performs this ritual at her new home in America. The feelings of incompatibility, nostalgia, sense of loss, and disruption intensify her endeavor to belong, to make a house home. However, by fetishizing this Indian artifact, the woman paradoxically increases the distance that separates her from India as she transforms the blade into a symbolic entity with spiritual qualities embodying an idealized place. The inauthenticity of the India recreated by Mrs. Sen is also represented by her clothes and body ornaments, as the next sub-section shows.

### Clothing and body ornaments: sari and the vermilion powder

The garments we wear play a fundamental social role as they are the way we present ourselves to the world and inevitably alter others' perception of who we are. For a migrant, traditional clothes are ever-present reminders of the homeland and keep his or her original identity alive, thus evoking a multiplicity of self. Mrs. Sen's habit of wearing saris even in the Western context, despite the very different weather conditions from India, suggests she keeps identifying herself with her original culture, which she is not willing to give up. The cultural anthropologist Daniel Miller led a study on the sari as a piece of cloth which does not merely represent Indian women, but actually constitutes who they are. In his book *Stuff* (2010), he claims that the sari wears the Indian woman—not the opposite—and it makes her what she is, both woman and Indian. To give an idea of how it feels to wear a sari, Miller explains that

[it] is a single piece of entirely unsewn cloth, usually around 6 meters, worn by being draped around the body. . . . [The sari] is draped from right to left, passing over the lower body twice . . . and the upper body once. . . . The pallu, the free and usually more decorated end of the sari, falls over the left shoulder down to the waist. Given the asymmetry of the sari, no sensation in one part of the body is repeated in any other. . . . The pallu represents a prosthetic quality to the garment that is not shared by any Western clothing. . . . As a woman does her household chores, the pallu is in constant use as a kind of third hand. . . . the pallu's presence is so constant and available that it almost seems part of the body itself. (pp. 23-25)

Miller goes on explaining that through the pallu the initial relationship between mother and infant is established and it also has potential for beauty and eroticism as touching it allows for intimacy in the absence of touching the body itself. The aim of Miller's detailed description of the sari is to highlight the continued engagement and conversation between the Indian garment and its wearer. Moreover, Miller points out the extent to which the sari is an instrument of power, putting constant pressure on the women who are inhabiting it. The sari turns a woman into a person who interacts with others and with the self through its constantly shifting material.

Clothes are amongst our most personal possessions. They are the main medium between our sense of our bodies and our sense of the external world. Shifting the focus to the diasporic context, it may be claimed that the sense of self, the experience of being an individual are different at different times and in different places. Clothing plays an active part in constituting the particular experience of the self in determining what the self is in different contexts. Hence, a study of clothing in the diasporic context should involve the tactile, emotional, and intimate world of feelings. In Mrs. Sen's case both the intimate and the sensual realms represented by her saris can be investigated.

Mrs. Sen's colorful saris are her distinctive trait as Eliot notices the day he first meets her: «[S]he wore a shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys, more suitable for an evening affair than for that quiet, faintly drizzling August afternoon» (Lahiri 1999, p. 112). This garment is usually associated with verbs of movement such as «fluttered» (p. 119), «spill over the edges» (p. 125), «tossed» (p. 125), and metaphorical representations evoking movement, like: «leaping like flames» (p. 130) and «each wave resembled a sari drying on a clothesline» (p. 129). However, the idea of change represented by Mrs. Sen's saris—«a different pattern each day» (p. 119)—clashes with the feeling of stasis which dominates the woman's life: «Mrs. Sen pointed to the water, and said that at a certain moment, each wave resembled a sari drying on a clothesline. "Impossible!" she shouted eventually, laughing as she turned back, her eyes teary. "I cannot move"» (pp. 129-130). A reason for that is her inability to drive and, consequently, to leave home. Driving becomes a real obsession for her, not only because it represents the possibility of leading an independent life, but also because it gives her hope of moving back to India. She confesses her wish to Eliot: «"Mr. Sen says that once I receive my driving license, everything will improve. What do you think, Eliot? Will things improve?" "You could go to places", Eliot suggested. "You could go anywhere". "Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How

long would it take, Eliot?”» (p. 119). India—which is the place Mrs. Sen perceives as her real home—has a powerful centripetal force, condemning her to a suspended life between a tradition she has already left and the way of life that stubbornly denies her right of entry. The sari represents a strong anchor to Mrs. Sen’s past, which is her only certainty, and in the moments of strong pathos and emotional involvement, she instinctively touches her sari as if it could transfer its symbolic power to her. For example, when Mrs. Sen recalls India while talking to Eliot’s mother, «she neatened the border of her sari where it rose diagonally across her chest» (p. 113); or while she is having an argument with her husband over the phone, «she seemed only to be replying to things, and wiping her face with the ends of one of the saris» (p. 126). Saris also dominate the scene in which Mrs. Sen suffers a real nervous breakdown, when she is unable to get her husband to bring fish for dinner. After bursting into tears, she goes to her bedroom, where «she flung open the drawers of the bureau and the door of the closet, filled with saris of every imaginable texture and shade, brocaded with gold and silver threads. Some were transparent, tissue thin, others as thick as drapes» (p. 125). As she sifts through the saris, she cries: «“When have I ever worn this one? And this? And this?” She tossed the saris one by one from the drawers, then pried several from their hangers. They landed like a pile of tangled sheets on the bed» (p. 125). As happens with fish and the Indian blade, the cultural reminders of India accentuate, if possible, her feelings of frustration over living a life she does not want and keep her stuck even more firmly in a liminal space, between an unreachable past and an equally uncertain present. The emblems of festivities, rituals, and ceremonies can only increase the distance from a life she has left behind and cannot access in her present situation.

Another body ornament that captures Eliot’s attention is the vermilion powder Mrs. Sen applies every day on her scalp, over the line dividing her braided hair. She explains to Eliot: «“I must wear the powder every day, . . . for the rest of the days that I am married”. “Like a wedding ring, you mean?” “Exactly, Eliot, exactly like a wedding ring. Only with no fear of losing it in the dishwater”» (p. 117). Read in the light of the whole story, this symbol of marriage is a strong metonymic element not only for what it represents culturally, but also as a signifier of her personal married life. Indeed, the straight scarlet line suggests her husband’s role in the fracture of her identity, which is never going to heal unless she finds a way of merging the two halves of her self: that of an Indian woman devoted to her original family and tradition, and that of a migrant woman who is supposed to integrate in the new place, while keeping her Indian culture alive.



The red line on her hair also evokes the straight line drawn by Mr. Sen in terms of his expectations towards her: it is the clear direction he has established for both of their lives, without considering his wife's possible difficulties in coping with the standards he has set. For example, he pushes her to learn how to drive, despite it being an incredibly stressful practice for Mrs. Sen: «[The] stream of cars made her knuckles pale, her wrists tremble, and her English falter» (p. 121). She lives this experience as an external imposition by her husband and the society in which she lives. When Eliot's mother expresses her concern about Mrs. Sen's inability to drive, Mr. Sen intervenes coldly: «'I have been giving her lessons, . . . By my estimate Mrs. Sen should have her driver's license by December'» (p. 113). His emotional aridity shows that he feels no empathy towards her fears and anxieties, and he is the primary agent of her psychic fracture. The result of his unempathetic attitude is a portrait of Mrs. Sen, both dematerialized and dehumanized, not only in front of other people, but also in her own self-perception. Interestingly, at the end of the story, the vermilion powder becomes the center of a cultural misreading, when after the small car accident caused by Mrs. Sen, a policeman tells her that her scalp was bleeding, ignoring that it is a cultural marker. This further episode of identity cancellation definitely destabilizes the woman, whose reaction is to give a self-effacing answer to the policeman: «'Mr. Sen teaches mathematics at the university'» was all she said by way of explanation» (p. 134). She has suddenly lost her determination to assert her own individuality and presents herself to others through her husband. Although we do not know whether Mrs. Sen will ever learn how to drive, we have the strong impression that this further trauma will make her give up all her efforts to constitute a new self. As Sarah Ahmed suggests (2006), the lines on our bodies, such as the laugh line or the furrow created by the frown, are external traces of an interior world. Mrs. Sen's artificial line on her skin is a symbolic sign of the past, a way of facing and being faced by others. She faces others as an Indian woman unwilling to give up her tradition even in the Western world. On the other hand, other people see her as a subject out of place whose body lines exteriorize a backward orientation of her interior world. This is not only evident in Mrs. Sen's habit of adorning her body, but also in the relationship she establishes with her American home, as is explained in the next sub-section.

**Home: cassettes and letters from India and furniture in the American house**  
Home has an ambivalent meaning in the story, which reflects the confusion in Mrs. Sen's mind about which is her real home now that she has moved to the

United States. An example of this is the confused use of the word «home» noticed by Eliot: «Eliot understood that when Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables» (Lahiri 1999, p. 116). The ambiguity of the concept of home is not only related to the liminal position occupied by the protagonist, but also to the material and symbolic value home has in the story, where the physical world merges with the metaphysical aspect of things. A concrete manifestation of the home she has left in India is a cassette recording of all her relatives' voices:

[S]he played a cassette of people talking in her language—a farewell present, she told Eliot, that her family had made for her. As the succession of voices laughed and said their bit, Mrs. Sen identified each speaker. «My third uncle, my cousin, my father, my grandfather». One speaker sang a song. Another recited a poem. The final voice on the tape belonged to Mrs. Sen's mother. It was quieter and sounded more serious than the others. There was a pause between each sentence, and during this pause Mrs. Sen translated for Eliot: «The price of goat rose two rupees. The mangoes at the market are not very sweet. College Street is flooded». She turned off the tape. «These are things that happened the day I left India». The next day she played the same cassette all over again. (p. 128)

By continuing to listen to those voices and hear the same stories, Mrs. Sen positions her own existence in the past, as if it were frozen in time, stuck in the moments and contexts in which those events were produced. The deep feeling of nostalgia for the people and life she has left in India is temporarily alleviated by the letters she occasionally receives from her family. Eliot learns that «[t]wo things . . . made Mrs. Sen happy. One was the arrival of a letter from her family» (p. 121); the other thing «was fish from the seaside» (p. 123). Her two sources of happiness derive from an ideological contact with her motherland and mother culture. However, while life in India goes on, she feels excluded from the natural cycle of time. This happens, for example, when she gets a letter announcing the birth of her niece: «My sister has had a baby girl. By the time I see her, depending if Mr. Sen gets his tenure, she will be three years old. Her own aunt will be a stranger. If we sit side by side on a train she will not know my face» (p. 122). Another letter informs her of her grandfather's death, causing an emotional breakdown in Mrs. Sen, not only because of the sad news, but also because she feels totally excluded from all life cycle events.

The same detachment from real life is visible in Mrs. Sen's new home in the United States, namely in the way she has arranged the furniture. When Eliot

enters the apartment for the first time, he notices that the pieces of furniture are all covered: «White drum-shaped lampshades flanking the sofa were still wrapped in the manufacturer's plastic. The TV and the telephone were covered by pieces of yellow fabric with scalloped edges» (p. 112). Such an absence of contact between her—the main inhabitant of the house spending the whole day there—and what should be a familiar place denotes a sterile relationship, lacking in emotional involvement of any kind. No intimate bond has developed between the woman and her home, as if she had not settled in permanently. While surrounded by covered objects, an interesting contrast stands out in Eliot's eyes: «[I]n that room where all things were so carefully covered, [his mother's] shaved knees and tights [were] too exposed» (p. 113). This is just one of the several comparisons that the young boy makes between his mother and Mrs. Sen, in which he notices the difference between the free, unconventional, and dynamic lifestyle of the former and the methodical, reserved, and static lifestyle of the latter.

Mrs. Sen's failure to inhabit the present and her present space engenders a series of acts of remembrance connecting her to her past, when she had a defined identity and a clear position in the world. She, therefore, enacts a material recreation of her original culture through a series of «diasporic things», representing a tangible bond with the motherland as well as a comforting presence in the new home. The examples of the diasporic things I have analyzed reveal Mrs. Sen's uniquely hyphenated identity of an Indian-American woman whose in-between position represents neither an advantage nor a new perspective on life, but rather a trap. The episodes discussed show that she is trapped between two notions of home alluded to by Brah: that of home as «place of origin» and «the locality» in the foreign country. As Brah argues, the notion of home «is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion and exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances» (2005, pp. 210-211). Mrs. Sen's individual experience denotes a deep nostalgia and an obstinate attachment to memory, which prevent her from starting any process of integration into a new culture. This is evident in Mrs. Sen's words when she recalls India: «At home, you know, we have a driver»/ Eliot's mother nodded. . . . «In India?»/ «Yes», Mrs. Sen replied. . . . «Everything is there» (Lahiri 1999, p. 113). On the one hand, as Bhatia claims, memory allows migrant communities «to refashion a space that becomes a meaningful site for empowering those facing marginalization» (1998, p. 512). On the other hand, however, it can become destructive as it may entrap identity.

Mrs. Sen's longing for her homeland is expressed not only in memory, but also in imagination. Moments of the past are frequently fictionalized and the homeland ends up becoming, to use Brah's expression, a «mythic place of desire» (2005, p. 209), the best of all possible worlds. This tendency emerges, for instance, in Mrs. Sen's hyperbolic description of an anecdote from her past Indian life: «“At home . . . [n]ot everybody has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements”» (Lahiri 1999, p. 116). As Salman Rushdie claims in his collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands*, the creation of an imaginary birthplace is a condition for expatriates, exiles, or emigrants who, in order to cure the painful identity fragmentation of the present, experience a selective appropriation of their cultural memories (1991, p. 10). He also talks about “Indias of the mind” (p. 10), referring to the diasporic subject's unconscious recreation of his or her natal place. In this regard, he points out that «if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge . . . that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind» (p. 10). Mrs. Sen's imagination, however, is neither productive nor is it a propellant forward. On the contrary, it is projected into the past and prevents her from getting on with her present life. The private museum of memories she has recreated within her American apartment shows her inability to balance remembrance and forgetting. In this regard, Bhabha writes: «it is through this syntax of forgetting—or being obliged to forget—that the problematic identification of a national people becomes visible» (1994, p. 310). As the passages from the short story examined reveal, Mrs. Sen tries to recreate her first home, India, by resurrecting idealized memories and transposing elements of a past life into America, thereby transforming both her present and her past home into a chimaera.

The creation of an imaginary homeland is typical of postcolonial subjectivities, as Bhabha claims (1992), because in order to cope with the insecurities of the present, they select their cultural memories and idealize them. In this respect, Azade Seyhan writes: «Insofar as culture is memory, it is embedded in the past and will have to be retrieved in symbolic action» (2001, p. 16). As the objects I have examined reveal, however, the feeling of estrangement which governs Mrs. Sen's life demonstrates that when it comes to material entities, context is important and things manifest their true essence insofar as they are being used as

the things they were brought into the world to be. To paraphrase it with Heidegger's words: «The peasant woman wears her shoes in the field. Only here are they what they are» (1971, p. 33). Mrs. Sen's need to surround herself with Indian reminders within the American context condemns her to live an unreal life in search for an unreal home.

While for Mrs. Sen the cultural luggage brought from India is too heavy for her to be able to cope with her hyphenated identity, for the protagonist of "The Third and Final Continent" the opposite is true. His luggage, both metaphorical and physical, carried across three continents, as the title suggests, is light and, consequently, easily transportable while travelling.

### **"The Third and Final Continent"**

"The Third and Final Continent" is undoubtedly one of the most important stories in the book, as also indicated by its position in the book, being the story that closes the collection. Moreover, the message it conveys sheds a new light on the texts that precede it. Unlike "Mrs. Sen's", the outcome of the process of migration lived by the unnamed protagonist of this story is far more positive. The main character and narrator is an Indian man who leaves India in 1964 as a young boy to move to London. After spending a few years there, he is offered a good job at an important American library and, a week after getting married, he leaves for Boston. As in "Mrs. Sen's", the Indian wife has to accept her husband's decision to pursue his career and move to another country, thus facing a huge change in terms of culture and daily habits. Their marriage is arranged, which means that they were strangers to each other. As the narrator explains, «[i]t was a duty expected of me, as it was expected of every man» (Lahiri 1999, p. 181). This comment suggests that women are not the only victims trapped by the shackles of patriarchy and that men are also oppressed by traditional duties that deprive them of their freedom of choice and independence. The husband and wife arrive in America at two different times. The man leaves first in order to start his new job and settle in, while the woman joins him six weeks later. From that moment on, although they are almost strangers, they are a family in a new continent and are supposed to build a new life together.

Another similarity with "Mrs. Sen's" is that a series of rituals performed by the protagonists of the story—especially the man—are presented, but the material things they entail reveal a completely different orientation of the subjects

involved in the process of migration. Indeed, as my close reading will show, they are not metonymies of a «desire for homeland», but of a «homing desire» (Brah 2005, p. 32), that is, the constructive desire to make a certain place home through «processes of multi-locationality across geographical cultural and psychic boundaries» (p. 212). The homing desire contemplated by Brah is based on a form of cosmopolitanism, which Hannerz has described as «an orientation, a willingness to engage with the other . . . an intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences» (1996, p. 103). According to this view, the cosmopolitan migrants accept the challenge of adapting to new traditions while also maintaining the old traditions in a syncretic way. Indeed, diasporic people may simultaneously adopt and transform cultural phenomena drawn from others around them by «gathering, recognizing, and applying cross-cultural scripts» (Vertovec 2013, p. 65). Hannerz further claims that, in addition to attitudes and practices, cosmopolitanism also entails «a personal ability to make one's way into other cultures through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting» (1996, p. 239). This outlook on migration suggests the dynamic role of the subject who does not passively accept his condition of outsider, but instead engages actively in the constitution of a new self. The things related to the male protagonist reflect this future-oriented attitude as opposed to Mrs. Sen's nostalgic recreation of the past.

The field of food is particularly representative in this respect. The young man's stay in London, for instance, is characterized by frugality as he is penniless and is there to try and get an education and find a job in the West. He shares an apartment with twelve other young Bengalis, like himself, and all they can afford is egg curry: «We lived three or four to a room, shared a single, icy toilet, and took turns cooking pots of egg curry, which we ate with our hands on a table covered with newspapers» (Lahiri 1999, p. 173). The man's ritual of eating Indian food is not fueled by the need to keep the contacts with his homeland alive, but is dictated by the circumstances of a simple lifestyle. No symbolic value is hidden behind the consumption of Indian food—it is just a recurring choice shared by young Bengali migrants to save money and try and build a life. Once in the United States, during the six weeks he spends there without his wife, he radically changes his culinary habits. Describing his first day in America, he states: «I bought a plastic bowl and a spoon at Woolworth's» and «a small carton of milk and a box of cornflakes. This was my first meal in America» (p. 175). The man's purchase and consumption of food is profoundly different from Mrs. Sen's. Unlike the Indian woman, who spent hours selecting the right ingredients and cooking them with passion, the protagonist of this story devotes neither time nor care to what

he eats. As opposed to Mrs. Sen's ritual of chopping vegetables with a specific Indian tool, the man's habit is to eat the same meal every day, using a spoon as his only tool: «I ate cornflakes and milk, morning and night, and bought some bananas for variety, slicing them into the bowl with the edge of my spoon» (p. 175). He consumes a quick, ready-made meal bought at the supermarket in line with the Western lifestyle. The protagonist gives additional details about his drinking habits as well:

I bought tea bags and a flask, which the salesman at Woolworth's referred to as a thermos. . . . For the price of one cup of tea at a coffee shop, I filled the flask with boiling water on my way to work each morning and brewed the four cups I drank in the course of the day. I bought a second carton of milk, and learned to leave it on the shaded part of the windowsill. (p. 176)

Unlike Mrs. Sen's habit of drinking tea at home at a precise moment of the day, the man's consumption of tea is spread out over the day, in the American way, and, as a result, loses any aura of nostalgic ritual or recreation of a past tradition.

Another significant thing at the center of a recurring act performed by the man is his newspaper. Every night, before going to bed, he reads the *Boston Globe*. The man says: «I read every article and advertisement, so that I would grow familiar with things» (p. 176). He is not afraid of the culture of the host land. On the contrary, he is curious about it and is eager to understand it in order to accelerate his process of integration. Moreover, to read a daily newspaper means to be focused on the present and involved in the society and culture one lives in. The man protagonist realizes that alienation can only be overcome by opening himself up to the new world he is inhabiting, trying to understand rather than being overwhelmed by the differences from his own culture. For instance, on his flight to America, the man reads *The Student Guide to North America*, a paperback volume thanks to which he learns, among other things, that «Americans drove on the right side of the road, not the left, and that they called a lift an elevator and an engaged phone busy» (p. 174). Such behavior reflects Hannerz's definition of cosmopolitanism as willingness to engage with the other (1996, p. 103) as well as the ability to make one's way into cultures through observation and reflection (p. 239).

As far as clothes are concerned, they are less problematic for men than for women as Indian men's garments are easier to adapt to the Western context. However, an episode that took place a few days after the protagonist's arrival in

the United States can be read as an attempt to open himself up to the host culture. The young man arranges a meeting with the owner of an apartment as he wants to find cheap accommodation for himself until his wife joins him. In order to impress the lady, he is going to meet, he wears the clothes that seem most appropriate to him for such an occasion. He says: «In spite of the heat I wore a coat and a tie, regarding the event as I would any other interview; I had never lived in a home with a person who was not Indian» (p. 177). He is ready to bridge the gap between the Indian and the American cultures, thus adapting to the cultural standards of the place in which he lives. This image contrasts vividly with the description of Mrs. Sen's meeting with Eliot's mother for the job as babysitter. In spite of the conventions of the local culture, she wears a shimmering white sari and a pair of slippers as she receives Eliot and his mother at home. Interestingly, the man protagonist of "The Third and Final Continent" also walks barefoot in the house, specifying, however, that: «I still felt strange wearing shoes indoors» (p. 185), implying that later he will get used to this Western habit.

The relationship between the young Indian man and his one-hundred-and-three-year-old landlady called Mrs. Croft offers another interesting thing to examine as a metonym of the diasporic consciousness, that is, the American flag. This thing is at the center of a funny ritual between the old woman and the Indian man. The day on which the protagonist lands in the United States is the same day on which three American astronauts land on the moon for the first time. Hence, when the young man meets Mrs. Croft, one of the first things she says to him is: «"There is an American flag on the moon. . . . A flag on the moon, boy! I heard it on the radio! Isn't that splendid?"/"Yes, madame". But she was not satisfied with my reply. Instead she commanded, "Say 'splendid!'"» (p. 179). In order to please Mrs. Croft, he has to shout "Splendid!" and the same conversation takes place every time they meet in the house:

Within days it became our routine. . . . [E]ach evening when I returned the same thing happened: she slapped the bench, ordered me to sit down, declared there was a flag on the moon, and I declared that it was splendid. I said it was splendid, too, and then we sat in silence. (p. 183)

The ritual of calling the mission «splendid», as absurd as it might seem, progressively acquires a significance for both the old woman and the young man. It is an opportunity for the old woman to realize that she has travelled as far in time as the astronauts have in space, for the young man to understand that the journey



to the moon is symbolic of his own journey. Both are amazing conquests which the old woman and the young man have to be proud of. On the last page of the story, when the protagonist is an old man and has been in the United States for thirty years, he reflects on his personal conquest and says:

While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (p. 198)

Diasporic travel is like space-travel as both are based on the exploration of alien lands where different living conditions exist, habits need to be modified, and a spirit of adaptation helps one to survive.

Six weeks after the young man's arrival, Mala, the protagonist's Indian wife, obtains her Green Card and flies to America to join her husband. Hence, the second part of the story is focused on the process of integration of the woman and the evolution of the couple through their new life together. While the man was in America settling in and getting accustomed to the local culture, Mala had stayed at her brother-in-law's house, as tradition requires: «She had worn an iron bangle on her wrist, and applied vermilion powder to the part in her hair, to signify to the world that she was a bride» (p. 189). They had lived two quite distinct lives: the young man was orientated towards the future and actively involved in a process of change during which he abandoned certain cultural habits and acquired others; the woman was orientated towards the past, perpetrating tradition by wearing the Indian symbols associated with marriage. While in India she honored her husband, whereas in America the young man did not think much about his wife. He confesses: «I regarded her arrival as I would the arrival of a coming month, or season—something inevitable, but meaningless at the time» (p. 189). He showed the same indifference during the days they spent together on the occasion of their wedding. He says: «Each of those nights . . . she turned from me and wept; she missed her parents. . . . I did nothing to console her. I lay on my own side of the bed, reading my guidebook by flashlight and anticipating my journey» (p. 181). This is another instance of the opposite orientation of the two: the woman is attached to memory with feelings of nostalgia and a sense of loss, while the man is projected towards the future, looking ahead with no fear.

The moment she gets off the plane, her husband recognizes her as she is wearing a colorful sari that covers her head in sign of modesty, as perfect Indian wives do. Her arrival disrupts the man's life. He is already used to American life, but he is not used to his wife, as he himself says: «I was used to it all by then: used to cornflakes and milk, . . . used to sitting on the bench with Mrs. Croft. The only thing I was not used to was Mala. Nevertheless I did what I had to do» (p. 190). Indeed, in order to welcome her, he speaks Bengali—«for the first time in America» (p. 191)—and prepares egg curry at home, which they ate with their hands—«another thing [he] had not yet done in America». The first days of cohabitation plunge the man into a world he had forgotten. Paradoxically, he perceives the Indian habits resuscitated by his wife in the American context as strange. He reflects:

I still was not used to coming home to an apartment that smelled of steamed rice, and finding that the basin in the bathroom was always wiped clean, . . . a cake of Pears soap from India resting in the soap dish. I was not used to the fragrance of coconut oil she rubbed every night into her scalp, or the delicate sound her bracelets made as she moved about the apartment. (p. 192)

All the symbols associated with India, such as the steamed rice, the bar of Pears soap, the coconut oil, and the bracelets, paradoxically provoke a feeling of estrangement in the man protagonist. A process of reversal is occurring, that is, he has become unfamiliar with the habits of his own native culture. His wife understands this and instead of remaining obstinately stuck in Indian traditions, she demonstrates her acceptance of change. A case in point is when she stops cooking rice for breakfast and serves cereals and milk.

As two wives who emigrated to the West to follow their husbands' projects, Mrs. Sen and Mala share the same experiences of uprooting from their homeland. However, a big difference between them can be noted. Their respective marriages are based on completely different values: while Mr. and Mrs. Sen's relationship is dominated by silence, individualism, and distance, Mala and her husband talk, explore the city, make friends together and plan things together:

Together we explored the city and met other Bengalis, some of whom are still friends today. We discovered that a man named Bill sold fresh fish on Prospect Street, and that a shop in Harvard Square called Cardullo's sold bay leaves and cloves. In the evenings we walked to the Charles River to watch sailboats drift across the water, or had ice cream cones in Harvard Yard. We bought an

Instamatic camera with which to document our life together, and I took pictures of her posing in front of the Prudential building, so that she could send them to her parents. At night we kissed, shy at first but quickly bold, and discovered pleasure and solace in each other's arms. (p. 196)

As this quotation shows, a growing intimacy links the two people, which helps them find a good balance between the old life they have just left behind and the new life waiting ahead. Unlike Mr. Sen, who never seems to show any sympathy for his wife's sufferings, the protagonist of "The Third and Final Continent" realizes the difficulties Mala has faced: «Like me, Mala had traveled far from home, not knowing where she was going or what she would find, for no reason other than to be my wife» (p. 195). The collaboration within the couple, then, is fundamental for a successful integration in the host country. Another ritual described in the story reveals the efforts they are making to belong to their new place. The narrator tells how after dinner, the man and his wife engaged in two specific activities: «I read the newspaper, while Mala sat at the kitchen table, working on a cardigan for herself» (p. 193). The newspaper and the cardigan are two significant things for their orientation towards the future. By reading the newspaper, the man can better understand the world in which he lives with a view to becoming an active part of it; while by knitting a cardigan, Mala shows she is prepared to give up her Indian clothes and adapt to the Western context. This is another relevant point which differentiates Mala from Mrs. Sen. As commented on in the previous sub-section, Mrs. Sen's garments are Indian and the only activities she engages in relate to the production and reproduction of Indianness.

Mala and her husband have a son whom they raise trying to keep alive their Indian roots. The protagonist says: «[W]e drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die» (p. 197). The couple have decided to settle permanently in America without, however, forgetting their original culture, which they try to transmit to their son. The narrator explains: «Though we visit Calcutta every few years and bring back more drawstring pajamas and Darjeeling tea, we have decided to grow old here» (p. 197). This reflects what Avtar Brah has called «homing desire» (2005, p. 32), that is, the decision to engage actively in the construction of a place to call home.

A few observations can be made before concluding the analysis of this story. Firstly, the story Lahiri concludes her book with offers a sense of hope linked to the experience of migration because although adaptation can be painful,

integration is possible for both men and women. This means that not all diasporas sustain an ideology of return and, therefore, a «desire for homeland» —they may also be based on a «homing desire» (Brah 2005, p. 32), a constructive ideal of home in a new land. The couple's joint effort to integrate in the diasporic place demonstrates that the tension between homeland ties and the new home is a propellant to find strategies of integration while also honoring the original culture. Secondly, the experience of migration described in "The Third and Final Continent" is what Van Hear has defined as «circular migration» (2002), that is, a kind of diaspora in which the subjects involved are well settled in the foreign land, but maintain a strong bond with their place of origin. In the essay "Migration", Van Hear explains that in certain circumstances, diaspora and transnationalism are connected notions to the extent that migrants do not make a sharp break with their homeland. He claims that «links with the homeland [continue] to be salient» and «connections . . . [are] maintained from afar through remittances and other forms of transfer and exchange, or through return and circular migration» (Van Hear 2013, p. 37). This is the case of the man protagonist and his wife, who visit India frequently and keep the Indian traditions alive. In other words, they maintain cross-border relations, establishing a dialogue between here and there, present and past. Luis Eduardo Guarnizo has noted the practice among migrants of «transnational living», which is referred to as «a wide panoply of social, cultural, political and economic cross-border relations that emerge, both wittingly and unwittingly, from migrants' drive to maintain and reproduce their social milieu of origin from afar» (2003, p. 667). The narrator and his wife's reproduction of India is not paralyzing, however, as it was for Mrs. Sen, but co-exists in a syncretic way with the adoption of the American culture. Finally, then, it may be argued that a necessary pre-requisite for settling is a dynamic conversation between homes. Memory needs to be balanced by projects, acts of remembrance by acts of construction.

The analysis of the things I took into consideration in Lahiri's short stories has highlighted a number of interesting points. On the one hand, the things examined in "Mrs. Sen's" show her continued engagement with her culture of origin as well as her everyday longing for the tastes, smells, and sounds of the home she left behind. Mrs. Sen's processing and working on things like food, the cooking utensils, and the Indian memorabilia inside her home suggest the physicality of her activities, performed mainly with her hands. Her active duties, however, never involve things related to Western culture, like the car, which are usually kept at a distance or totally avoided. The visual reminders of Indianness

within her home anchor her to her past and the familiar things she surrounds herself with alienate her from the present. In other words, she never leaves India as it is always kept alive through material memories which, however, constitute a virtual prison. India is a constant presence while America is an absence in both the physical and the emotional sphere. The clash between the Western exterior and the Indian interior, for instance, shows Mrs. Sen's clear resistance to the dominant culture. However, although she uses Indian artifacts as an anchor to a sense of self, they only contribute to increasing her sense of alienation and loss. Hence, the cultural baggage she has carried over from her homeland is too heavy and impedes integration in the hostland.

In stark contrast, the things I have discussed from the short story "The Third and Final Continent" show the man protagonist's orientation towards the future, an active engagement with the construction of a new identity, as well as a projection towards the outside rather than the inside of the home. The guidebook and the newspapers he habitually reads, for instance, show his desire to understand the society in which he lives and reduce the cultural distance that separates him from local traditions. The consumption of a certain type of food—which does not involve any ritual or nostalgic reproduction of his original culture—also reveals the narrator's flexibility in terms of adaptation to new points of reference. His personal adjustment to American society is so successful that he ends up perceiving as strange the habits and things associated with India, such as the smell of steamed rice or coconut oil, the habit of eating with one's hands, and his wife's traditional Indian clothes and jewels. Unlike Mrs. Sen, who is only comfortable in the closed space of the home, surrounded by the things that link her to the past, the man protagonist of this story is frequently depicted outside, both alone and with his wife, surrounded by the new places he is inhabiting. As for his marital relationship, it is based on the simultaneous remembrance and revision of Indian traditions. The protagonist couple of this story are capable of balancing forgetting and remembering. Their shared effort to belong and make their new house a home allows them to settle down successfully and accomplish a mission as great as that of astronauts who familiarize themselves with an alien land. The home they build together, in its physical and emotional details, is not a way of recalling the past—as in "Mrs. Sen's"—but a means of changing and rebuilding from the past.

In both stories representations of rituals are included, but the outcome is completely different for the two protagonists. Mrs. Sen's recurring habits entrap her in a mental and physical prison, while the repeated actions performed by the

narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” contribute to his progressive assimilation in the United States. Consequently, the material artifacts through which the two protagonists perform their rites orientate them in opposite directions. To exemplify this through Ahmed’s concept of orientation explained in sub-section 1.2., Mrs. Sen is orientated around Indian material culture to the extent that she is taken up by the things that evoke her past over which she can hardly take control. On the contrary, the man in “The Third and Final Continent” is orientated towards things of the host culture and takes up habits and goods of the American context which facilitate his belonging. As regards rituals, it is interesting to note that repeated and habitual actions play a significant role in shaping bodies and worlds. This is also confirmed by Ahmed (2006), who draws on Butler’s concept of performativity when she claims that social pressure and the repetition of norms and conventions contribute to making a subject follow a certain line. Becoming a member of a certain community means following a certain direction through a series of actions and behaviors. As Butler argues, if these actions and behaviors are repeated over time, bodies take the shape of this direction. To apply this theoretical explanation to Lahiri’s stories, it may be claimed that Mrs. Sen follows a line drawn in advance, which many Indian women are expected to follow. As discussed in section 1.1., despite a change of location, women find it hard to break with tradition given their symbolic role as «custodians of cultural heritage» (Metha 2015, p. 6) responsible for the reproduction of the nation. Through rituals linked to food, clothes, and forms of labor, women assume homemaking roles as «home is the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality» (Chatterjee 1990, p. 239). As Anita Mannur suggests: «women are frequently (but problematically) associated with positions within the domestic cultural economy and charged with maintaining the edifice of home life» (2003, p. 17), even in the diaspora, where they are expected to bear the double burden of integration into the new life and faithful reproduction of Indianness. To use Butler’s expression, Mrs. Sen is affected by «Repetitive Strain Injury», that is, she is stuck in a certain alignment as an effect of the repetition of a series of acts. Repetition, as the story also shows, is not neutral since it orientates the body towards specific things and the values they embody. Certainly, this is a painful condition as Bhabha, in his contribution entitled *DissemiNation*, explains with a question: «What kind of “present” is this if it is a consistent process of surmounting the ghostly time of repetition?» (1994, p. 205).

This is not the case of the narrator in “The Third and Final Continent”, who, being a man, has a lighter cultural burden to carry. Avoiding simplistic depictions of women as passive victims and being aware that today women have various degrees of agency in the diaspora—in terms of choices with respect to migration, involvement in decision-making processes within the household, political mobilization and participation in social and cultural activities (Al-Ali 2013)—it can be argued that men have more opportunities to look at the future by achieving self-fulfillment in their jobs and public life, while women are often stuck in a position of in-betweenness, as they no longer belong to the homeland, but still do not belong to the hostland. Consequently, women often develop confused identities and a sense of displacement, which affects their strategies of new identity formation. Thus, they find themselves constrained in a constant tussle between past and present. Hence, in order to understand the complex phenomenon of the diasporic experience, an intersectional perspective needs to be adopted relating gender and diaspora. In this way, individual experiences and the specific contexts in which they occur can be considered instead of generic accounts which often exclude the female voices.

In conclusion, the analysis of the materialization of diaspora contributes to shedding new light on the link between gender and migration. Diasporic gendered identities are forged through the production, circulation, and consumption of material things, which constitute both the physical and the spiritual baggage carried over to the new land. Things are not simply personal belongings, passive tools, or mere accessories disseminated around the home, but perform diasporic memories—both personal and social—and play a central role in the process of integration in the new culture. The entanglement of things, values, and social relations that emerged from a close reading of Lahiri’s two short stories has shown that «to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul» (Weil 1952, p. 41). However, clinging to one’s roots impedes movement and this is incompatible with the very idea of diaspora, which is a «travelling term» (Clifford 1994, p. 302). In order to fully belong what is needed, then, is not baggage heavy with memories, but baggage light enough to be carried on the journeys back and forth between past and present undergone by the identities in flux.

## TRANS-FORMATIVE THINGS

[T]he autonomy of the objective world  
around us was once more to be enjoyed;  
the wonder of matter that could crystallize  
into objects was to be seen anew.

Franz Roh, *Magic Realism*

You are thinking, what does it look like,  
such a knife. Most ordinary, for that is the  
nature of the deepest magic. Deepest magic  
which lies at the heart of our everyday lives,  
flickering fire, if only we had eyes to see.  
(Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*)

Tales from India often blur the line between the fictional and the real. Thanks to their hybrid character, combining the supernatural and the worldly, these wondrous tales can become powerful means of empowerment for the marginalized, especially within the diasporic context. Marked by hybridity and identity transformation, the diasporic subject represents the concretization of the clash between two different worlds as well as their dialectical interaction. In this chapter, another literary work dealing with the challenges of life in diaspora is examined, but from a new angle which takes into consideration both content and form. *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1997) addresses the question of gender and migration not only through the themes tackled, but also through the specific genre it belongs to: magical realism. As Shoshana Felman argues in *Women and Madness*, it is necessary to «reinvent language . . . to speak not only against but outside of the spectacular phallogocentric structure, to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning» (1975, p. 1). In other words, a new mode of expression which departs from the traditional literary standards can be a significant tool of



contestation which gives voice to those excluded from the mainstream, namely migrant women.

After exploring the genre of magical realism as a diasporic and feminist discourse, I will provide an analysis of «trans-formative things», i.e., things which embody the identity formation and transformation of migrants. In particular, I will focus on the things associated with the protagonist—the mistress of spices—and the main characters of the novel—the diasporic customers who visit her shop. A close reading will show how in magical realist texts apparently ordinary things can acquire a transformative and subversive potential thanks to the mingling of magic and reality.

As Hegel wrote in *Philosophy of History*, India is a «land of desire», wisdom, and wondrous tales: «From the most ancient time downward, all nations have directed their wishes and longings to gaining access to the treasures of this land of marvels» (qtd. in Prashad 2000, p. 1). Folktales produced in the colonial era by and for the British depicted India as a land of mysteries and marvels and this has played a significant role in the transnational conception and reception of literature of South Asian diaspora (Bacchilega 2004, p. 180). The tale of wonder has traditionally been associated with the female sphere and its stereotypically seductive construction has reinforced the static conception of Indian culture and the place of women within it. However, as Arjun Appadurai points out, «the work of the imagination . . . is neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a space of contestation» (1996, p. 4). The Indian American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in her widely-acclaimed novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), draws on the Indian myth of Tilottama<sup>1</sup> and re-invents it to challenge the exoticised image or fantasy of India as well as the gendering of this association. This has been possible thanks to the subversive mode of writing offered by the genre she has chosen: magical realism. This narrative mode has been a useful tool for writers who choose to write from the perspective of the marginalized from the mainstream for its transgressive spirit and border-crossing nature. Indeed, since the mid-twentieth century, magical realism has been chosen by many postcolonial, cross-cultural, and feminist writers to give voice to their ideals. As Stephen Slemon writes, «[magical realism] creates marginal spaces in which the silenced voices of totalizing system can speak» (1988, p. 18). In other words, it is a genre

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<sup>1</sup> Tilottama is the celestial nymph protagonist of an ancient myth dating back to the early Vedic age of India. She was the goddess of knowledge, mysticism, and power and took her name from “Til”, the Sanskrit word for the sun-burnished sesame seed, the spice of nourishment (Bacchilega 2004, p. 5). On the origin of this myth, see Pattanaik’s *Myth=mitiya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology* (2006).

on the borders which has the power of transcending conventions and deconstructing the given order of things, as the next section explains.

But before starting the discussion, a clarification of the terms used is necessary. A certain confusion exists around the proper term to use to refer to the genre which combines reality and fantasy. The most frequently adopted expressions are «magic realism», «magical realism», and «marvellous realism». In her book, *Magic(al) Realism* (2004), Maggie Ann Bowers attempts to clarify the main differences between these terms, although she also admits that a clear-cut distinction is difficult because of a number of overlapping characteristics, a lack of accuracy in their application, and the series of variations they have gone through in the different translations. The term «magic realism», coined in 1925 by the art critic Franz Roh, commonly refers to the art movement developed in Germany in relation to the painting of the Weimar Republic which attempts to produce a clear depiction of reality that includes the presentation of mysterious elements of everyday life. «Marvellous realism», on the other hand, was introduced in Latin America during the 1940s as an expression of the combination of realist and magical views of life in the context of the differing cultures of Latin America expressed through its art and literature. The third term, «magical realism», was introduced in the 1950s in relation to Latin American fiction, but has since been adopted as the main term used to refer to all narrative fiction that includes magical happenings in a realist matter-of-fact narrative, whereby, «the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, and everyday occurrence—admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism» (Zamora and Faris 1995, p. 3). Hence, since I am dealing with fiction, the term I am going to use in this chapter is «magical realism», understood, in Salman Rushdie's words, as the «commingling of the improbable and the mundane» (p. 9). The presence of magic in these texts corresponds to an extraordinary occurrence, anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science which is not presented as an illusion, but as something extraordinary that has really happened. Two basic conditions are necessary for the good functioning of a magical realist narrative. First, the premise of any magical realism is the creation of a narrative in which magic is incorporated seamlessly into reality. Second, magical realism relies upon a lack of judgment, by both the narrator and the readers, to the extent that the existence of magical elements in the text is accepted as part of the tangible and material reality.

With these distinctions and conditions in mind, it is worth investigating magical realism as postcolonial and diasporic discourse as well as a feminist tool to

enact a transformative agenda, and as a genre in which things occupy a privileged position. Including a dialectical struggle between apparently incompatible worlds, that is, the realist and the magic, magical realism has often been attributed a decolonizing role as an alternative to Western realism. Several critics have pointed out the almost inextricable link between magical realism and the postcolonial novel. Bowers, for instance, has claimed that the majority of magical realist writing can be described as postcolonial (2004, p. 88). That is to say much of it is set in a postcolonial context and written from a postcolonial perspective that challenges the assumptions of an authoritative colonialist attitude. Elleke Boehmer has underlined that the proliferation of magical realist writing in English in the closing decades of the twentieth century has coincided with the rise of the postcolonial novel, in which the voices lost in the postcolonial encounter started to be recuperated (2005, p. 235). In his famous article, *Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse* (1988), the Canadian postmodernist critic Slemmon demonstrates how the hybrid nature of this literary genre makes it a perfect means of resistance to assimilation into the imperial center. The first instance of hybridity, he claims, is enclosed within the very expression «magical realism», which sounds like an oxymoron suggesting the binary opposition between the representational codes of realism and those of fantasy. However, in magical realist texts, the two oppositional systems coexist in an ongoing dialectic to the extent that one genre is never completely assimilated into the other. No hierarchy is constituted between magic and reality because the narrative is always suspended between the two literary codes in a perfect balance. The same double-faceted nature can be documented in the postcolonial approach, as John McLeod emphasizes in his guide to postcolonialism:

«[P]ostcolonialism» recognises both historical continuity and change. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the material realities and modes of representation common to colonialism are still very much with us today, even if the political map of the world has changed through decolonisation. But on the other hand, it asserts the promise, the possibility, and the continuing necessity to change, while also recognising that important challenges and changes have already been achieved. (2000, p. 33)

Magical realism, like the postcolonial perspective, is an enabling strategy which questions the dominant discourse and gives voice to indigenous or ancient myths, legends, and cultural practices. As a consequence, the codes of recognition of the official culture, such as the language of the colonizer, intermingle with

the imagined codes of the original culture, like the traditional knowledge of the colonized.

Slemon, in his discussion about how and why magical realist narratives are so suited to expressing postcolonial issues, claims that magical realism is able to express three postcolonial elements. First, the dual narrative structure of magical realist texts makes it possible to present the postcolonial context from both the colonized peoples' and the colonizers' perspectives through its narrative structure as well as its themes. Second, it is able to produce a text which foregrounds «the gaps, silences, and absences» (1988, p. 11) produced by the postcolonial encounter. Third, it provides a means to fill in the gaps of cultural representation in a postcolonial context by recuperating the fragments and voices of forgotten or subsumed histories from the point of view of the colonized. Therefore, as Slemon sees it, magical realism is based on a structure which reflects the tension between the colonized and the colonialist discourses. Moreover, this tension also highlights the gaps in the narrative which can both refer to the difficulty of expression of the colonized and to the possibility of different forms of narration produced by the colonized themselves. In this respect, he explains that

a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other. Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences and silences. (pp. 10-11)

Slemon describes the interaction between the two systems as a «battle», thus suggesting that their coexistence is far from peaceful. Magical realist narratives, in fact, originate from the anger and power of otherness expressed against the dominant discourse. While, on the one hand, magical realism has been criticized for offering an exotic notion of life in the Third World and risking reinforcing colonial thinking<sup>2</sup>, on the other it needs to be evaluated for its capacity to represent every dimension of reality, not only the rational, but also the irrational. This is also advocated by Isabel Allende, author of *The House of the Spirits* and one of the most famous magical realist writers, who claims:

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<sup>2</sup> On a critique of magical realism as emancipatory discourse in postcolonial contexts, see for example Brennan (1989) and Connell (1998).

magic realism is a literary device or a way of seeing in which there is space for the invisible forces that move the world: dreams, legends, myths, emotion, passion, history. All these forces find a place in the absurd, unexplainable aspects of magic realism. . . . It is the capacity to see and to write about all the dimensions of reality. (1991, p. 54)

In addition, as Jan Abdul Mohamed acknowledges, finding shelter in a fantastic world can help soothe «the pain of the colonial subjugation» (1983, p. 274). On the comforting as much as destabilizing potential of magical realism, Bill Ashcroft explains that it is a kind of literature which draws on pre-colonial cultures and integrates local myths in order to «interrogate the assumptions of Western, rational, linear narratives» (2013, p. 143). In this postcolonial perspective, then, magical realism questions the binary vision of the world that dominates in the West—according to which the magical is opposed to the rational—and treats the irrational as much part of reality as the rational.

Summarizing her view of the closeness of magical realism to postcolonialism, Boehmer claims that

[d]rawing on the special effects of magic realism, postcolonial writers in English are able to express their view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement . . . [T]hey combine the supernatural with local legend and imagery derived from colonialist cultures to represent societies which have been repeatedly unsettled by invasion, occupation, and political corruption. Magic effects, therefore, are used to indict the follies of both empire and its aftermaths. (2005, p. 235)

The cultural displacement mentioned by Boehmer as well as the distorted and destabilized view of the world expressed through magical realism are not limited to the postcolonial experience, but also apply to the diasporic condition. Indeed, magical realism is also a discourse of the international literary diaspora.

A number of characteristics of this narrative technique make it a suitable means to express the status of the displaced in a foreign land. For instance, the suspended condition of the fictional worlds—magic and reality—as well as the permanent dialectic between them mirrors the situation of the diasporic subject suspended between two or more cultural systems. Moreover, the fantasy world can become a shelter in which the migrant's pain due to identity fracturization can find relief. Myths, legends, and traditional practices refer back to the native culture and represent a point of contact with the land left behind. The magic evoking an ancient wisdom also contributes to re-envision the past by bringing

it forward and to reform the present by negotiating the unfamiliar reality. As a genre which escapes classifications and deconstructs boundaries and dualities, magical realism reflects the double self of migrant subjects. Their identities are not stable and transform continuously as a consequence of the struggle between the old and the new cultural influences.

The hybrid nature of the genre, then, can perfectly reproduce the inevitable hybridity resulting from the diasporic experiences, as Homi Bhabha also confirms. He underlies how the «“denied” knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition» (pp. 112-114). As a consequence, elements of the Other enter the Western mode of expression, thus producing a polyphonic narrative which allows different voices to be heard. Familiar and unfamiliar are combined and blended into a new narrative, which is the synthesis of two opposing forces. In this way, the complexity of reality—as it appears to the displaced—is reproduced. On the one hand, the realistic side of the narrative represents the daily struggles of diasporic life; on the other hand, the supernatural is a way of escaping from the psychical pain afflicting the disoriented self.

All in all, magical realism is a genre on the borders which can, therefore, speak of borders. It rejects the idea of purity, of conveying a single truth. As Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris state, «[i]n magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption» (2004, p. 3). Indeed, however fantastic they may seem, magical realist texts are concerned with the socio-cultural reality to the extent that «the magical mode is frequently designed specifically to support the mimetic ends of the text, to define social and political realities in highly unrealistic ways» (Zamora 1988, p. 249). Its power of obscuring hierarchy and dissolving boundaries makes it a genre which, on the one hand, allows marginalized people to present their perspective while maintaining their distinctiveness, and, on the other hand, reflects the double consciousness inherent in a marginalized position. This approach to reality is a powerful tool not only for postcolonial and diasporic narratives, but also for feminist discourses.

In its quest to voice the other(s) of the world, magical realism can be an important tool for the emancipation and empowerment of women. It is interesting to note that magical realism is an originally feminine mode of storytelling. It has its origins in *One Thousand and One Nights* and the art of Sheherezade as a female narrative voice (Kolahjooei and Beyad 2011, p. 165). The Persian storyteller mixed reality and fantasy in her tales and used them as a means of survival and

resistance against the tyranny of a man. As Faris acknowledges, «even though she [Scheherazade] narrated for her own life, she had the eventual welfare of her state on her shoulders as well, and her efforts liberated her country from the tyranny of King Shariyar's rule» (2004, p. 180). However, the tale of wonder, feminized and thought of as attractive and seductive, can easily lend itself to reinforcing stereotypes. Cristina Bacchilega has pointed out how, according to Western folkloristics, the wonder tale has its roots in India, a land of mystery, a story-filled womb-like world embodying the feminine Orient (2004, p. 179). Myth, spirituality, and imagination have traditionally been considered as female attributes, as opposed to men's reason and rationalism. Women's links with the supernatural, however, can be transformed from disadvantage into a point of strength.

A feminist revision can re-evaluate the conventionally held view towards female spirituality and imagination. As Devona Mallory says, «women were the first beings worshipped as deities» in pre-historic times and this gives them «a unique link with divine power» (2008, p. 31). Universally, these goddesses were bestowed with attributes like «dove, death, creativity, the moon, and sexuality» (p. 31), and their contact with the divine gave them qualities and powers unattainable by men. Thus, women's intimate link with the art of storytelling as well as their deep bond with the supernatural conflate in a magical realist narrative with a feminist agenda. In this respect, Patricia Hart has talked about «magical feminism» (1989, p. 54), that is, a magical realist discourse employed in a femino-centric work or one that is especially insightful into the status or condition of women in the context described in the work. According to her view, when women are denied real power, they find other sources of power, such as telepathy—as is the case with Clara in *The House of the Spirits* (1982)—or clairvoyance—as is the case with Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* (1997). Magical feminist narratives, like the novel which is the object of this chapter, show how women do not have a homogeneous form, but hide a multi-layered identity linked to social, cultural, and regional features. Their multiple faces can be properly represented through a heterogeneous narrative, like the magic realist narrative, which combines the normative function—i.e., the comfort and seductiveness of the tale—with the subversive function—i.e., the goals of transformation and resistance. In her book, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, Bacchilega comments on this doubling strategy by claiming that wonder tales—like *The Mistress of Spices*—simultaneously use affirmative and questioning approaches, thus parodizing or remaking the classic wonder tale's production of gender (1997, p. 23).

Hence, as Antonia Navarro-Tejero and Manuel Cabello Pino also acknowledge (2006, p. 225), magical realism is important as an aesthetic for women's fiction, especially for marginalized women. Through typical tropes of magical realism, such as allegory, symbols, fantasy, and the inclusion of oral narrative, it is possible to represent their experience of dislocation. In imagination, they can find a possibility of both escaping and overthrowing the multiple patriarchies which oppress them in the foreign country. Moreover, through the imaginative process enacted by the magical part of the text, the voices and aspects of self which got lost in the act of uprooting from the native land and re-rooting in the new land can be recuperated. The result of the interaction between the magical universe and the real world is, then, a polyphonic narration which is open to «multiple eligible interpretations» (Bowers 2004, p. 67). From a feminist perspective, magical realist narratives are a powerful tool in which form and content mirror each other: the positions of center and margin are put into question, unspoken voices are given space, and revisionist readings are made possible.

## The magic in things

The relationship between magical realism and things dates back to the very origins of the genre in the field of visual art. It would not be excessive to claim that things have played a foundational role since when in 1925 the German art critic Franz Roh first used the term “magic realism” to describe a post-expressionistic mode of painting which developed in Europe between World Wars I and II. Comparing it to the expressionist style, focused on the instinctive depiction of painters' emotions, and the surrealist style, based on cerebral and psychological representations of reality, Roh noted a number of differences which concerned above all the way of portraying the material world. He was struck by the painters' engagement with the everyday, the commonplace, because objects were simultaneously viewed as direct perceptions and located in the realm of the marvelous. According to Roh, magic realist artists «turned daily life into eerie form» (1968, p. 137). The emphasis here is distinctly on «daily life». Similarly, in his *History of Modern Art*, Hjørvardur Harvard Arnason explains that «the magic realists . . . are interested in translating everyday experience into strangeness» (1978, p. 376). He describes magic realism as «a mode of representation that takes on an aura of the fantastic because commonplace objects are presented with unexpectedly exaggerated and detailed forthrightness» (p. 321). The magic, however, is not literally



present; it does not arise from any «strange or monstrous distortion» (p. 371); instead it comes from «the fantastic juxtaposition of elements or events that do not normally belong together» (p. 371).

Importantly, magic realist paintings consist of nothing that is actually magical or supernatural; nothing is distorted or technically unreal. But the pictures do contain an eerie atmosphere. Giorgio de Chirico, who both Roh and Arnason agree is one of the founders of magic realism, provides a textbook example of this in his painting *Melancholy and Mystery of a Street* (1914): although nothing is distorted, the very sharp contrasts between light and dark, the endless symmetry of the arcades and small windows, the static quality of the airless, deserted city square, and the fact that the girl appears only as a dark silhouette give the picture a strange, nightmarish quality. Instead of actual distortion, there appears to be a magical aura about what is otherwise a perfectly natural depiction. The scene seems eerie and unreal, though in fact everything depicted is completely natural.

Magic realist works raise questions about the nature of visual representation and the nature of the object represented, which is why Roh also used an alternative label, that is, «New Objectivity» (Zamora 2002, p. 21). For Roh, the essence of this new form of art was to be found in the object. More specifically, the most important aspect of magic realist painting was that the concrete object caught through painting was depicted realistically but with all its wondrous meaning. Through the depiction of material world, the inner life of humans was incorporated into paintings. As a consequence, the close observation of objects allowed the consideration of the mystery of life and the complexity of the humans' inner life. Or to use Roh's words, «*the interior figure of the exterior world*» (1968, p. 24).

As Zamora has observed, these considerations can be applied to the analysis of other forms of art as well, such as literature. For instance, he claims that vision is often a theme as well as a narrative strategy in magical realist texts to the extent that sight and insight conflate. The literal and figurative meaning of «vision» collapse because observing an object often means seeing the mysterious life behind it. The visualizing capacity of magical realist texts lies in their potential to create magical meaning by seeing ordinary things in extraordinary ways. The representation of objects in realist narratives, in fact, differs radically from the nature of objects depicted in magical realist narratives. In the former, objects are required only to represent themselves, while in the latter the real world of everyday things, places, and people is the container of the «magic» of the text. This reflects Roh's assumption according to which «the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it» (1995, p. 16). In other words,

magic does not come from the outside but is intrinsic to things. As a result, material objects become literary images the value of which needs to be investigated according to what the mind's eye—and not the physical eye—sees.

This idea underlying the concept of magical realism—according to which the reverence for everyday life hides an orientation towards the realm of the spirit—is in line with the transgressive mood which characterizes this genre. The representation of fantastic events as if they were scenes of everyday life as well as the central role given to things which make fantastic events happen are part of the attempt to voice the other(s) of the world by foregrounding elements which are traditionally excluded from narrative. Common elements of reality that are often present but have become virtually invisible because of their familiarity are emphasized and presented under a completely new light. This is possible through the technique of defamiliarization, that is, the presentation of familiar things in unusual ways in order to stress their innate magical properties.

As Hart argues, the magic is incorporated to tell us a deeper truth outside the text and this helps the reader hold a new way of looking into his or her surrounding world and «re-evaluate what he [or she] has previously held to be real» (1989, p. 22). A new level of knowledge opens up to readers, which is the level of the unseen. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak supports Foucault's idea according to which: «To make visible the unseen can mean a change of level addressing oneself to a layer of material which had had no pertinence for history and had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic, or historical value» (1994, p. 81). Things, certainly, occupy that layer of material which has been devalued and overlooked over time. However, in magical realist texts, they can finally express the life that breathes within them.

### ***The Mistress of Spices: a magical feminist novel***

*The Mistress of Spices* (hereafter mentioned as *TMS*) is a text including all the elements commented on so far, that is, the magical, the feminist, and the material. It is Divakaruni's first novel and was published in 1997, when the writer had already published collections of poems and short stories. As she states in an interview with Fredric Luis Aldama in 2000, she started to write the novel after her youngest son's birth, when she had a near-death experience and remained in hospital for a long time. This experience changed her perspective on life and death and made her reflect on the transformations one undergoes throughout one's

existence. The end of one thing, she states, is just the beginning of another experience. She also felt the need to include elements of the fantastic and the supernatural in her novel. She says: «I drew on a lot of Indian folktale and fairytale sources as I was writing—and old Indian myths about talking serpents, the island of spices, and women healers» (p. 6). Mithun Bhattacharya has claimed that the social construction of femininity is reinforced by myths and religious doctrines, which segregate women into a realm of customary duties and ideals to follow (2012, p. 2). Interestingly, Divakaruni's use of myth serves exactly the opposite cause. Indeed, it is part of a revisionist strategy according to which the traditional portrayal of Indian women as selfless healers and care-givers is subverted and rewritten. In other words, the focus is on how the privileged link with the supernatural can be transformed from burden into a form of power.

In addition to the influence of Divakaruni's near-death experience on the novel, her life as an Indian woman immigrant also played a fundamental role in the conception of the novel. *TMS* mostly deals with the condition of Indian immigrants in the United States, and especially the difficulties of women in coping with multiple patriarchies in a foreign land. Born in Kolkata, Divakaruni emigrated to the United States for her graduate studies. As she says on her website, in order to earn money for her education, she did many jobs, which allowed her to come into contact with different aspects of the American culture as well as the hardships of being a South Asian woman in the West. After completing her Ph.D. in English, she started writing for herself in order to fulfill a need she felt deep inside her to tell the stories of her people and keep a constant link with India, which was beginning to fade from her mind. Her work has been published in over 50 magazines and has obtained several awards, her books have been translated into 29 languages, and many of them have been used for campus-wide and city-wide reads. *TMS* was shortlisted for the Orange Prize (England) and chosen by the *Los Angeles Times* as one of the best books of 1997. Moreover, it was made into a film in 2005 by Gurinder Chadha of *Bend it Like Beckham* fame. Her interests in community and women are evident in her fiction as well as in her personal life. She serves on the board of "Maitri" in the San Francisco Bay Area and on the Advisory Board of "Daya" in Houston. Both organizations help South Asian or South Asian American women who are victims of abusive relationships. She is also on the board of "Pratham", an organization that helps educate children (especially those living in urban slums) in India. In *TMS*, both the author's deep bond with India and activist engagement for the protection of women are clear: besides the supernatural elements, which evoke the ancient, mythical India, very

current social themes are tackled, and both aspects coexist in a magical realist narrative.

The protagonist of the novel is a woman who changes name and identity throughout the story. Born into an Indian family that does not welcome her as she is «another girlchild, and this one coloured like mud» (Divakaruni 1997, p. 7), young Nayan Tara discovers that she has magical powers such as the gift to see the future. The news of her talents spreads not only in her village, but also across the seas. Determined to have her on their ship as a carrier of good luck, pirates kidnap the young girl and take her with them. Nayan Tara is unhappy, forced to serve a crew of men who exploit her magical powers for their own interests, so she decides to escape and, with the help of sea serpents that materialize from underwater, she leaves the pirates' ship and reaches the Island of spices. There, she meets the Old Mother, who, every year, selects the girls to whom she is going to teach the art and mysteries of spices. Nayan Tara, despite her rebellious character, is admitted to the island and there she learns all the secrets of ancient Indian rituals and traditions. After this period of training, the mistresses are sent all over the world, to places where they can be of service to the Indian people. The place chosen by the protagonist is the city of Oakland, California, in which a very high number of Indian immigrants live. During her passage from the island to her American destination, the woman undergoes a deep transformation. She has to give up all her material possessions as well as her beauty, her young body, and her name. When she materializes in California, she wakes up naked, in an old woman's body, with a new name: Tilo. There, she manages a small spice bazaar, a sort of microcosm of India, where Indian diasporic customers can be comforted by the smell, sight, touch, and taste of familiar things. Her mission is to alleviate the sense of loss and disorientation of her people in the foreign land through the power of spices.

As the form of the novel is based on dualism—as is typical of magical realism which combines real and magical elements and simultaneously connects and disconnects reality and fantasy—it may be claimed that the content also reflects this dualism. Indeed, the main theme of the novel is that of fracturization, division, and dualism based on boundaries. Immigrants are torn apart on multiple levels, namely the physical, the emotional, and the mental. Moreover, everything in the story is shattered into many pieces, both materially and symbolically. For instance, the structure of the book is segmented as it is divided into fifteen chapters and each chapter is divided into sections and sub-sections. The story line and the setting also reflect this multiplicity. The plot is not linear as it proceeds in

continuous oscillations between past and present through flashbacks and digressions; as for the setting, it moves from India, to the pirates' ship, to the spice island, and finally to America. The style of narration—including the syntax and the lexicon used—is not homogeneous as, in some parts, it reproduces what Ashcroft *et al.* have called «*english*», that is, a non-standard form of English which is the result of a contamination of the official language with local dialects or other languages (2006, p. 262). For instance, some of the Indian immigrants who go regularly to the mistress's shop, like the taxi driver Haroun or the battered wife Lalita, speak a “broken” form of English conveyed through syntactic or grammatical mistakes, which reflects broken lines of communication. Finally, from a more literal point of view, the bodies of these immigrants are shred into pieces. There are a number of examples in which they are beaten and wounded as if the physical traumas they undergo reflected their emotional fracturization. As Elazar Barkan and Marie-Denise Shelton argue, «transplanted, the individual is transformed, the “I” is no longer a speaking subject with a clear history and a distinct voice but rather becomes a composite product of historical antinomies and contradictory impulses» (1998, p. 3). The protagonist of the novel, the mistress of spices, embodies perfectly the multifarious identity of migrant subjects, their contradictions and heterogeneous nature, as the repeated change of names and appearances she undergoes demonstrates. As Oliva Espín underlines in her book, *Women Crossing Boundaries*, South Asian women are at the forefront of fracturization because of the twofold pressure placed upon them (1999, p. 10). On the one hand, they are oppressed by the cultural expectations of their societies of origin, while, on the other hand, they are supposed to satisfy the requirements of the host society. James Clifford has also noted how diaspora women are «caught between patriarchies, ambiguous pasts and futures. They connect and disconnect, forget and remember, in complex, strategic ways» (1997, p. 258).

In her novel, Divakaruni has focused on the positive effects brought by this change of location as well as by the inevitable identity transformation undergone by migrants, especially migrant women. Their displacement may, indeed, represent an opportunity for change and rupture with the established norms. As she says through one of her women characters, «[h]ere in America maybe we could start again, away from those eyes, those mouths always telling us how a man should act, what is a woman's duty. But ah the voices, we carried them all the way inside our heads» (Divakaruni 1997, pp. 102-103). On the possibilities of reinventing a new identity thanks to distance, both spatial and temporal, Avtar Brah has pointed out how tradition is continually invented «even as it may be

hailed as originating from the mists of time. What is at stake is the infinite experientiality, the myriad processes of cultural fissure and fusion that underwrite contemporary forms of transcultural identities» (2005, pp. 226-227). People are inclined to follow the suggested practices and institutions just because they are long-standing, but within a transnational horizon they may change their attitude towards them.

If we think of spices in Divakaruni's book, for instance, they are metonyms of patriarchal power which forces women to be at home, within a domestic environment. As the writer confirms, spices are domestic, ordinary things, usually handled by women in their kitchens. Moreover, they have the same healing qualities that women are supposed to have. Yet, there is a lot of power in them: they have herbal, medicinal, and mythical qualities. In Divakaruni's words, «these little things that we think of as domestic, if we use them right, can have a lot of power» (Aldama 2000, p. 7). The feminist goal of the novel is enclosed within this statement. The domestic, detailed in order to show the influence of tradition and customs perpetuating discrimination and oppression, becomes a place of empowerment for women who can draw power from ordinary things. Like many South Asian women, at the beginning Tilo is a selfless woman, an asexual healer subjugated to the command of spices and the good of her community. According to her culture, individuality cannot prevail over community, so she has to give up her own self in the same way that many Indian women are supposed to do for the sake of their families. However, in *TMS* a substantial change of perspective occurs. The woman protagonist, while supporting men by offering them comfort and cures, challenges patriarchal expectations and breaks the rules set by spices. A case in point is represented by the love relationship she starts with one of her clients—a totally forbidden circumstance for mistresses of spices—as a way of expressing her own needs as a woman. As Phillipa Kafka notes, Divakaruni is the first feminist Indian author who has portrayed an old woman with sexual desire (2003, p. 156). Not only has she broken a cultural taboo about old women, but she has also depicted desire as a way for women to establish control over their own bodies. Moreover, Tilo has been able to embrace the multiplicity within her self, thus negotiating successfully fracturization. In other words, she incorporates many elements: she is biologically young, but physically old; she is a mistress with magical powers, but, fundamentally, an ordinary woman; she is Indian, but she also belongs to America. Eventually, however, she becomes a fully realized person who is able to maintain all the different facets of her identity.

The portrayal of Tilo allows readers to understand that Indian women in the diaspora do not have a homogeneous form, but rather a multi-layered identity linked to social, cultural, and regional features (Nubile 2003, p. 1). The mistress's metamorphoses represent women's multi-faceted identity which, in this novel, is exalted as a positive condition beyond binary constrictions. Moreover, individual power and inner strength are also celebrated as fundamental qualities of the Indian woman. Indeed, while, on the one hand, fantasy and magic are used to rebuild the mysticism of ancient India as well as the mythical link of women with the supernatural, on the other hand, they are not enough to help women challenge the norms. After breaking all the rules set by spices, Tilo is left without any power and, in spite of that, she finds strength within herself as women often do. At a closer look, the rules that govern Tilo's life are the same as those for many Indian women in America: she is expected to follow a number of guidelines imposed by the Old Mother and the spices, she strives for a successful negotiation of inner fragmentation, and she is restricted to living in the store because the outside is not considered as a suitable place for women.

As for this last point, it is interesting to investigate the spice shop—the main setting of the novel in which Tilo lives, works, and interacts with all the other characters—as the microcosm of India in which rules are transgressed, borders are blurred, and encounters are enacted. The spice bazaar is the place where Tilo spends all her days. She lives, sleeps, and works there every single day since after her arrival in America from the island of spices. Moreover, it is the place which triggers transformations, transgressions, and encounters, for both Tilo and her customers.

The spice bazaar is not merely the background of the narrative, but also an active agent to the extent that it could be considered as another character in the story. It is alive, active, and makes things happen. As Franco Moretti has argued in *Atlas of the European Novel*, «[s]pace is not the “outside” of narrative, . . . but an internal force, that shapes it from within» (1998, p. 70). This holds true for Divakaruni's novel, in which the spice shop is more than a setting or a background—it is a social location that concretizes the forces of history, contains history. Indeed, it sets in motion the identities of the people who move through it, thus embodying narrativity. Foucault would call this space of narrativity «heterotopic». His neologism appears in *Of Other Spaces*, where he defines heterotopias as «real places» that bring into focus the interrelationship of other spaces and «slices of time» as structures of the social order (Foucault 1986, pp. 24-27). Among the places which embody what Foucault calls heterotopic sites there are

cemeteries, museums, prisons, brothels, theatres, and libraries. They are all places that relate to larger social structures of crisis, juxtapositions, encounters, deviation or continuity. In other words, they are all spaces that metonymically bring into focus the social, cultural, and political systems that form identities in a specific historical period. In the case at hand, the spice shop is a heterotopia to the extent that it reflects the cultural contacts in the diasporic space as well as the forces that regulate them—whether social, cultural, or political—and sets in motion the story and the transgression of borders. As a location of encounter, it contains the history of South Asian migration in America as well as its challenges. However, not only does it contain stories of the past, but it also generates stories of the future, such as the transgressions enacted by Tilo throughout her development towards a fully-realized woman, free from cultural constrictions.

The grocery store «Spice Bazaar» is described in detail from the outside in, at the very beginning of the novel. It is a little patch of India that fits into an American street as if it has always been there. It is located on «the crooked corner of Esperanza» (Divakaruni 1997, p. 4), an American street of immigrant hopes. The Indian Spice Bazaar is between the barred windows of Rosa's Weekly Hotel and the Chinese sewing machine and vacuum repair store. The immigrant cultures are lined up in their struggle to cope with relative poverty and pursue the American dream. The eye of the narrator narrows from the street to the spice shop's window—«grease-smudged» (p. 4)—and the faded sign—«a dried-mud brown» (p. 4). Then, the narrator takes us inside, where the chanting quality of the products on the shelves conjure the mythical image of India. Containers of Basmati rice and lentils, pictures of gods, Indian fabrics, and old videomovies populate the store and contribute to recreate the idea of the eternal India. Similarly, the colors evoke nostalgia tinged with exoticism: «Bolts of fabric dyed in age-old colours, New Year Yellow, harvest green, bride's luck red» (p. 4). Besides the material products, immaterial things are also stored in the shop: «[I]n the corners accumulated among dustballs, exhaled by those who have entered here, the desires. Of all things in my store, they are the most ancient» (p. 4). Indeed, this is the place where South Asian immigrants go to heal their sufferings in the new land as well as to build a new future of happiness. Tilo, the store-keeper, looks like her shop, as if she had been there forever. She embodies the atavistic link to the palpable eternal past. As a healer and mistress of spices, she provides her customers with the comfort of lost memories, thus representing an ever-present connection with India.



Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the spice bazaar is a space that simultaneously embodies «roots» and «routes», to use Clifford's terms (1997, p. 88), as opposing but interrelated dimensions of culture. This is to say that the shop represents both the origins (India), and the journeys made by the Indian populations across the world. The term «routes» can also be used in relation to the shop as it is a «milieu of becoming» which allows for an understanding of reality as «orientations, directions, entries and exits» (Grossberg 1996, pp. 179-180).

The spice shop also reflects the multiplicity of perspectives on which the whole book is based. It embodies the nest/prison duality which recurs in women's narratives relating to ambiguous spaces where they can find both protection and entrapment. More specifically, the Indian bazaar plays a different role depending on the point of view from which it is observed: while for Tilo it is the materialization of ties to the Indian tradition that prevent her from exploring the outside, for her customers it is a comfortable place where they can go to draw comfort and spiritual sustenance through food and Indian artifacts.

Tilo arrives at the shop after leaving the island of spices. This means she has moved from a magical place to a real place. On the island, a women-only utopian space, she was part of a community ruled by the Old Mother in which, together with the other women, she mastered the magic of spices. The main lesson for women to learn there is to foreground community and sisterhood, thus acquiring from each other the capacity to empathize without the necessity of words. There, they learn to devote their lives exclusively to spices, thus sacrificing love, family, and friendship, as this is the price to pay to be a mistress. In that place, where time has a different, mythical meaning, they spend most of their days performing ordinary tasks, «sweeping and stitching and rolling wicks for lamps, gathering wild spinach and roasting *chapatis* and braiding each other's hair. . . . In this way our lives were not so different from those of the girls we had left behind in our home villages» (Divakaruni 1997, p. 52). As is evident from this description, their tasks are extremely gendered; they are what could be seen as traditional «women's work». Hence, female lineage and birthland (India) are evoked from the start and offer security, protection, and a sense of self, which immigrants find in Tilo's shop in America. In this sense, the spice shop is a microcosm of India in which Tilo finds herself trapped between duty and cultural expectations.

When she wakes up in America, after leaving the island of spices through a spell, the mistress finds herself in the store surrounded by its Indian contents. What she sees around her is «the store already hardening its protective shell around me, the spices in their shelves meticulous and waiting» (p. 58). Tilo has

the feeling that everything has been there forever, just like the Indian traditions, and compares the shop to a snail's shell, both protective and entrapping. Later, when she remembers that moment, the mistress realizes that spices and her transformed old body were shells too: «The spices too surrounded me, a shell of smells and voices. And that other shell, my aged body pressing its wrinkles into me. Shell within shell within shell, and inmost of all my heart beating like a bird» (p. 125). Hence, like a bird in a cage, there is no way she can move, expand her self through experiences, and the outside is a forbidden place which she cannot explore. This is a condition that afflicts many Indian women whose place assigned by Indian patriarchal culture is traditionally the inside. In this respect, Tilo clarifies that it is forbidden for her to leave the store. Malashri Lal has termed this crossing of boundaries the «law of the threshold» (1995). According to Lal, a metaphorical limit exists for women dividing the inside, safe place, from a dangerous, threatening outside. While men are allowed multiple existences between the home and the world, women are thought to be vulnerable outside the protection of domestic patriarchy and the result is a number of psychological and spatial restrictions for them. Traditional beliefs, which date back to Indian myths, sustain the idea that the perils of stepping out can have disastrous consequences as there is no place for these «border-crossing» women to go. However, behind the apparent guarantees of protection and security, the reality reveals a condition of incarceration. The psychoanalyst Sudir Kakar has observed how in the Indian culture a subliminal link exists between goodness and passivity when it comes to women (1990, p. 68). Moreover, independence and action are typically seen as signs of a moral and spiritual deficiency. The result is that a traditional model of womanhood is proposed to Indian women, who are culturally led to embrace sacrifice, wifehood, and motherhood as their ultimate purposes in life. This means that, from a traditional perspective, women are valued more for what they are—mothers, wives, custodians of traditions—than for what they do.

This is exactly the same condition experienced by Tilo in America. Her presence in the store is valuable not so much for what she does as for what she represents. Reassuring and comforting, she is only supposed to listen to her customers' problems and give them the right spice. She says: «Anchored to this store, I can only wait and hope» (Divakaruni 1997, p. 175). At the beginning, she symbolizes stereotypically the exotic India, the ever young/old wise and caring mother/lover figure. She is a performer of ethnicity in the space she inhabits: mother, lover, sister, friend, and most of all, healer. However, in line with the author's purpose of revising traditional myths, the shop is also a place in which

womanhood as a construct is questioned. As a heterotopia, that is, a real space that contains by inference «other spaces and the spatial trajectories of the disciplinary social order» (Friedman 2005, loc. 3319), the spice shop represents a border for Tilo, who finally dares to cross it to reach self-fulfillment as a woman. The first transgression she enacts openly is when she decides to leave the store and intervene actively to help one of her customers. She says: «Today I plan to stretch my wings, to crack perhaps these shells and emerge into the infinite spaces of the outside world» (Divakaruni 1997, p. 125). This is a very brave decision since never before had she bent the rules and gone against the spices' will, or in Tilo's words, «[n]ever before [had I] driven my desire against duty» (p. 126). The scene in which the mistress leaves the shop conveys very well the image of the power of tradition which oppresses women. Through elements of magical realism, it seems as if the shop puts up resistance and physically prevents Tilo from exiting:

Under my palm the knob is slick and stubborn. The hinges stick, mutinous. The store's muscles wrestling mine . . . until at length I can bang the door shut. The sound is sharp as a shot, terminal. I am left shivering on the step. *On the wrong side*, says the voice in my brain. . . . I run my hand over the door, which looks so alien in outdoor light, and am struck by the sudden vertigo of homelessness. (p. 128)

The terminal sound of the door shut behind Tilo's back reproduces on a sensory level the consequences of stepping out of allotted gender roles. The woman's rationality tells her that she is on the «wrong side» and a feeling of homelessness pervades her. In stepping out of the protective space of the shop, she renders herself vulnerable like any ordinary woman. This scene recalls the mythological tradition of Sita crossing the protective boundary in the *Ramayana*, an epic Indian text, thus running the risk of compromising her own chastity and reputation as a dutiful wife. As Tilo also states: «[W]hen you step beyond the old rules, you increase the chance of failing a hundredfold. The old rules which keep the world in its frail balance, which have been there forever, before me, before the other Old Ones, before even the Grandmother» (p. 139). Hence, no protection can be granted to rebellious women like her.

Therefore, like a nest but also a prison, a protective shell but also a suffocating trap, the spice bazaar plays a controversial role in Tilo's life until she decides to cross both the material and symbolical border it represents. She does so several times in order to help her customers personally and even to spend a day with the American man she falls in love with. Tilo's desire for self-determination is so

strong that the shop physically disintegrates as it has no more reason to exist. The mistress hears a very loud sound and realizes: «It is this shop built of spice-spell, cracking apart like eggshells around me. The walls shake like paper, the ceiling snaps in two, the floor rises like a wave» (p. 299). An earthquake strikes the area, and interestingly, the line of fracture passes right under Tilo's shop, which ends up being split apart. All the binary divisions it represents are now evident, but also blurred: inside/outside; here (the United States)/there (India); center/periphery; present/past; magical/ordinary. Paradoxically, while escaping from the city devastated by the earthquake, the mistress feels the need to go back there because it is only by embracing fracturization that she can really feel whole. She realizes that the only way to be free is by accepting her double nature as Indian and American, thus finally developing a «transnational hybridized identity» (Vega-González 2003, p. 6). This is demonstrated, for instance, by the new name she chooses for this new phase of her life, Maya, that is a name combining both her Indian and American soul.

If for Tilo the shop represents a quite ambiguous space to inhabit, for her immigrant customers it is a shelter where they can retreat to cure their spiritual wounds as displaced people. In Pratt's words, it is a «safe house» (1991). This term first appeared in her keynote speech given at the *Responsibilities for Literacy* conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in September 1990. Pratt defined safe houses as

social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression. . . . Where there are legacies of subordination, groups need places for healing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone. (p. 40)

This definition fits particularly well with what the spice bazaar represents for the Indian customers. First, they belong to a subordinate group—that of South Asian immigrants—and experience racial and social oppression. Second, they actually need a place in which no hierarchies or divisions exist and mutual identity recognition is possible. Third, in the shop, they find all the necessary ingredients—both culinary and spiritual—that will enable a smooth acculturation without losing roots. As the mistress of the store says: «I have brought together everything you need in order to be happy» (Divakaruni 1997, p. 7). What the store ultimately offers them, then, is a promise of happiness.

As Pratt's quotation mentions, safe houses always exist in relation to «contact zones», which is another relevant term in this analysis of context. Pratt uses it to refer to «social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today» (1991, p. 34). According to this definition, diasporic spaces can also be contact zones in which asymmetrical relations of power occur. In the case of *TMS*, for instance, America, and more specifically the city of Oakland, is a contact zone. Pratt's notion includes the idea that imperial encounters take place in the contact zone as it is a «space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict» (1992, p. 310). Thus, according to this view, in this space asymmetrical relations of power exist among its inhabitants. Contact zones can be places of violence and terror, sites of exclusion and struggle. This is particularly evident in the novel which is the subject of this chapter. America is frequently represented as a dangerous place for immigrants, where they are easily misunderstood and hurt. A heartbreaking description of a violent beating suffered by an Indian man points out how pain—both psychological and physical—is deeply part of immigrants' lives:

[H]ead yanked up, knuckles cased in metal smashing down . . . , the memory of pain is clear. Pain like a constant throughout whatever happened next. (Kick to the groin, face dragged through gravel.) So many kinds of pain—like fire, like stinging needles, like hammers breaking. . . . [A] blow to the head so hard that his thoughts splinter into yellow stars . . . the blood in his eyes, the torn nerves playing tricks on him. (Divakaruni 1997, p. 171)

The numerous references to ruptures (knuckles smashing down, pain like hammers breaking, splintered thoughts, torn nerves) evoke the fracture that will leave its mark on the man's body and self. He survives, but remains a «crippled, scarred» man. The image of a broken world is not only visible on the man's body, but also in the space surrounding him, which he destroys into pieces following a nervous breakdown: «[He] will bring down the crutches, hard and shattering, on whatever he can reach. Dishes, furniture, the framed wedding photos on the wall. . . sweet crash of window glass, the stereo he had saved for so many months to buy» (pp. 171-172). The psychological pain derived from feeling unsafe in the place he is inhabiting is too strong for him to bear.

This is why people need locations where they can retreat and feel safe, places of shared understanding, safe houses. And this is why Tilo's customers attend her bazaar, their safe house, to get emotional sustenance and comfort. In other words, safe houses are a product of contact zones. The latter, as Pratt's essay explains, are places of many emotions, where moments of mutual understanding and wisdom intertwine with rage and incomprehension. The emotional turmoil described by Pratt is evident, for instance, in the words of a character in the book, an elderly man who moved from India to America to live with his son, mother-in-law, and granddaughter. In his uncertain English, he confesses: «[m]ental peace I am not having, not even one iota, since I crossed the *kalapani* and came to this America» (p. 85). For him, the shop is a safe house where he can be with people he shares an identity with—which does not mean banally to share the same nationality, but a whole series of cultural elements which can help him affirm who he is. A brief passage through the safe space of the shop gives customers the strength to go back to the contact zone, certain of what they represent. This is also confirmed by Pratt, who claims: «Safe houses [are places] in which to construct shared understanding, knowledge, claims on the world that [can be brought into] the contact zone» (1991, p. 40).

It is from this perspective of reciprocity—that is, taking from and bringing to the contact zone—that the spice bazaar can be considered as a place of transculturation. Transculturation is a term used by ethnographers to describe processes whereby «members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant culture» (Pratt 1991, p. 2). By definition, then, it is different from assimilation and acculturation because it implies that subordinate people determine to varying extents what gets absorbed into their own culture. In other words, as a consequence of the interactions that have occurred in the contact zone, the safe house can be a place in which immigrants work out a new identity. The notions of center and periphery are also re-worked to the extent that the Indian shop becomes the center—a point of gathering—while America embodies the periphery—an area of exploration and discovery. The spice shop, as a place of transculturation, is a site in which relationships between past and present, inside and outside, self and other are re-worked. This is possible thanks to the Indian food, objects and paraphernalia it contains. A similar process takes place in museums, as Clifford has noted (1997). He has claimed that museums can be places of loss and nostalgia, but also include access to powerful continuity and connection. Indeed, objects in museums evoke memories, hopes, oral traditions, attachment to land, but principally the meanings

addressed to the interlocutors are relational. Similarly, in *TMS*, the characters act and react through the spices they buy in response to the displaced condition in which they find themselves. However, a big difference can be highlighted between museums and the Indian shop in the novel. In museums, peripheral work (meaning indigenous artifacts) is brought to the center for appreciation and commodification, while the exchanges which occur in the shop are based on reciprocity because not only the clients, but also Tilo, through the spices and objects she sells, reworks her position in the United States. Thus, her bazaar is a space of collection, recollection, and display. It is a site of identity making and transculturation, a breathing space in which a certain degree of agency can be acquired—by both the shopkeeper and her customers.

The location of the safe house is typically within the contact zone and linked to it. By moving back and forth between boundaries and across cultures—simply by crossing the threshold of the shop—customers enact intra- and intercultural contacts, thus undergoing continuous identity transformations. The spice shop is, in fact, not a stable place, but a place in progress, being dynamically and actively produced. What occurs inside this space is what Martina Löw has called «a relational arrangement of living beings and social goods» (2018, p. 133). As Clifford has also argued, «space is never ontologically given. It is discursively mapped and corporeally practiced» (1997, p. 54). Thus, the complex cultural agendas dealt with in the novel are negotiated not “in” but “through” the construction of this narrative space. Here, identity formations and transformations take place principally through the things that circulate around this location, which reflect the duality that characterizes Tilo and her customer’s lives.

## «Trans-formative» things in the diasporic space

Divakaruni’s novel is based on a series of oppositions which reflect the multifarious experience of diasporic subjects: reality and fantasy, memory and everyday life, past and present places. As Susana Vega-González has claimed, *TMS* is a novel characterized by a dualism based on boundaries (2003, p. 2). This dualism is also reflected in the things related to the main characters who embody migrant subjects with hyphenated identities. The things I am going to analyze, therefore, represent the physical as well as psychical fracturization of the characters, namely Tilo—the protagonist—and the customers in her shop. It is important to note that Divakaruni, despite using magical realism, does not aim at connecting myth,

cultural history, tradition, and modernity by focusing on major sociocultural goals. On the contrary, she focuses very much on individuals, their psychological needs, and their personal transformations in the foreign land. A case in point is represented by the numerous transformations the woman protagonist undergoes, matching the different contours of the plot. Hence, the things at the center of my analysis belong to the circumstances of daily life and instantiate the diasporic subjects' identity conflicts.

Firstly, I will focus my attention on the protagonist, Tilo, by analyzing four material elements that highlight the ambivalent experience of being an Indian mistress with magical powers, but at the same time a woman willing to start a new life in America. The things I will comment on are: the spices, Tilo's body, the mirror, and the fire. Secondly, I will discuss the material entities related to the other main characters. More specifically, I will deal with Haroun (a taxi driver from Kashmir), Lalita (an abused Indian woman), Jajit (a second-generation Indian teenager), and an unnamed grandfather (an old man who has recently immigrated to America). I will also comment on Raven, the Indian-American man Tilo falls in love with.

## Spices

The things which mostly represent Tilo are undoubtedly the Indian spices she cooks and sells in her shop. They have the ambivalent function of giving her supernatural powers while, at the same time, demanding sacrifices and total dedication. The Janus-faced function of spices is expressed very well by Tilo, who defines the mistress's life as «a beautiful, terrible burden» (Divakaruni 1997, p. 203). In Divakaruni's magical realist project, they serve a fundamental function since they are the main source of magic in the story. In the epigraph, the author addresses the readers directly and writes: «*[T]he spices described in this book should be taken only under the supervision of a qualified Mistress*». From the very beginning, then, by highlighting their powers as well as their link with mistresses, she projects readers into a dream-like world. Spices can speak and sing, and their words are emphasized in the text in italics. For instance, the scene in which Tilo cooks Turmeric is described as follows:

When I hold it in my hands, the spice speaks to me. Its voice is like evening, like the beginning of the world.



*I am turmeric who rose out of the ocean of milk when the devas and asuras churned for the treasures of the universe. I am turmeric who came after the poison and before the nectar and thus lie in between.* (p. 13)

The spice's words evoke a mythical atmosphere which recalls ancient times, the exotic image of India and its ancestral traditions. The spices guide Tilo when she needs to find a solution for her customers' problems and they warn her when she breaks their rules.

It may be claimed, then, that spices empower Tilo and all the other mistresses. These magic Indian ingredients represent an alternative form of power for them, who, being women, are denied real power within the communities in which they live. Tilo's fundamental role in the lives of the immigrant customers who frequent her shop, for instance, is summarized in the epithet she uses to define herself: «architect of the immigrant dream» (p. 28). She has the power to relieve their pain, make their American dream come true, bring happiness to their lives. This is possible thanks to the visions the spices conjure up before her eyes. She sees and hears her fellow Indian immigrants' actions and thoughts in the privacy of their homes. One of the most significant is the vision she has of an Indian woman's desperation over the poverty of her family and her husband's lack of support, both material and emotional. Tilo sees the scene and reflects:

The men, where are they? . . . I see them, boots kicked off, swollen feet released and lifted heavily to rickety tables. They are breathing in the old comforting smells. Ground coriander, roasted *saunf*, the small tinkling of a woman's bangles. Almost it could be home. They close their hands around sweating brown bottles of Taj Mahal beer they bought at my store, chew inside their lips. (p. 62)

This passage points out how women, the Indian food they cook, and the household they manage embody a reassuring presence for men in the new land. The women are supposed to keep alive the memory of India through a series of sensory elements which provide comfort and soften nostalgia. At the same time, the situation is not easy for men either, whose expectations of a rich and easy life are usually disappointed. Tilo also hears their thoughts:

No one told us it would be so hard here in Amreekah, all day scrubbing greasy floors, lying under engines that drip black oil, driving the belching monster trucks that coat our lungs with tar. Standing behind counters of dim motels where we must smile as we hand keys to whores. Yes, always smile, even when people say

«Bastard foreigner taking over the country stealing our jobs». Even when cops pull us over because we're in the wrong part the rich part of town. (p. 62)

While women have to cope with the frustration of staying at home and looking after hungry children, men, who are often more socialized because of their jobs, have to face humiliation, racism, and prejudices.

Tilo can also hear children's thoughts as well as their anxieties in complying with the Western models that surround them. For instance, she sees a young girl's dream of a new home for her family, a «shiny new car», a «red motorcycle», «sparkling earrings like the women on TV», and lots of Barbie dolls. For the girl, Barbie represents an ideal model of Western beauty to follow: «*Barbie with a waist so narrow and hair so gold and most of all skin so white, and yes, even though I know I shouldn't, I must be proud like Mother says to be Indian, I wish for that American skin that American hair those blue blue American eyes so that no one will stare at me except to say WOW*» (p. 63). Feeling the burden of all the hopes, fears, and expectations of her customers, Tilo spends her days preparing the right spice for each of their problems. Finding a cure for their sufferings is her reward. In other words, she needs them because they need her (p. 79). Some days, however, a warning given by the Old Mother haunts Tilo, that is, «power is weakness» (p. 174). To dedicate one's life to spices means to acknowledge that they give power, but also that they demand a great deal in return.

It may be argued that spices are metonyms of the Indian patriarchal tradition. When Tilo talks about the island, she explains that, like the island on which they grow, the spices have been there forever: ««The island has been there forever, . . . the Old One also. And the spices? Always. Their aroma like the long curling notes of the *shehnai*, like the *madol* that speeds up the blood with its wild beat, even across an entire ocean»» (p. 23). Like tradition, they have existed forever and this gives them unquestionable authority. Moreover, spices expect the women who handle them, the mistresses, to give up everything and devote their lives fully to them. Before landing on the island of spices, Tilo realizes that «she will lose everything. . . . Sight, voice, name, perhaps even self» (p. 24). Tilo observes that the spices are invigorated after her promise of eternal devotion: «[W]hen I held them in my misshapen hands the spices sang clearer than ever before, their notes true and high like ecstasy, like they knew I was now theirs wholly» (p. 59). Among the rules imposed by the spices, the most important is that the mistresses must possess qualities like submission, self-sacrifice, care, and empathy. In Tilo's head, their words resonate like an old chant: «*A Mistress must*

*carve her own wanting out of her chest, must fill the hollow left behind with the needs of those she serves»* (p. 69). Mistresses must never use spices for their own ends and need to meet a number of requirements in order to live up to the spices' expectations. For instance, the first thing that the Old One examines with all the girls who arrive at the island is their hands. As Tilo is told,

[a] good hand is not too light, nor too heavy. Light hands are the wind's creatures, flung this way and that at its whim. Heavy hands, pulled downward by their own weight, have no spirit. They are only slabs of meat for the maggots waiting underground. A good hand is not palm-splotched with brown, the mark of a wicked temper. When you cup it tight and hold it up against the sun, between the fingers are no gaps for spells and spices to slip through. Not cold and dry as the snake's belly, for a Mistress of Spices must feel the other's pain. Not warm and damp as the breath of a waiting lover against the windowpane, for a Mistress must leave her own passions behind, In the centre of the good hand is imprinted an invisible lily, flower of cool virtue, glowing pearl at midnight. (p. 31)

This litany evokes one of the obligations to which many Indian women are submitted from early childhood, as they must comply with a series of cultural dogmas linked to their temper, good nature, compassion, and obedience. The Old Mother warns her apprentices before they make their choice to live for and in the name of spices. On their last day on the island, she asks them: «“Are you ready to give up your young bodies, to take on age and ugliness and unending service? Ready never to step out of the places where you are set down, store or school or healing house? Are you ready never to love any but the spices again?”» (p. 40). Women are supposed to give up everything in the name of tradition. They have to comply with their duties, forgetting to be women, renouncing their youth and beauty, and living a life inside their dwellings. The Old One repeatedly tells the girls: «You are not important. No Mistress is. What is important is the store. And the spices» (p. 5). These words recall Indian wives' traditional duty of prioritizing homes, husbands, and children before anything else.

The relationship between a mistress and her spices is not very different from the relationship between a wife and her husband. As marriage guarantees honor and protection, devotion to spices guarantees a life of power and respect. This is the reason why many of the girls who are not admitted to the island decide to commit suicide. Tilo explains that «death is easier to bear than the ordinary life, cooking and washing clothes and bathing in the women's lake and bearing children who will one day leave you» (p. 34). An extraordinary life at the service of

spices is preferable to an ordinary life at the service of a man. However, Tilo, who lives and sleeps surrounded by spices, feels the weight of what they represent very strongly. At night, she feels the reassuring presence of spices, but at the same time, she is also oppressed by them: «Their love winds around me heavy as the sevenfold gold Benarasi that women must wear at their wedding» (p. 74). The simile evoking the image of the heavy type of sari women wear at wedding ceremonies confirms the parallel suggested in the novel between spices and patriarchal power.

The power spices exercise over the mistresses' lives also manifests itself through the punishments they inflict on them when they do not comply with the requirements properly. On these occasions, they become suffocating entities. For instance, when Tilo leaves the store, defying the will of the spices, they make her feel all their disappointment: «The spices watching, the spices stronger than I ever thought, their dark power clenched in their core. The spices sucking all the store's air into themselves until none is left for me» (p. 140). As is evident from this passage, Tilo is controlled by the spices, who direct her actions and greatly influence her behavior, thus limiting considerably her free will.

However, it is through spices that she begins her rebellion against the patriarchal system that they represent. The more time Tilo spends in America, the more she questions the spices' authority. She understands that the ancestral knowledge they represent needs to be backed by a more direct contact with people and the real experiences they live. For instance, when she gives a young woman customer «*methi* for healing breaks and *ada* for the deeper courage . . . , and also *amchur* for deciding right», (p. 137) Tilo tells her in the end: «The magic is in your heart» (p. 137). In other words, Tilo realizes that a person's will is more powerful than any spell or magic substance. In this respect, Tilo reflects: «“Ultimately the Mistresses are without power, hollow reeds only for the wind's singing. It is the spice that decides, and the person to whom it is given. You must accept what they together choose”» (p. 139). A fundamental synergy between thing and subject is necessary for the spices to be effective. Moreover, a moment comes when Tilo challenges their authority by acting for her own good and in her own interest—which is forbidden to mistresses. When she falls in love with an American customer—a man she calls «my lonely American» (p. 75)—she ignores their rules and increasingly feels the pleasure of mastering her own destiny and fulfilling her own desires. She states: «This is a new way I am going, and in front all is bramble bush and dark fog» (p. 150). Tilo faces a conflict between her sense of duty and her desire for independence, but, eventually, concludes: «It's

*my desire I want to fulfil, for once»* (p. 82). Certainly, life without the power of spices is uncertain, but Tilo learns to rely on her inner strength. A case in point is when she looks for the right spice for a customer, but the spices no longer speak to her: «I pace the inner room, running my hand along the shelves that hold the spices of power, wanting guidance. But the spices are silent and I have only the turmoil of my woman mind to fall back on» (p. 178). Instead of panicking, Tilo bravely faces up to her condition of being an ordinary woman and tells herself: «You must use what you have, your own frail mortal wits, your imperfect remembering. Your heart's pain» (p. 183). To be alone is the price Tilo—like many Indian women—has to pay for overstepping the boundaries imposed by tradition. She states: «I begin to see the price I have unknowingly paid for each step I took into America. Inside me a voice cries *What else is lost*» (p. 182).

Because of her audacity, Tilo gradually loses her magical powers, but she also gains something as precious as supernatural powers, that is, the pleasure of women's solidarity as well as the love of a man. Despite the spices' instructions not to touch anyone, she happens to touch the hand of one of her women clients to give her strength and support. Although the spices have determined that she cannot become too involved in her customers' problems, she shares their worries, secrets, and confessions. Moreover, one night she decides to accept the American man's invitation to go out with him and uses one last spell to transform herself into a beautiful young woman. Finally, she understands that it is important to use power and not be used by it. The real power Tilo discovers during her experience in America is not the magic of spices, but the power of human frailty, the fertility and richness of fractures, as she recognizes: «I . . . have always craved the power of perfection and find now that human frailty has its own power too» (p. 288). Fractures do not have to be cancelled because they are also opportunities of growth and positive change.

As far as fractures are concerned, the final scene in which a devastating earthquake hits the city of Oakland suggests that this is the extreme punishment inflicted by the spices on the rebel Tilo. While she is escaping from the city and about to cross the last bridge still intact, she suddenly stops and realizes that it is not by avoiding fractures that one's identity can take shape. On the contrary, only by embracing all the aspects of a self is it possible to live hybridity positively. Therefore, despite «big cracks slashed across the freeways, fissures with gases rising from them [and] buildings [that] were burning» (p. 308), she decides to go back and continue helping her own people.

Spices play an ambivalent role in Tilo's life. On the one hand, they are the materialization of the privileged link women have with magic and an expression of female power in alternative forms. On the other hand, they are metonyms of the Indian patriarchal system based on prohibitions and strict rules that women must respect. During the course of the novel, the profound transformation the woman protagonist undergoes is evident. Indeed, she uses spices to enact her rebellion against the system of beliefs that they represent. In other words, she prefers living life free like an ordinary woman—having friends and a lover—to having the powers of a mistress, but being trapped. She understands that women do not need supernatural powers because they can find strength and power within themselves, even in their own frailty.

### The body

Another thing which represents duality as far as Tilo is concerned is her own body. In its numerous transformations, it represents both a trap and an opportunity to change and adapt to different situations.

There are several examples that confirm the first interpretation. From the very beginning of the story, readers understand the precarious balance in Tilo's social life. She explains: «It is not allowed for Mistresses to touch those who come to us. To upset the delicate axis of giving and receiving on which our lives are held precarious» (p. 6). No contact with other people is allowed, no intimacy of bodies is tolerated by the spices, who want full control over the mistresses' bodies. Tilo's conflictual relationship with her own body starts long before her encounter with spices, however. Indeed, from the day of her birth, her body is a source of disappointment and suffering. She was born «colored like mud» (p. 7), which is a terrible disgrace for Indian families, who hope for girls with a fair complexion. However, soon after arriving at the island of spices, ready to start a new life, Tilo's body undergoes another examination. Interestingly, she lands in the island completely naked, as if she were a vulnerable newborn baby. Tilo states: «The sea had stripped me of all, clothes and magic and for the moment arrogance even. Had thrown me at her [The Old One's] feet bereft of all but my dark, ugly body» (p. 32). She asks herself: «Who was I? I could not say» (p. 32). Tilo is lost and ashamed, uncertain about her identity and disoriented. But the Old Mother and spices offer her shelter and protection, like a man with a vulnerable Indian girl: «[A]lready she [the Old Mother] was removing her shawl, placing it around my shoulders. Soft and grey as a dove's throat, and the spice-smell rising from it like a mystery I longed to learn» (p. 33). This generosity, however, comes at a price

as the future of a mistress depends on a careful examination of her body. In particular, the Old Mother studies the women's hands, which have to be neither too light nor too heavy, neither cold and dry nor warm and damp. In other words, the mistresses' bodies have to comply with the spices' expectations or face expulsion from the island. In this respect, Divakaruni wants to point out that the anxiety related to one's body is considerable for many Indian women, who risk being highly discriminated against within their community for merely having unwanted physical characteristics.

Once the mistresses' preparation on the island is over, they must be ready to give up their young, beautiful bodies and acquire a completely different appearance. By walking into a magic fire, they will disappear and «will wake up in [their] new body as though it has been [theirs] forever» (p. 57). This is a further instance of the lack of control many Indian women have over their bodies, which are the primary battlefield upon which patriarchy exercises its power. The Old One asks the apprentices whether they are ready to give up their bodies, because in their new lives, they will have to be selfless women at the complete disposal of their customers. They will know no pleasure, love, beauty, self-care. Their bodies will be mere containers of their selves and will be neither a distraction nor a source of pride. Tilo's awakening in the store, in her new body, gives an idea of the dramatic life change she undergoes:

Ah that first waking in the silent store, the smell of damp cement flowing down the walls down my body. How I lifted my arm, so heavy in its loose-lapped skin and felt the scream taking shape like a dark hole in my chest. Not this not this. The trembling in my knees as I pushed myself up, the pain that jabbed the twisted bones of my hands. My beautiful hands. Anger whose other name is regret surged like wildfire through me. Yet who could I blame. The Old One had warned us a hundred times. (p. 59)

Although at the beginning Tilo does not give this transformation too much importance, she soon discovers the amount of pain (not so much physical as emotional) this condition entails. After spending a long time entrapped in a body which is not hers, she feels terribly lonely at the thought that people around her have no idea of who she really is: «There's a lurching inside me. . . . How long it has been since someone looked at me except in ignorance. . . . Loneliness fills my chest, a new dull aching weight, like drowning water. It is a surprise. I did not know that Mistresses could feel so lonely» (p. 69). The loneliness Tilo feels is due to a lack of real contact with anybody else except the spices. She is like a foreigner,

not only in a new land, but also in a new body. Like many diasporic people, she longs to be seen as her true self, independently of her physical appearance. However, the spices own every part of her, from the mental to the physical level. This is why, in cases of disobedience, the first thing on which they act is the body itself. After violating all the spices' rules—by falling in love with a man, touching her customers, and stepping out of the shop—Tilo must face a terrible punishment, which consists in the destruction of her body through poison and fire. The moment in which Tilo drinks the poison made up of a number of lethal spices is described as follows:

The jolt of it hits me first in the throat, like a bullet, a burning such as I have never felt before. My neck is exploding, my gullet, all the way to my stomach. And my head, expanding, a giant balloon, then shrinking to a nugget of iron. I am lying on the floor. The nausea pulses out of me like blood from a torn artery. My fingers are stiff and splayed, my body bends and buckles beyond my will's controlling. (p. 262)

Physical suffering is the punishment for using one's body improperly. She was supposed to be selfless, but instead she used her body as a means to fulfill her own desires. This is a central element in Tilo's transformation from mistress detached from real life to ordinary woman deeply involved with her community. In this respect, it is crucial to note the other role her mutable body plays in the story, that is, as a means of resistance and adaptation to the challenging situations of life, especially from a gender perspective.

In spite of the Old Mother's recommendations, Tilo feels an erotic desire towards an American man, Raven, who comes regularly to her shop. She discovers the effects of physical attraction on her body: «Fluid fills my mouth in a hot sweet rush. In all my lives before, fortune-teller and pirate queen and apprentice of spices, I have never seen a naked man, never desired to see it» (p. 73). The body is not a cage, nor is it a negligible part of one's self. On the contrary, it can become a vehicle of pleasure and satisfaction. When Tilo thinks of Raven, her mind escapes the control of the spices: «My head fills with pictures, the Tilo I could be, Raven's face when he sees. Our bodies together, supple and twined in ecstasy» (p. 190). Although she knows that giving into her own desires means to break the most sacred promise and «doom [herself] beyond recall» (p. 190), she questions the spices' impositions and asks: «Can I not love you and him both. Why must I choose» (p. 190). The deep fracture which divides Tilo's life emerges from this question: she is torn between the promise made to the spices and the



need to realize herself as a woman. She wants to give her identity a new shape and look at herself through different lenses. As a woman, she can be more than a motherly care-giver; she can desire and be desired as well. This is reflected in her words when she describes the way she feels before the American man: «Even my name takes on new texture in his mouth, the vowels shorter and sharper, the consonants more defined. My American, in all ways you are reshaping me» (p. 192). Tilo understands that he sees more than her old wrinkled body and she longs to discover the new woman she could be. Looking at Raven, the mistress thinks: «One day you will have to tell me what you see when you look at this shape wrapped in its folds of oldwoman skin. Is it some truth about me that I myself do not know, or merely your own fantasy» (p. 162).

Tilo's progressive change on a personal level is mirrored by a need to change on a physical level as well. This is why she decides to use the power of spices to completely change her appearance and transform herself into an attractive woman for just one night. She wants to be master of her own body and use it to discover new sides of her identity still unknown to her. Tilo understands the importance of this moment: «My whole body trembles, desire and fear, because it is not for Raven alone I am doing this but for myself also» (p. 280). In my view, this temporary transformation of Tilo's body does not confirm the stereotypes according to which she feels self-confident and ready to love a man only when she is physically attractive. What needs to be underlined here is that she subverts the spices' powers for herself. For once, instead of them owning her, the opposite is true. While making love with Raven, she thinks: «[W]e are one body, many bodies and no body at all at once» (p. 289), thus suggesting that many perspectives have opened up for her as a woman, now that she has experienced both the spiritual and the physical side of love.

This self-discovery through a different use of her body is not limited to the erotic field. Indeed, a very similar thing happens when, for the first time, Tilo intentionally touches one of her customers to console he, once more disobeying the spices' orders: «I Tilo initiated this joining of skin and blood and bone» (p. 99). And as happened when she touched Raven, she is inundated by a series of contrasting sensations: «Where my hand meets her, a pulsing. Cold fire, hot ice, all her terrors shooting up my own veins. Light dims as though a giant fist is squeezing the sun. A thick milky grey like cataracts covers my eyes» (p. 99). Women's solidarity is also expressed through physical contact and Tilo is ready to break the rules if this means helping women in need. Another case in point is represented by her decision to leave the store and take a packet of spices

personally to one of her girl clients. The mistress disguises herself to step out into America:

I pull on my no-nonsense pants and polyester top, button my nondescript brown coat all the way to my calves. I lace my sturdy brown shoes, heft my brown umbrella in readiness. This new-clothed self, I and not-I, is woven of strands of brownness with only her young eyes and her bleached-jute hair for surprise. She tries a hesitant smile which resettles her wrinkles. (p. 131)

Tilo speaks in third person as she is imagining herself from the outside. Interestingly, she gets ready for her contact with America by wearing different clothes. As a consequence, she is simultaneously «I and not-I», that is, both Indian, but also someone new resulting from the encounter with a different culture.

At the end of the novel, Tilo's body undergoes a final transformation, which may be interpreted as the decisive step towards the completion of her identity. This transformation is anticipated, as usual, by a passage in which Tilo's body is completely naked and vulnerable. The devastating earthquake that splits her shop into two surprises her while she is sleeping and when Raven manages to bring her out from the debris, she is wearing no clothes and her body has completely changed. A new birth has occurred. Neither the frail old woman, nor the beautiful attractive girl are part of her any more. She has become an ordinary woman: «High cheekbones, straight brows with crease lines between. Some grey hair. Not particularly pretty or ugly, not particularly young or old. Just ordinary» (p. 306). Tilo, who in her many existences has never known what ordinariness is, now appreciates the potential of it. She realizes: «My power, my mystery—they are all gone» (p. 311). Nevertheless, she is no longer frightened by her vulnerability. She accepts the presence of fractures and cracks in life, and is ready to embrace them fully as they are part of her transnational hybrid identity. This revelation is also evident in the reason she gives Raven when she decides to go back to the area ravaged by the earthquake:

«[T]here is no earthly paradise. Except what we can make back there, in the soot in the rubble in the crisped-away flesh. In the guns and needles, the white drug-dust, the young men and women lying down to dreams of wealth and power and waking in cells. Yes, in the hate in the fear» (p. 315)

Tilo's purpose in life is still to help Indian people, but with the awareness that fractures are part of human nature, especially when it comes to migrant people,

and no magic is necessary to overcome them. What is needed is a syncretic dialogue between past and present identity.

As far as identity is concerned, it is crucial to note that each of Tilo's transformations is accompanied by a change in her name. Names are important in this novel as they mirror a specific identity. The first name of the protagonist is the one she was given by her parents at birth, that is, Nayan Tara, which means «star of the eye». As she herself says, her parents' name was heavy with fallen hope because she was born with dark skin and this was a disgrace for her family. When she is kidnapped by the pirates, she is assigned a new name: «Bhagyavati», or «bringer of luck» (p. 19). In this case, too, her name is instrumental to the needs of the people who give it to her. The third name, however, is chosen by the protagonist, so it has a different value. When she passes the ceremony of purification and is ready to go to America, she tells the Old One: «First Mother, my name will be Tilo» (p. 41). This name recalls an ancient Indian myth which anticipates what will happen to her later in the story. Indeed, Tilottama, the goddess, fell and was banished to earth to live as a mortal. But within her, Tilottama also has the essence of *til*, the sesame seed, «life giver, restorer of health and hope» (p. 42). This side of the name matches what is going to be her role in America within the Indian immigrant community. At this point, the Old Mother warns Tilo that she must never tell anyone her name as this would expose herself to others. As Tilo reflects: «A true-name has power, and when you tell it you give that power into your listener's hands» (p. 163). Like every warning from the Old Mother, this one is also aimed at shielding Tilo from the outside world. However, Tilo will feel the need to change her name once more, as Tilo no longer represents her in the new country she is inhabiting. At this point, she chooses to call herself Maya, a name which embraces both the Indian and the American cultures. As she explains, «[i]n the old language it can mean many things. Illusion, spell, enchantment, the power that keeps this imperfect world going day after day. I need a name like that, I who now have only myself to hold me up» (p. 317). Now that she is an ordinary woman, she draws strength through this new name from the two souls which form herself.

### The mirror

Continuing my analysis of the things which embody fracturization and ambivalence, a fundamental element to take into consideration is the mirror. The images produced by the mirror have a twofold effect: they can be either memories or mirages. In the first case, they are orientated towards the past and, consequently,

reproduce the past through retroaction, while in the second case they are orientated towards the future and produce the future through projection. Although the reason is never specified, mistresses of spices are categorically forbidden to use mirrors. The field of psychoanalysis could offer a possible interpretation of this rule. As the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has argued, mirrors play a fundamental role in the definition of identity. At a very early age, children go through a phase which Lacan has called «the mirror stage», that is, upon seeing themselves in the mirror, they imagine themselves assuming an upright position—a mastery they will only acquire later. According to Lacan, this is a turning point in their lives, because afterwards, the subject's relation to himself or herself will always be mediated through a totalizing image which has come from the outside.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the image on the mirror produces a totalizing ideal which organizes and orients the self. This is why this stage can be considered as the origin, the moment of constitution of that self. By looking into the mirror, the birth of self occurs, that is, the unification of image—what one thinks one is—and the actual physical being. This is also a moment of self-delusion, based on the production of an illusionary image. The infant anticipates the maturation of his or her power by believing in a projected image which is only an illusion of self-mastery. Both potential and danger can arise from this gesture. On the one hand, it allows one to recognize the self as an autonomous being, independent, and self-realized. On the other hand, great expectations of the interaction with the mirror are produced and since the image seen is a mere illusion, these expectations might not be realized at a later stage.

If this discourse is applied to Tilo's situation in *TMS*, it may be deduced that she is forbidden to use the mirror for two possible reasons. On the one hand, seeing herself could be equivalent to a new birth, a revelation of her true identity as well as her potential as a woman. This would be unacceptable for the spices, which would lose their power over her. On the other hand, self-reflection could produce a fracture between what Tilo sees and what she really is as well as frustration over what others see and do not see. In other words, seeing her own image might increase disorientation within her already displaced self.

The image of mirror has frequently been used by writers and critics within postcolonial and diasporic contexts as it conveys very well the problematic identity conflict of facing and being faced by others. Salman Rushdie, for instance, in his collection of essays, *Imaginary Homelands*, has used the metaphor of «broken

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<sup>3</sup> On Lacan's "mirror stage", see *Lacan's "Mirror Stage": Where to Begin* by Jane Gallop (1985).

mirrors» (1991, p. 11) referring to the fragmented pieces of memory of an emigrated subject who inevitably loses parts of his past which can only be retrieved through imagination. In this respect, however, Rushdie also claims that «[t]he broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also . . . a useful tool with which to work in the present» (p. 12). Distance opens many other doors as it allows one to look at the past more objectively and speak of it «properly and concretely» (p. 12). Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, also refers to mirrors as objects reflecting the ambivalent identity of colonized people. In his view, both the self and its otherness are enclosed in the projected image of the colonial identity as colonized people see both what they are and what the colonizers want them to be (1994, p. 62). Hence, the mirror, the very object of identification, is a space of splitting apart, doubling, dissembling the image of being. Bhabha also adds that in postcolonial as well as diasporic contexts, the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, that is, the space of representation, where the image is confronted with its difference, its other (pp. 66-67). The otherness of the self is inscribed in the projection of the colonized and migrant subjects, so their looking in the mirror inevitably produces alienation within identity. From this perspective, then, the mirror splits, distorts, disturbs, and divides. Cristina Bacchilega, in her book, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, comments on mirrors as a predominant metaphor in tales of magic. She claims that the magic mirror «conflates mimesis (reflection), refraction (varying desires), and framing (artifice)» (1997, p. 10). All these mirror images make the mirror a site for the production of the subject. Bacchilega agrees with Bhabha on the fact that the concept of frame plays an important role as it is the shaping presence embodying cultural constrictions and biases. Of the three components of the image produced by the mirror, the framed image is the most problematic as it raises questions such as: who is holding the mirror and whose desires does it represent? Moreover, the frame selects, limits, (de)centers, (dis)places, and unmakes the mimetic function.

As far as Tilo is concerned, she obeys the spices until her desire to find the true woman hidden in herself becomes too strong. At one point, she buys a mirror and, very significantly, she hangs it on the wall in place of a painting of an Indian god. She thinks:

«[W]hat can be wrong with seeing yourself? The afternoon sun is a flash on my mirror, making the store so blinding bright even the spices must blink. Before they can reopen their eyes I have lifted down a picture of Krishna and his *gopis* and hooked it into the waiting nail, with a *dupatta* draped carefully over it. Mirror,

forbidden glass that I hope will tell me the secret of myself». (Divakaruni 1997, p. 142)

Tilo's gesture of replacing a symbol of Indian tradition with the most forbidden of things is very eloquent. It demonstrates that a transition is occurring and the mirror is a fundamental tool in her search for identity. There, she can see her reflection, her refraction, and the frame in which her image is enclosed. The first time for many years she looks into a mirror is an epiphanic moment as she can distinguish what is real from what is fiction:

Mirror what will you reveal of myself. I am dazzled by the face looking back at me, young and ageless at once, the fantasy of fantasies come to life, spice power at its fullest. Forehead flawless like a new opened *shapla* leaf, nose tipped like the *til* flower. Mouth curved as the bow of Madan, god of love, lips colour of – there are no other words for this – crushed red chillies. For kisses that will burn and consume. It is a face that gives away nothing, a goddess-face free of mortal blemish, distant as an Ajanta painting. Only the eyes are human, frail. In them I see Nayan Tara, I see Bhagyavati, I see the Tilo who was. (p. 279)

The young beautiful woman she sees in the mirror is just a refraction, a distortion, a transformation enacted through the spell of the spices. The only true thing she sees are her eyes, which reflect her own self and her past lives. The frame is represented by the shaping presence of the spices, which displace, select, and limit the vision.

At the very end of the story, after being saved from the earthquake by Raven, Tilo looks in the mirror one more time and recognizes a final transformation of her appearance, but not of her eyes. Again, the mirror is an instrument Tilo uses to define her own identity: «My eyes are on his rearview mirror. . . . “I need to look”, I say. My voice trembles a little» (pp. 305-306). This time what she sees is an ordinary woman, very different from the young beauty she saw after the spices' spell. However, she notes that «the eyes are the same. Tilo eyes. Still curious-bright. Still rebellious. Still ready to question, to fight» (p. 306). In conclusion, the mirror offers both an outward and an inward reflection. Both context and identity are reproduced in the image it conveys. The story it tells develops on three levels: it is orientated to the past, thus enabling Tilo to see who she was; to the present, thus allowing her to live through her present uncertainties; and to the future, by projecting her into her future existence. The woman she sees at the end of the novel is more real than all the women she had been before. This means

that, finally, Tilo has overcome disorientation and confusion and recognizes herself in an image in which reflection, refraction, and frame coincide.

## Fire

The last thing I would like to analyze as far as Tilo is concerned is fire. This element is pervasive in the novel because of the ambivalent role it plays: as a symbol of destruction and purification.

Fire is the medium used by mistresses to leave the island of spices and reach their destinations all over the world. It is named «fire of Shampati» (p. 56) and is represented as a pyre in which the apprentices are supposed to throw themselves. The Old One reassures them by saying: «You will not burn you will not feel pain» (p. 57), but the same fire could become a means of torture if any one of them dares to disobey the spices. Indeed, the punishment for traitors is burning, being engulfed by the flames of that fire. The Old One tells them:

Once in a great while a Mistress, grown rebellious and self-indulgent, fails her duty and must be recalled. Warning is sent to her, and she has three days only to settle her affairs. Then Shampati's fire blazes for her once more. But this time entering she feels it fully, scorch and sear, the razors of flame cutting her flesh to strips. Screaming, she smells her bones shatter, skin bubble and burst. (pp. 56-57)

This description recalls the ancient practice of *sati*, that is, the sacrificial burning of widows. *Sati* is the proof of women's extreme virtue as well as a reminder of their self-sacrificial deed (Kafka 2003, p. 12). For sinful mistresses, it is the last opportunity to show their devotion to the spices and protect the ideal of glorious Indian womanhood. Traditionally, women who do not submit to the concept of «the Indian Woman» are considered as traitors to the entire community and treated accordingly. Moreover, this warning reflects the tendency to control women metaphorically through the construction of binaries such as goddess/whore, good girl/bad girl. Women's violation of rules is tackled through violence and fire is the extreme threat for those who question patriarchy. A case in point is represented by the demonstration the Old Mother gives them while explaining what happens to mistresses who use their powers for their own purposes: «The island begins to rock, the ground grows hot. And then I [Tilo] hear the roaring. It is the volcano, spewing ash and lava» (Divakaruni 1997, p. 93). Shame, stigma, and fear are attached to the violation of traditional rules and fire is the symbol of punishment reserved for disobedient women. They will be condemned to live in isolation and chaos, as Tilo's vision describes: «Alone on the

island that tilts like a plate someone wants to scrape clean. Pellets of scorching rock strike me like shot. I try to hold on, but the ground is smooth as burning glass. I am sliding off its edge into the jaw of nothing» (pp. 93-94).

After violating the spices' rules, Tilo is called back to the island, which means she has to walk into the fire and endure terrible sufferings. In her shop, she makes the pyre with the spices that will guide her through the last painful passage from America back to the island. However, after speaking the words and chants which light the fire, nothing happens and she is left alone, naked and vulnerable at the center of her store. This is the utmost punishment of the spices: silence and loneliness. Tilo observes: «Shampati's fire, which I have feared for so long. Now suddenly I fear more my life without it. . . . I am doomed to live in this pitiless world as an old woman, without power, without livelihood, without a single being to whom I can turn» (p. 297). More devastating flames are waiting for Tilo and the people whom she loves. Indeed, the earthquake that hits her shop causes destruction and fires all over the city. At this point, she reflects:

I know what burning smells like. . . . Smoke and scorch. Smoulder. Each thing that fire takes has a different odour. Bedclothes, bullock cart, cradle. That is how a village goes up in flame. A city would be different, buses and cars, sofa sets covered with vinyl, an exploding TV. But the smell of charred flesh is the same everywhere. (p. 313)

However, this fire is different because it has a cathartic function. Indeed, after smelling the odor of real things burning, like homes, furniture, and people's flesh, Tilo realizes that she does not belong to the fantastic dimension of spices, but to the concrete dimension of real life. The fracture brought about by fire in the final pages of the book is like a scar in Tilo's life, which finally separates her from the patriarchal world created by the spices.

As far as Tilo's customers are concerned, they also deal with things which might be considered as metonyms of the internal fracture of their diasporic selves. Haroun, for instance, is a young taxi driver from Kashmir who came to America to escape war. He was happy in his country, but he was forced to leave it and now he is doing his best to start a new life. The distinctive thing associated with Haroun is his taxi, his pride and only source of income. It is a typical American element, which in Haroun's case, represents the possibility of being independent, starting a business of his own, and being integrated in the «flow» of American life. When Haroun shows it to Tilo, his words express all his



excitement: «[F]rom tomorrow, I am driving a cab black and yellow like sunflowers» (p. 29). However, the same car which embodies the American dream becomes a trap for Haroun, a vehicle of violence and pain. Indeed, because of the wave of racism that spreads through the city of Oakland in that period—especially against South Asians—the young man is harassed inside his taxi by an American man. He is beaten with an iron bar while the aggressor shouts: «C'mon blood, time to split man» (p. 234). There are several references to fractures and wounds. For instance, the doctor who examines him later says: «Skull could have cracked like snail shells» (p. 230). Looking at Haroun's body, Tilo also reflects on his «wounded life» (p. 231), not only physically, but also psychologically. Hence, it may be argued that the taxi represents both the possibilities and the risks of America for immigrant people. On the one hand, America is the place where they can start anew and forget the difficulties of their native country, but, on the other hand, it can also be a place of suffering, racism, and painful integration.

Another regular customer of the spice shop is Lalita, an Indian housewife who spends most of her days at home cooking Indian food for her husband. Tilo calls her «Lalita-to-be», meaning that she has still not completed her identity formation. Indeed, she is entirely dependent on her husband, a violent, jealous man who controls Lalita's every move. The woman is torn between her duty as a wife and her desire to leave a man she does not love and who regularly beats her. The thing which symbolizes her inner fracture is a women's magazine she inadvertently takes from Tilo's shop. On the one hand, it is a symbol of Western consumerism and frivolous life, but, on the other hand, it reveals itself to be Lalita's way out. As Lalita explains in a letter to Tilo, that magazine saves her life:

You know that magazine you gave me? In the back were notices. One said, If you are a battered woman, call this number for help. I looked at it for a long time. One minute I would think Why not. Next minute I would think Chee chee, what sharam to tell strangers your husband is beating you. Finally I threw the magazine in the pile of old papers. (p. 269)

While at the beginning Lalita does not consider the option of asking for help, after the last violent beating by her husband, she decides to call the helpline. As in Haroun's case, Lalita's experience is full of references to splitting, fractures, and cracks. She describes the violence she suffered: «He [*her husband*] lunged forward, grabbed the front of my blouse and tore it. I can still hear the ripping sound, like it was my life. I cannot write what else he did to me. . . . When he fell asleep I went in the shower and stood under hot water scrubbing, even the bruises, till my skin felt as it would come off» (p.

270). Next morning, Lalita makes the call which saves her life, and can finally begin seeing America as a place of opportunities which could give her a fresh start.

The shop is not only visited by first-generation immigrants, but also by young second-generation Indians like Jajit. He attends a local school and is laughed at by his schoolmates because of his Indian origins. The thing which best represents the fracture he lives as an Indian immigrant is money. In Jajit's story it has the ambivalent meaning of a burden and an opportunity. From one point of view, the young boy sees money as an opportunity of power and integration in the new country when he joins a gang and starts dealing drugs and weapons. feeling part of a group gives him a sense of protection as well as the illusion of making money easily and gaining respect in this new land. At the same time, however, money entraps him in a web of unhealthy relationships, which nevertheless, make him feel lonely and disoriented. Thus, instead of spices, Tilo decides to help him by using the same thing which has caused his fracture: money. She leaves a bag containing a thousand dollars for him—so that he can enroll in karate classes—with a card saying «*[u]se power, don't be used by it*» (p. 275). A new hope opens up for Jajit: «His eyes hold a new shine, visions of impossibly high kicks, edge of the hand breaking a brick in two. Kiais fierce enough to shatter the walls of an opponent's heart, katas delicate and precise as a dance. Fame and fortune, perhaps the movies, like Bruce Lee. An escape from now into for ever» (p. 275). He realizes that there are other ways of channeling his rage and transforming his disorientation into a new purpose.

The oldest customer of the shop is a grandfather (whose name is never mentioned), an elderly Indian man who moves to the United States to live with his son and his son's family. He is very traditional and nostalgic of his country of origin. For instance, he does not approve of his granddaughter's Western habits of working, driving a car, and leading an independent life. When she announces to the family that she has a boyfriend—a chicano boy—he feels outraged, and together with the other members of the family he repudiates her. The symbol of his identity fracture is Indian food, which he buys at Tilo's shop to maintain an anchor to his country of origin. At the same time, it is also the element which he uses to understand his granddaughter's world and reconcile with her. Indeed, he cannot stand the idea of having a split family. Hence, he eats a mixture of spices which causes cramps and pain, and makes him vomit. These symptoms reflect the physical and emotional fracture which has opened up within his self. In the attempt of soothing the man's sufferings, both his son and his granddaughter

have the idea of asking Tilo for some remedies and accidentally meet at her shop. This encounter makes them both understand how deeply they care for each other and that family is not so much about choosing tradition rather than modernity as going through changes together.

The last customer I would like to comment on is Raven, the American man Tilo falls in love with. As the mistress gets to know him, she finds out that he is also torn between two different cultures: the American and the Native American culture. His mother belonged to an ancient tribe in which magic and supernatural powers were used by people. However, she decided to turn away from this world and start over in another state, leading an ordinary life with a husband and their child. When Raven discovers his own origins, he faces a deep identity crisis as he does not know whether he belongs to the magic world of his mother's family or the ordinary world of his American father. This dualism is represented by a thing which recurs repeatedly in his life (also in his name): a vision of a raven. On the one hand, it embodies the dark side of his mind as well as the presence of another world inside him, invisible and yet present. On the other hand, it symbolizes the freedom one has to choose where to belong as well as the fluidity of boundaries between one identity and the other. The most significant instance of this vision is when Raven meets his maternal great-grandfather for the first time. The old man is ill and asks the boy to approach him near the bed. At the touch of their bodies, Raven sees what his life could have been like if he had chosen to be part of the tribe:

[A] host of men and women at the edge a river. . . . I saw them behind his [the grandfather's] head, the other faces stretching all the way into the wall, like when you stand between two mirrors. The faces shifted, their features blending so that they were and were not my great-grandfather's face, were and were not mine. (p. 204)

In this quotation, there are several references to split images and ambivalent feelings. For instance, the river embodies a means of simultaneous connection and separation, thus suggesting both distance and nearness with respect to that world. Moreover, the image of two mirrors distorting the reflection of Raven's great-grandfather as well as his own face suggests that the boy does not have a clear picture of his family's identity, nor of his own self. This hallucination is followed by another one: a big raven appears before him, «big and beautiful, charcoal black, gleaming like oil, which sat still . . . and watched [him] with red bead eyes» (p. 204). At this point, through the raven, the boy sees his life until

that day, calm and ordinary, as opposed to the life he could live by joining his great-grandfather's people. Again, a twofold perspective opens up, as Raven realizes: «I knew it was my life I was seeing, the one I'd have to give up before I could take on the other» (p. 204). The boy is not fast enough to decide and the vision fades away, like the possibility of changing his life forever. The opposition between what is and what might have been has confused the American man ever since. Interestingly, in order to help him work out this ambivalence, Tilo gives him an ointment made of spices, the effect of which is like «cold fire, hot ice» (p. 205). These oxymorons reflect the contradictory feelings of simultaneously belonging and not belonging to his present life. The bird, then, represents the freedom of choice as well as the power allowed by a life full of magic, but also the cage in which Raven has been trapped since he had the opportunity to choose. He confesses:

[T]hat beautiful black bird which I shied away from . . . which disappeared into the sky with its sad eyes like rubies. . . . I'd dream about it from time to time. Why didn't I grab hold of it, why didn't I shout a *yes* . . . ? And then I'd think of the power I'd felt for a moment near that bed, an amazing blast of heat like you might feel if you suddenly, unknowingly, pull open a furnace door. (p. 215)

As happened to Tilo, Raven also associates magic with power and is deeply attracted by the unusual life magic allows one to lead. He does not find stimuli in ordinariness and constantly longs for extreme experiences, even in drugs. The exotic image of Tilo is probably what attracts him to her despite her physical appearance; the world she has recreated within her shop—through ancient spices and magic potions—reminds him of his native American origins. However, he ends up agreeing with Tilo when she tells him that they do not need to look for the «earthly paradise» (p. 315)—another oxymoron which obsesses Raven—because they can live with their double identities through syncretism, not opposition. As they prepare to leave Oakland forever, Tilo tells him: «“It wouldn't work, Raven. Even if we found our special place. . . . Because there *is* no earthly paradise. Except what we can make back there [in the city of Oakland]”» (p. 315). It is no coincidence that they stopped their car on a bridge in order to talk. This image suggests that the two different worlds (past and present, old and new identity) can communicate and embracing hybridity is the right way of coping with a split self.

As the critical analysis has demonstrated, to observe things in magical realist texts means to observe the mysterious life that flows within them. Literal and

figurative meaning collapses to the extent that apparently ordinary things acquire transformative and subversive potential. This is possible thanks to the ongoing dialectic between magic and reality. Material entities become literary images to be investigated less in the light of their physicality than of their spiritual interaction with people.

In Divakaruni's novel, things play a crucial role insofar as they instantiate the physical as well as psychic fracture of diasporic selves. Diasporic identity conflicts are metonymically represented by things which can be read in the light of their ambivalent meaning. They are both ordinary and magic, familiar and alien, reassuring and disorienting. Most importantly, they are apparently stable entities, but with a great transformative potential. A case in point is represented by the most relevant things that are part of Tilo's life. As my close reading has shown, they have gradually transformed from traps into vehicles of change. The Indian spices, Tilo's changing body, the forbidden mirror, and fire are deeply linked with tradition, and consequently, controlled by patriarchal power. Tilo, however, increasingly sees them as means of transformation from one identity (that of Indian mistress devoted to spices) into another (that of a bicultural woman free from cultural constraints). By transgressing rules and overcoming the clash between duty and self-fulfillment, the woman protagonist manages to transform the oppressive effect of these things into a liberating force. The same happens with the customers in her shop who have to deal with the problem of assimilation and integration in a new land. The things I have commented on with regard to these characters show how the foreign country can be a place of suffering and uncertainty, but also a source of opportunity and personal growth. As far as Raven is concerned, the frequent vision he has reflects his inner cultural conflict, which he eventually resolves by realizing that no paradise is available to humans. Neither magic nor an endless search for the perfect place can help anyone cope with their hybridity. This personal condition is an integral part of the self and only by connecting all parts of the self is it possible to experience difference positively.

Three main conclusions can be drawn from the object-oriented reading of Divakaruni's novel. First, the ontological disruption of reality and fantasy supports the purpose of political and cultural disruption. In other words, the magical elements included in the story uphold the mimetic ends of the text, that is, to analyze and revise social and political realities linked to the diasporic condition. Moreover, through a magical feminist narrative, the author has represented the multi-layered identity of the migrant woman as well as the opportunities she can find in the new land. The classic wonder tale's production of gender has been remade

and stereotypes linked to the mythical representation of charming, submissive female characters have been challenged. Tilo's qualities as a curious, rebel, subversive, and anti-conventional woman got lost in the uprooting and re-rooting process, but her true self has eventually come out, in spite of the oppressive presence of the spices. Second, center and margin have been put into question. By focusing the narrative inside of the dreamlike world of the spice shop—a marginal place—and by emphasizing the “other side” of things—that is their magic side—the traditional order of the work of art has been reversed. Through the technique of defamiliarization, readers are led to re-evaluate what is previously considered as real and unquestionable. Finally, fractures are sites of great potential. Tilo realizes that the fracturization that she has experienced—the rending apart of herself as an immigrant, as a woman, as an Indian American person—is a part of who she is. And in order to find successful resolution of that condition, she must accept it and learn how to navigate within it. Gita Rajan asserts that «the sum of [Tilo's] immigrant, diasporic, racialized, and gendered experiences in America make it possible for her to negotiate the outcome of events» (2002, p. 221). Tilo has broken away from all expectations, rules, desires of others and finally found the ability to voice her own needs. She is prepared to build her new sense of self on her own conditions. As Raussert Wilfried has stated, «[r]eturning to the earthquake area, she demonstrates that she has integrated motherly instructions for social responsibility into her own dream of self-fulfillment» (p. 199). Her ability to cope with ambivalence—as the analysis of things has demonstrated—has ultimately resulted in a willingness to build life within fracturization because, paradoxically, it is there that strength, self-realization, and wholeness can be found.



# READING THINGS

There is a kind of “beyond” *within* things,  
not *outside* them.

(Timothy Morton, *All Objects are Deviant*)

Things constitute the stage on which human action (including the action of thought) unfolds. By offering an insight into the material dimension of literary texts, in this volume I have made an effort to think with and through physical objects in order to image human interiority. As I pointed out in the previous chapters, things are often obscured by their everyday use as objects, but they are, in fact, material entities infused with metaphysical meanings. Social, cultural, and literary history emanates from things to the extent that their existence is inextricably linked to human existence. On the one hand, it is not wrong to claim that things are independent entities as they were there before us and will be there after us. Indeed, our material possessions exist independently of our intervention, and because of their physical characteristics, will outlive us. On the other hand, when things are materialized by human attention, they transform themselves from things-for-us (objects appreciated for their use value) into things-in-themselves (things imbued with spiritual force). It is in this sense that when objects and subjects interact beyond the commodity sphere, a co-constitution of humans and things occurs.

Supporting the idea according to which things are not inert, void matter, Martin Heidegger underlines the importance of listening to things, of noting their talking to us (2001, p. 25). Furthermore, he maintains that, although things belong to the physical dimension of reality, they speak to a philosopher or an artist in a privileged manner if compared with a scientist. He motivates his view by claiming that whereas science and engineering desire to «objectively control» material entities, and consequently instrumentalize them, arts show sensibility towards things in themselves, thus revealing them as they are in all their facets.



Indeed, an interesting aspect to note about things is that they have the capacity to be both things and signs of something else. Drawing on Heidegger's argument, Bill Brown has developed the idea that the «spaces within» things enable us to store meanings, ideas, and thoughts. In other words, he argues: «[W]ithin an object ... the subject» (2013, p. 12). According to this view, then, in order to reach the subject, it is necessary to penetrate the object, thus destroying it. On the basis of the analyses carried out in the previous chapters, I would like to suggest an alternative point of view: through the object, the subject. This is to say that objects are not merely containers of meaning, but they are also fundamental tools of self-discovery and self-expression for subjects. To use this approach in literary critical analysis means to resist the impulse of reading by scratching through the surface of things in order to see into them, thus overcoming the hermeneutic model of surface/depth, exterior/interior, sensible/suprasensible. If one penetrates or sees through a material entity, one destroys it, thus forgetting its existence, and preferring the subject. Conversely, as Theodor Adorno also states, «granting the physical world its alterity is the very basis for accepting otherness as such» (1997, p. 193). This is a fundamental principle to follow if a feminist approach to literary works is to be adopted. Therefore, my critical analysis has deviated from the hierarchical principle according to which the content is more important than the surface. In the light of the mutual constitution of human and nonhuman entities, things have, instead, been both the starting point and the orientation devices of my close readings.

From my comments on contemporary Indian women's literary production, two main aspects have emerged. Firstly, over the last two decades, Indian women authors have enacted gender in their writings through a materialist phenomenology of everyday life. This means that their attention has been particularly focused on things which have become materializations of social, cultural, and individual conceptions of gender. In their fiction, along with subject matter, there is a preponderant object matter, a foregrounding of the object world through which the women protagonists circulate. This leads me to my second observation, that is, gender and gender-based discrimination can be objectified; they can be experienced, faced, manipulated, made, and re-made as objects. In things, there are congealed facts of culture, surface phenomena that disclose the logic (or illogic) of the culture of a certain society. Gender is a fact of culture for contemporary Indian women writers, as race is for Franz Fanon, who talks about «fact of blackness» (2009, p. 257). Fanon famously described the experience of being «sealed into . . . crushing objecthood» upon realizing that he «was an object in the midst

of other objects» (p. 257). Hence, there is a form of facticity in things and a non-anthropocentric approach can reveal processes of objectification and marginalization embodied in the physical object world.

For the purpose of this book, I have chosen texts that, as I understand them, ask why and how things are used by women to make meaning and voice alterity (as in *The God of Small Things*), resist, express creativity, and sublimate fears (as in *Ladies' Coupé*), organize anxieties and memories while coping with nostalgia and sense of loss (as in "Mrs. Sen's"), and make or remake a gendered self (as in *The Mistress of Spices*).

In *The God of Small Things*, patriarchal and colonialist attitudes are objectified through a series of things which recall the oppressive colonial power as well as chauvinist ideals. Women are considered as property of the family, their freedom is condemned, and they are victims of forms of patriarchy expressed not only by men, but also by the other women of the community. By focusing on the small things of the everyday, Roy enacts a reification of human relations which are the result of cultural and gender ideals. On the oppressors' side, for instance, their desire to master, rule, name, and classify is objectified through things that metonymically represent control, manipulation, restriction, and captivity. On the other hand, the subalterns' need for self-expression is materialized in things that embody creativity, hybridity, freedom, and disobedience. In *Ladies' Coupé*, readers are faced with stories of objectified women, whose lives have been put on hold for their families' sake. They are materially used to enhance the ego of their husbands and protect the honor of their families. The things I have commented on show how the women protagonists have rejected objectification and managed to transform oppression into opportunity. In other words, material entities which instantiated humiliation, fear, rage, and unfulfilled desires become means of resistance as well as tools of creativity. The women characters portrayed by Anita Nair create an intimacy with things that makes them feel at home in the home they create. There, in the places in which they used to experience dis-ease, they eventually develop a sense of homely belonging. Indeed, within their domestic environments, they enact processes of re-objectification that result from a kind of misuse of ordinary things. An unnatural or uncustomary use of things (such as food, clothes, and furniture) discloses creative, expressive, and transgressive performative actions that interrupt repetition and offer readers physically interpretable signs of the women's transformation. The woman protagonist, in particular, after an experience of dislocation which interrupts the habits with which she used to view the world, eventually finds the canny comfort of being at home

through narration and imagination. As far as Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "Mrs. Sen's" is concerned, it may be argued that things embody the difficult process of integration women undergo in a new land as well as the strong emotional bond they maintain with their homeland. Moreover, the comparative analysis with another short story in the same collection, "The Third and Final Continent", reveals how things can be considered as instances of a different way of experiencing migration between men and women. While men are oriented towards the future and the things that circulate in their lives are propellants of change, women are oriented towards the past and things act as emotional anchors. Through her material possessions, Mrs. Sen lives a sort of self-alienation that makes her a spectator of her own life instead of an active participant. She can be imagined as a collector who exhibits and assembles her life through things that constitute a specific domestic soundscape, smellscape, and visualscape. As my analysis has demonstrated, Mrs. Sen needs palpable proximity with India and longs for objects through which to stabilize and organize her identity in the hostland. She turns things into personalities to the extent that they become substitutes for human relations. From this perspective, then, it may be claimed that the Indian woman experiences a kind of quotidian animism, that is, a spiritual link with the physical elements she surrounds herself with as they crystallize events, people, emotions, and relationships. Her rituals reflect what Sigmund Freud has defined as «repetition-compulsion» ([1920] 2017, loc. 239), that is, an effort to stabilize and possess the material world, to exert control, and achieve stability or stasis. However, stasis is what slowly emotionally kills Mrs. Sen, who increasingly becomes a slave of things, the past they evoke, and the loss they embody. In the analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, I have pointed out how things represent women's capacity to assume multiple identities and express their "double" nature which allows them to be at once mothers and lovers, angels and witches, comforting and unpredictable presences. The examination of the woman protagonist of this novel has shown that women cannot be enclosed into fixed categories as they have the power to destroy stereotypes and classifications. Indeed, *The Mistress of Spices* is a novel in which things fall apart, like people, but from the remains new opportunities can arise. The circulation of things—namely spices—and the circulation of characters around things lie at the heart of Divakaruni's novelistic enterprise. Spices are the center around which the plot is organized, they are vehicles of many metaphors, material representations of patriarchy, and entities with a life of their own. They are reminders of India, but unlike Mrs. Sen, the protagonist of this novel reworks their meaning in the

foreign land and escapes from the trap of obedience and submission they create around her. The diasporic context in which the narrative takes place is a significant location as it offers the opportunity not only for the mistress of spices, but also for all her customers to connect past and present in a syncretic manner and, consequently, accept their hyphenated identities.

As regards context, in my study of the literary works mentioned above, I have devoted considerable space to an analysis of settings. As I have pointed out, they are no less significant than the events that take place within them to the extent that they make things happen, are a catalyst of encounters, and instantiate the characters' psychical evolution. The contexts I examined are constituted by moments in which person, thing, and place converge in a point of physical conjunction. This is evident in the examination of the Meenachal river, in *The God of Small Things*, which I defined as a «mindscape», borrowing Lambros Malafouris' term (2013, p. 227). Along the riverbanks, characters evolve to the extent that their interiority as well as cognitive processes extend into the extra-organismic environment. The same can be said about the train compartment in *Ladies' Coupé*, which I have considered as a transitional site with great transformation potential. Its transitory nature allows for a suspension of identity of the women inhabitants, who have the opportunity to review their traditional roles in a context of retreat and community. In "Mrs. Sen's", I have examined the diasporic context in which the woman protagonist finds herself after involuntary migration and I have highlighted how the things it is filled with are orientation devices that constantly point back to India, thus causing alienation and disorientation in the new land. In "The Third and Final Continent", on the other hand, the man protagonist manages to find a sense of familiarity among things in the Western context and, consequently, to orientate himself in the new space he inhabits. Finally, I have considered the spice shop in *The Mistress of Spices* and read it as both a prison and a «safe house» (Pratt [1992] 2008, p. 40). On the one hand, for the woman protagonist the bazaar is a suffocating place, a container of Indian paraphernalia that immobilize her in a timeless dimension. On the other hand, for the customers it is a breathing place, a location imbued with Indian culture in which they can find comfort, recognition, and relief from their painful condition as expatriates.

Hence, as for the role of things within the specific contexts of the narratives examined in this study, two observations can be made. Firstly, it can be concluded that things are indexes of characters as well as the historical, cultural, and social circumstances in which they live. They mediate social relations differently in postcolonial, diasporic, and magical realist contexts as they have the

metonymic power to express ideologies and cultural views depending on the situations in which they circulate. Secondly, contemporary Indian women writers have produced a literature of the interior—focused on a detailed depiction of Indian women’s subjectivities—by foregrounding the exterior—that is the material world that their characters inhabit. Interior processes have been externalized, which is to say that mental acts, including thoughts, mental evolution/involution, emotions, etc., have been transformed into physical operations within specific physical environments.

## Gendering of things and thingness of gender

I began this volume by asking whether it is possible to talk about objectification of gender discrimination. My close readings have demonstrated that gender is no less physical than an object. It can be materialized through either the externalization of thoughts and ideologies or the internalization of the physical object world. Thus, since the ontological distinction between objects and thoughts can be erased, it may be claimed that gender-based oppression or suffering can be objectified, reconstructed, and experienced physically. This is demonstrated, for instance, by Ammu’s transistor (in *The God of Small Things*), Akhila’s starched and dull-colored saris (in *Ladies’ Coupé*), Mrs. Sen’s cooking utensils (in “Mrs. Sen’s”), and Tilo’s spices (in *The Mistress of Spices*). These examples show that oppression, discrimination, displacement, sense of loss, and patriarchal tradition can be given a physical shape.

This leads me to the second crucial question underlying this work, that is, can we talk about gendering of things and thingness of gender? My critical comments on the texts tackled in the previous chapters allow me to answer both questions affirmatively. The first issue aims at establishing whether things affect the gendered perception of the self, or, in other words, whether things have a culturally-established gender which, consequently, influences the possessors’ perception of themselves as men and women. Based on my analysis of literary things, I would argue that gender is not an intrinsic property of things, but it is the effect of the way men and women interact with them as a result of habit and repetition. This is why, for instance, that domestic environments are traditionally associated with women. In this respect, the literary production I have examined in this work clearly reveals the mutual influence between women and the interiors they

occupy. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman explains in her book, *The Home: Its Work and Influence*, the home reflects the gender of its main inhabitants, i.e., women:

See it in furnishing. A stone or block of wood to sit on, a hide to lie on, a shelf to put the food on. See that block of wood change under your eyes and crawl up history on its forthcoming legs—a stool, a chair, a sofa, a settee, and now the endless ranks of sittable furniture wherewith we fill the home to keep ourselves from the floor withal... If you are confined at home you cannot walk much—therefore you must sit—especially if your task is a stationary one. So, to the home-bound woman came much sitting, and much sitting called for ever softer seats. (2002, pp. 27-28)

As this passage suggests, possessions are imbued with the identity of their owner, they acquire a gender depending on the recurrent use people make of them in specific historical and geographical settings. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity according to which gender is the product and process of repetition (1988, p. 519), it may be concluded that the gender attributed to certain things is not the manifestation of an innate property they have, but a clear direction established at the familial or social level. As my analysis has shown, in India, more than in other cultures, specific spaces, and consequently specific objects, are gendered as female because of the social pressure under which women are placed to orient themselves towards certain spaces and objects.

As far as the second issue—focused on the thingness of gender—is concerned, it may be claimed that things are material representations of a gendered self. They create narratives structured in relation to the gendered imaginary portrayal a person has of himself or herself. In other words, things are devices of self-representation, sensory elements expressive of self-identity. As Sarah Pink has underlined, «sensory experience, knowledge and practice are a fundamental to the articulation of traditional and contesting gender identities» (2004, p. 9). This is confirmed by the women protagonists of the works I have examined, who engage with a series of material elements through which they do not merely perform a given gendered identity, but also negotiate and contest it through forms of creativity. Hence, through their individual daily practices, both men and women perform genders that refer to, resist, or challenge hegemonic discourses. The material elements on which I have focused my attention are expressive of biographies and identities and can be considered as a means through which gender is performed. In this respect, Pink also states that gender is partial, completed only in interactions with other individuals, objects, and spaces (p. 43). Thus,

according to this view, women's interactions with things are performative actions through which they might self-consciously constitute or re-constitute their gendered identity. It is from this perspective that it may be argued that the mundane activities of everyday life can also be performative for women, who from an unconscious use of objects pass to a conscious perception of things. This is evident in the narratives I have discussed, in which women's intentionality and consciously formulated practices contribute to shifting the parameters of traditional or established ways of doing things and carrying out forms of performativity and resistance. As Henrietta Moore states in her book, *A Passion for Difference*, people «both consent to and dissent from the dominant representations of gender when they are encoded in the material world all around them» (1994, p. 75). Thus, individuals may bring new meanings to the «forms and practices» they «animate» and dominant discourses can change through «processes of interpretation and reinterpretation» (p. 83). In other words, people can revoke or bring into question ingrained gender practices and values by making a different use of the material artifacts around them. In conclusion, to be aware of the thingness of gender means to accept that things might be instrumental in processes of change. The creative and strategic actions informed by individuals in the material and sensory environments can become forces that serve to either maintain or transgress existing conventional gendered approaches. As such, continuity and change are created through everyday actions performed through things.

## Wider implications: from feminist subject to feminist object

A feminist ideal of inclusivity lies at the basis of my thought. My interest in the nonhuman, materialism, and thingness parallels a feminist concern for objectification and instrumentalization. Indeed, women and things share a common status as matter, objects made available to the community. The former have been commodified in terms of their breeding potential, while the latter for their exchange and use value. From this perspective, the progressive silencing of things can be compared to the suppression of the female other, who is often assimilated and not recognized in her irreducible difference. Hence, given the women-things affinity, it is necessary to acknowledge that things are less defined by their functionality than their action potential and metaphysical presence. In other words, by claiming ethics for things—which is also the purpose of Object-Oriented Feminism—women are also freed from objectification.

Through my object-oriented readings, I have injected feminism into the discourse around things in the literary field. I have inverted the typical inward orientation of feminist approaches—towards subjectivity—and promoted an outward orientation—towards the object world. The application of Thing Theory to the literary analysis of texts that foreground women has highlighted that a shift from the literary subject to the literary object has great transformative potential for both feminist politics and feminist literary criticism.

Firstly, by focusing on the apparently inanimate, inert, nonhuman objects, I have demonstrated that feminist and postcolonial practices could also arise from a focus on the phenomenological world. In line with Donna Haraway's principle of «situated knowledges» (2004, p. 188), I have shown how reading from the perspective of the thing allows one to reconsider how the very process of objectification works. Neither an anthropomorphic approach ascribing lifelike experiences to objects nor an anthropocentric view focusing on our lived subjective experience of objects are effective ways of dealing with the literary thing. Indeed, the idea of connectivity and mutual influence between humans and nonhumans should be adopted. In this way, concepts like networking, care, and sympathy—often promoted by feminism—are fully applied in the process of reading, which, consequently, becomes an inclusive practice.

Secondly, Timothy Morton's idea according to which «there is a kind of “beyond” *within* things, not *outside* them» (2013, p. 68) could be applied to other literary fields as well. The corpus of writings on which I have focused my analysis was carefully selected because it includes texts published in a period in which Indian female authors have turned their attention to the everyday and the material. Through their new focus on women's daily practices and their interactions with the object-world, they have made the impersonal political, thus making both the inside (subjectivity) and the outside (the physical environment) welcoming and accessible places for women. However, other literary works belonging to different geographical and historical contexts and dealing with lived experiences of exploitation can be read through the lens of Thing Theory. Texts representing the construction of identity within postcolonial and diasporic contexts lend themselves well to a study focused on materialism, utilitarianism, and instrumentalization. They may include, for instance, African, Caribbean, South Asian, Australian, Chinese, and Chicano literature. Moreover, a number of texts of fiction—defined broadly to include literary texts and films—can be explored from the perspective of the thing. One of the most interesting text-types in this respect is undoubtedly science fiction, which more than any other genre, typically tackles



concepts such as transhumanism, embodiment, and autonomy, and, in so doing, raises questions about the experience of objectification and marginalization.

In conclusion, the examination of the «curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle» (Bennett 2010, p. 6)—which Jane Bennett has defined as «Thing-Power»—leads me to argue that literary things are invested with intimate space, forms of memory and desire, affect and affliction, oppression and resistance. As entities replete with meaning, they are legible not only because they «gather into themselves something of the character of those who live among them, through association», as Lucy Larcom has stated ([1889] 1986, p. 150), but also because through them forms of material struggle are articulated. The battle for emancipation, the attempt to dismantle patriarchal institutions, and the challenge to gender discrimination are embodied in the phenomenological world and constitute the symbolic power of the post-colonial feminist literary works I have examined. As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, the symbolic production of literary works is important as it generates new structures of belief (1993, p. 37). The new structure that contemporary Indian women writers have created through the wide semiotic apparatus within their texts is the belief that things tell stories, and, recalcitrant in their mute physicality, they are reading matter.

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