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A Geocritical Reading of Diasporic Identity in the Prose of Leila Aboulela, Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali

Abstract: This paper proposes a geocritical reading of diasporic identity in the prose of Leila Aboulela, Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali. It starts by looking at the experience of women joining their husbands in the West, their integration (or lack thereof) and the characters' strategies for maintaining their faith, humor and specific cognitive mechanisms in spite of the culture shock they are facing. My hypothesis is that, instead of conforming to consecrated patterns of cultural interaction – such as assimilation into Western modernity, isolationist rebellion *against* it or voluntary uprootal – these characters manage to find another way of defining themselves against a new background: namely, they create mental spaces to inhabit, bringing their original homes and their adoptive ones into constant dialogue and subjecting both worlds to a combination of irony and empathy.

Keywords: Diasporic identity; Geocriticism; Open/ Closed Spaces; Postmigration; Humor; Community.

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The combined use of diaspora studies and geocriticism is a necessary starting point when discussing the issue of migrant identity and agency. Not only because diasporic existence entails first and foremost the negotiation and renegotiation of space and spatial belonging, but also because one's relationship with space or their purported default location is never innocent; it always has ideological, political and ethical undertones. After all, the very concept of the diaspora has been generally understood through the prism of uprootal from a localized culture and transfer into another. For instance, Jonathan Grossman, who proposed a distant reading of the most cited articles on the subject of diasporic groups (seventy-four texts, published between 1976 and 2017, belonging to a range of disciplines, from political to medical sciences) and who coded them into a qualitative data analysis software, obtained the following definition: "a transnational community whose members (or their ancestors) emigrated or were dispersed from their original homeland but remain oriented to it and preserve a group identity".¹ In other words, one's position in space and

one's orientation towards a previously inhabited place are core attributes of the diasporic subject.

At the same time, when approaching diasporic experiences and their literary depiction, one must keep in mind that, for at least two centuries, identity and belonging have been obsessively seen as relying on nationness and nationality, with the nation-state becoming "the international norm"² after World War I. As Benedict Anderson writes, the nation has been constructed as a "motherland" or a "home" to which "one is naturally tied"³ and where the identity of each individual is determined through kinship and synchronicity: "a sociological organism moving calendrically though homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation".⁴ Thus, a discussion of diasporic belonging must begin with the dismantling of the belief that to be part of no nation or part of multiple nations is to be inherently rootless, alone or devoid of identity. In this sense, scholars like Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall have shown that, while movement does represent the precondition of diasporic doubleness,⁵ the precariousness and in-betweenness involved in this process were often productive circumstances, generating new ways of being in the world: "successive generations of black intellectuals (...) noted this intercultural positionality and accorded it a special significance before launching their distinct modes of cultural and political critique".⁶ In doing so, they questioned a series of long-enshrined notions such as nation, ethnicity, community, one's homeland and even the concept of culture, all of which inform our understanding of diasporic life.

Therefore, the need to involve geocriticism in diaspora studies – relativizing both

the *national* perception of space and Anderson's homogenous time – is the very premise of my case study, centered around the prose of three authors from Anglophone diasporas: Leila Aboulela, who writes about the life of Sudanese migrants in Scotland, specifically Aberdeenshire, Monica Ali, who focuses on the Bangladeshi community in London, and Jhumpa Lahiri, whose characters travel from India to the United States. Despite the great geographical span of their work, they all capture the intricacies of one specific sociological phenomenon, namely women joining their husbands in Western countries as the latter pursue more or less prestigious careers and try to build a financially superior life to the one which was accessible or imaginable back home. Thus, the common denominator is a sort of biographical pact between husband and wife, through which the woman takes part in another's diasporic ambition, project, endeavors, while her own decisions and initiatives are subsequently derived from the new social landscape available upon her arrival in Europe or America. Moreover, the protagonists never get to know their adoptive cultures through the prism of professional struggle, intellectual challenges, pop culture, politics or the public sphere; instead, their first contact with foreignness consists in the close inspection of their very limited surroundings, a dissection of their domestic environment conducted in the first person or through free indirect speech. At the same time, given that the narrative charts the subjective experience of one character at a time, weaving in and out of the stream of consciousness, these stories from the diaspora also share a spatially dialogical structure, a back-and-forth between the new home and the homeland,

the present and the past, the immediate perception of reality and the urgent, intrusive, sensory memories of the character's childhood and youth.

A brief incursion into the plot is in order, in the hope that close reading will eventually reveal a clear sociological pattern and a set of conclusions regarding the narrative enactment of spatial perception and its relevance for diasporic agency. To begin with, in Monica Ali's 2003 *Brick Lane*, Nazneen is an eighteen-year-old girl from a poor Bangladeshi village, married off to a much older civil servant in London. She is poorly educated, raised in the spirit of fatalism and submissiveness, knows only a handful of words in English and is, in fact, completely isolated from British society and its ethnic and religious milieu. As the novel progresses, Nazneen will change drastically, becoming a mother, entering into an affair with a radical Muslim closer to her age, developing a critical perspective on aspects of society and politics which were previously impossible to comprehend. However, her specific manner of processing and expressing displacement becomes visible from early on: "in those first few days", we are told, "her head was still spinning and the days were all dreams and real life came to her only at night, when she slept".⁷ In general, the past is weightier and captures her attention more stubbornly, which is why it can erupt in the middle of daily life, drawing sensory perception away from her surroundings, towards perfectly-preserved recollections of home: out of the blue, Nazneen drifts off "to where she wanted to be, in Gouripur tracing letters in the dirt with a stick, while Hasina [her sister] danced around on six-year-old feet".⁸ Traveling through space and time and spending half

of her days in the interstices of memory, Nazneen is the creator of a heterogenous spatiality *and* temporality, whose coordinates fluctuate depending on her mundane tasks and interactions. In other words, the chaos of London yields a type of comparative cognition: on the one hand, this is a common response to the unfamiliar and the need to make sense of it; on the other, the English landscape is repeatedly interrupted and fragmented by snapshots of her village, resulting in an uneven pattern, a jigsaw of sorts. Take this description of Tower Hamlets: "The brick, dull red, got its way. The frames are as dirty, as sullen, as their hosts" and then immediately after "You can spread your soul over a paddy field, you can whisper to a mango tree, you can feel the earth beneath your toes (...) But what can you tell to a pile of bricks?"⁹

The fragmentation of the adoptive environment is even clearer in Lahiri and Aboulela's prose. *The Namesake* (2003), Lahiri's first novel, tells a symmetrical story, in which Ashima, an MIT doctoral candidate's wife, handles her new domestic, American life in a strikingly similar fashion, relying on traditional food, religious customs and on her own memories of home in order to survive in the new world she is thrown into. Although her husband's social and economic position is definitely more comfortable than Chanu's – the civil servant from *Brick Lane* – and although Ashima is a proficient English speaker, familiar with British poetry among other things, her inner monologue employs the same mechanisms of cognition and control: when lying in hospital, awaiting the birth of her son, the so-called "American seconds" are soon replaced by Indian time,¹⁰ and "the off-white tiles of the floor, the off-white panels

of the ceiling, the white sheets tucked tightly into the bed” give way to simultaneous, vivid images of home, described in the present continuous: servants pouring the tea “into steaming glasses”, her mother “untangling waist-length hair”;¹¹ in short, Ashima’s senses zoom in on a far-away room, superimposing it on the cold, antiseptic lack of color of the American hospital ward. Just like in Nazneen’s case, Ashima’s lived experience in the United States is actually mediated through a myriad borrowed sensations and images from the past. Her contact with the present and with the American space she inhabits is never smooth, never continuous; there is constant interference between her two lives – before and after her marriage. What is more, this sensory criss-crossing is also given a preferred medium: food. As Anindya Raychaudhuri writes in his book on the South Asian diaspora and the function of nostalgia, “Ashima’s life in the United States and the way she negotiates the conflict between her American and Indian identities is also depicted through her attitudes towards food”.¹² She gets to know her husband by cooking for him, she expresses her love for her children by providing them with a healthy, Indian diet (while also making concessions to certain American foods) and she manages to recreate Indian domestic events such as birthdays and religious holidays by preparing elaborate feasts. In short, Ashima’s American surroundings undergo a process of culinary transfiguration: if an apartment in Massachusetts smells and tastes like Indian food, isn’t it already a home? Lahiri explores this phenomenon time and again, as Ashima has a similar story to Mrs Sen, another protagonist from the older short story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999).¹³

The comparisons she makes between her old and new life all revolve around food and the impossibility of recreating the flavors and rhythms of Bengali cooking: “The few positive experiences for Mrs Sen are only positive insofar as they approximate similar experiences back home”.¹⁴ While Mrs Sen’s story is short and has a very limited time span, conveying the tension and anguish of diasporic life, Ashima’s evolution in *The Namesake* has a resolution once food is no longer a source of frustration but becomes a way of purposefully situating herself in the world: an Indian woman living in the United States and creating a unique subject position for herself.

Finally, Aboulela’s prose fits the same pattern, starting with Samra from *The Ostrich* (2018), whose intrusive thoughts about Sudanese culture and society puncture the story like clockwork: “I weave paper ribbons with holes”, she narrates, and then “Grapefruit juice – no one buys for themselves, always sharing (...) our downfall, Majdy says, the downfall of a whole people, a primitive tribal mentality (...) Pink grapefruit juice, frothy at the top”.¹⁵ In a split second, the husband’s political opinions and his disdain for the collectivist mindset of ‘third-world’ people are invalidated by a strong sensation, which transports Samra to the streets of Khartoum. Finally, the double filtering of one’s surroundings – through heightened senses and imaginary traveling to a different continent – is most noticeable in Aboulela’s novel *The Translator* (2021), where the Scottish landscape appears through the haze of memory, while homecoming places Sudan in constant dialogue with Scotland. Consider, for instance, the following fragment:

Outside, Sammar stepped into a hallucination in which the world had swung around. Home had come here. Its dimly lit streets, its sky and the feel of home (...) She smelled dust and heard the barking of stray dogs among the street's rubble and pot-holes (...) the muezzin coughed into the microphone (...) But this was Scotland and the reality left her dulled.¹⁶

Symmetrically, the "huge expanse of hard, square tiles" found in Sudanese homes is now "strange for Sammar. She was used to the unobtrusive carpets and wood of London's flats".¹⁷ Thus, everything points to the impossibility of inhabiting one place and one culture undividedly, since the adoptive land simply lacks the substance of more emotionally fulfilling substitutes such as memory, imagination, dreams, projections, and so on. Nevertheless, as we delve deeper into these novels and short stories, exploring the protagonists' discourse, we also discover that the coherence of their cognitive and imaginative processes and their privileged duality ultimately shape an autonomous mental space, which allows the characters to preserve and model their own conceptions of knowledge, faith, community and even humor, without having to abide by the norms and entrenched ways of a single society, be it English, Scottish, American, Sudanese or Indian. In this sense, the cognitive patterns involved in the familiarization with one's host country are no mere reflex but have ideological significance, as well. They have the potential to create what Roger Bromley and Lena Englund have named "postmigrant realities", that is, "a new set of emergent spaces of plurality"¹⁸ in which the

migrant is able to forge particular ways of being, thinking and communicating, without being excluded *or* assimilated. To quote Englund, "Aboulela's stories depict a society in the making, a society which is still in the process of becoming postmigrant, just like her characters who still struggle with their own becoming".¹⁹ Thus, the keyword of migration is "interaction" rather than integration, as agency is born out of one's self-expression in and constant dialogue with an unfamiliar culture, eventually producing what Anindya Raychaudhuri calls "diasporic subjecthood".²⁰ Of course, the process is never easy and, as Englund rightly argues, Aboulela's earlier stories – including *The Ostrich* – tend to focus on the struggles of migration rather than the possible outcomes: in these narratives, "belonging is largely defined along ethnic, racial and religious lines, contradicting any postmigrant hopes and aspirations for a more inclusive society".²¹ It is only when the characters overcome these rigid categories that true dialogue (or "interaction") can take place.

I insist on the spatial nature of diasporic identity because, on the one hand, the urban landscape of Western cities, as well as the domestic landscape familiar to Ali, Aboulela and Lahiri's characters are quite literally the gateway of knowledge and difference, signs to be interpreted. On the other hand, their situation brings to mind Homi Bhabha's Third Space of enunciation, which appears as a virtual field of interaction "between the I and the You", between two individuals or cultures, and which can further reveal the value of diasporic prose for how we think about space and identity in our theoretical pursuits. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha proposes

the seminal notion that the “pronominal I of the proposition cannot be made to address – in its own words – the subject of enunciation, for this is not personable, but remains a spatial relation within the schemata and strategies of discourse”.²² Therefore, not only is the cultural embeddedness of the message implicit and impossible to isolate, but the resulting ambivalence and ambiguity involved in the formation of meaning make possible a myriad of strategies for deconstruction, the questioning of hegemonic knowledge patterns and subversion. In Bhabha’s words, “it is that Third Space (...) which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew”²³ in a space of demystification. This is precisely the function of diasporic speech: characters like Nazneen, Ashima and Sammar reinterpret the West through the lens of their childhoods, cultural reflexes and memories, while also reviewing their past and their home societies comparatively, critically and in the spirit of disenchantment. The great advantage of their perspective is that the process of mutual filtering cannot possibly stop or settle on a fixed, normative frame; it involves continuous perception rather than definitive charting, which comes to light through the numerous mutations legible in the protagonists’ discourse: culture shocks, learning curves, the accentuation and the alleviation of nostalgia, new metaphors and beliefs. By conceptualizing the two cultures inhabited by the protagonists as open discursive spaces and communicating vessels, it becomes easier to envision diasporic hybridization as a never-ending

process, in which the subject negotiates her agency precisely by bringing into dialogue a physical space – the adoptive country – and a remembered one – the homeland. Thus, Bhabha’s Third Space of enunciation also manifests itself in the lives and discourse of diasporic subjects, operating as *a mental space of postmigration* (borrowing Bromley and Englund’s concept): a space of constant oscillation and mutual filtering.

This brings me to one of the most difficult questions regarding the diasporic experience of Ali, Lahiri and Aboulela’s protagonists: does the birth of agency amount to a celebration of Western (neo)liberalism and multiculturalism? Or, more problematically, do these migrant women find their own voice by rejecting the patriarchal values embedded in the “Third World” cultures they were born into? Since the publication of *Brick Lane* and the protests of the Greater Sylhet Welfare and Development Council in 2003, some critics have expressed the opinion that Ali’s depiction of Bangladesh, Islam and the Bangladeshi community in London was insulting, undignified and orientaling.²⁴ Some have gone as far as to claim that Ali’s novel is “an endorsement of liberalism” and a critique of the “cultural relativism” promoted by postcolonialism and critical theory.²⁵ In Ali Rezaie’s view, for instance, Ali’s critique “of non-Western societies and cultures from a liberal point of view” is meant to highlight “the suffering of those members of non-Western cultures who are oppressed by the traditional norms and customs of their local cultures”.²⁶ To a certain degree, this interpretation could be applied to Lahiri and Aboulela’s prose, as well: after all, Mrs Sen’s status as a housewife in America relegates her to a life of isolation,

apparent purposelessness and lack of mobility, implying that the traditional gender roles that she is meant to fulfil cause her chronic disempowerment; Ashima's quiet, long days are very different from her husband's, who is working as a researcher; Samra, the protagonist of Aboulela's *The Ostrich*, is uncomfortable renouncing her veil or the practice of walking behind her husband in public, both of which are mandated by Islamic tradition; finally, Nazneen herself is perfectly capable of evaluating her husband's political opinions, yet she always strives to say "the right thing" in front of Chanu, asking her daughters to do the same²⁷ etc. Undoubtedly, Ali, Lahiri and Aboulela capture the varied forms of oppression which derive from religious and patriarchal dogma rather than Western social norms. Ali's novel even ends with Nazneen living in London, separate from her husband, making a living for herself and going skating in a sari, because "this is England (...) You can do whatever you like".²⁸ The idea of female liberation is there for all to see, which is also why we cannot ignore the concerns of critics like Rehana Ahmed, who claim that "the binary of individual freedom versus communal/ religious repression (...) underpins the novel itself, and (...) the social contradictions that are repressed in Brick Lane (...) emerge at the point of its reception by members of the Bangladeshi community".²⁹ Indeed, one could argue that the stories written by Lahiri, Aboulela and especially Ali prioritize *individual* emancipation by eliding the wider structures of power in British and American society (for example, the marginality of the Bangladeshi community in London) and, implicitly, "the necessity of a collective politics of self-representation".³⁰

However, it is my contention that this particular ideological reading is restrictive and insufficient, as it ends up disregarding the ambiguous nature of most cultural practices and the intersectional aspects highlighted by the three writers. Far from simply signaling their allegiance to Western liberalism, the authors are interested precisely in the articulation of multiple forms of marginality and oppression in the lives of migrant women, as well as the negotiation of agency *despite* this web of prejudice and vulnerability.

To begin with, let us return to the issue of diasporic spatiality. When they move to the West, the women in Ali, Lahiri and Aboulela's stories encounter for the first time what Bertrand Westphal has termed the "closed spaces" of the Western world. Throughout the centuries, Westphal writes, Western modernity has been treating open, growing, infinite and uncontrollable space as a problem to be solved, turning it into clean-cut *places* through selection, ordering and mapping. Using the harmonious primordial village as the prototype of the global village and being plagued by an "*omphalos* complex", it ended up producing a "space saturated with places".³¹ Westphal discusses the connection between rhetoric and one's desired territory: quoting Barthes and the legend of rhetoric being born in ancient times, during a property trial, Westphal concludes that the discursive "invention" of place is an age-old practice. Discourse allows us to appropriate a land, he argues, it gives "a familiar shape, *ours*, to something that you do not have".³² This applies perfectly to the colonial practice of literal and metaphoric cartography: making physical maps of new continents and lands; making taxonomies

of new people; making catalogues of new ecosystems, that is, becoming masters of the unknown by subjecting it to a Western system of knowledge. But it also indicates that space can be *unmade, un* or *reinvented*. Thus, diasporic consciousness opens up the world, reconnecting far-flung cultures and undoing the hierarchies and roles assigned in the wake of colonialism. Through their language and persistent discursive practices, characters such as Nazneen or Mrs Sen take one more step towards Edouard Glissant's utopian project, in which the world can become decentered or polycentric once the signs and symbols of culture undergo a process of displacement, losing their supposed ontological weight and becoming opaque.³³ Looking at Ali, Lahiri and Aboulela's protagonists and their dialogical, transcultural worldview, we are reminded that, ever since Glissant and the créolité movement, the relational understanding of culture has been a goal of post-colonial and diasporic literature: "Relation is an open totality evolving upon itself (...) the whole is not the finality of its parts: for multiplicity in totality is totally diversity".³⁴

To test these hypotheses against the corpus, let us consider two civilizational elements which make subtle appearances in all of these stories: namely, privacy and cleanliness, both of which are undeniably loaded tropes, which have been employed in Western literature to essentialize, define and belittle the so-called Third World, while glorifying Occidental progress and modernity. First, when describing "clean" urban spaces, Ali, Lahiri and Aboulela's protagonists are also able to look past the cult of order and administrative success, pointing out, often indirectly, the ethical and political implications of spatial organization.

For instance, a pristine Scottish museum about African culture and history – with its dim light, perfect silence, simple explanations – is in stark contrast with the destruction, chaos, loudness and brutality of war and colonialism. In the short story *The Museum*, Aboulela's protagonist, a Sudanese student, notices that the oversimplification of her entire continent is conducted by focusing on civilizational clichés, while her own experience of home is organic, sensory, subjective and, thus, irreducible to an educational pamphlet: back home, there were "people like her father"; she remembers "the waiting room of his clinic (...) the air-conditioner, the smell of his pipe, his white coat".³⁵ In Ashima's story from *The Namesake*, the white, clean hospital where her child is born is also impersonal and devoid of human connection, because the legitimacy of good organization and the authority of modern science seem to replace the need for warmth or community. The same can be said about privacy and restraint, i.e., the essential Western virtues derived from the sanctification of Reason. Almost all the protagonists in Ali, Aboulela and Lahiri's texts meditate on the cultural valences of public and private life, so that their train of thought amounts to an exercise in defamiliarization or estrangement (as the Formalists defined it): in Britain and America, there are hardly any tabus left in terms of sexuality, the women conclude, but giving birth, illness and death are solitary experiences, which cannot be shared with a stranger and not even with one's extended family; domestic violence or a woman crying for help on the street might go unnoticed, while the body is a temple devoid of mystery. In other words, the Western public sphere has been purportedly shaped

by the democratic imperative, which made Jürgen Habermas charge it with “the tasks of criticism and control which a public body of citizens (...) practices vis-à-vis the ruling structure organized in the form of a state”.³⁶ However, the same democratic society prevents its immigrant communities from choosing their own definition of a good life, safety or dignity and will swiftly accuse them of being “backward, barbaric” if they abide by a different conception of emancipation.³⁷ It also bows to the accelerated commercialization of all desires and, as famously explained by Guy Debord, to the “appearance” or representation of social life instead of its authentic practice.³⁸ Hence, there is little room for vulnerability, weakness or intimacy in the society of the spectacle, not least because they are much harder to commodify; in Nazneen, Ashima and Sammar’s discourse, they appear as inexplicable absences, as gaping wounds and an obsessive topic of conversation. To give but an example, Samra from *The Ostrich* grieves the loss of public prayers, which were commonplace in Sudan but would seem scandalous in Britain: back home, she remembers, “I would know that I was part of this harmony, that I needed no permission to belong”.³⁹ Thus, despite telling the story of displaced housewives who have a hard time adapting to a new environment, Ali, Aboulela and Lahiri’s prose actually touches upon some major themes of modern political and critical theory. In their stories, the concepts that have driven the political life of the West for centuries – freedom, autonomy, solidarity, tolerance, all of which have considerable ethical weight – are suddenly uprooted from their matrix, appearing as hypotheses and ambivalent propositions rather than axioms.

At the same time, I would venture the opinion that, rather than promoting “the private and apolitical significance given to cultural and religious identities in liberalism”,⁴⁰ as some scholars have suggested, Ali, Lahiri and Aboulela’s use of private and public space is in itself a political commentary. Not only do they question the glorification of the Western public sphere, revealing its coldness, its mechanized and dehumanizing aspects, but they also imply that political struggle – as envisioned by postcolonial and critical race theory – is not immediately accessible to all those who are subject to oppression. In other words, the women who come to the UK and America to be housewives and mothers encounter prejudice and discrimination – e.g., a bus driver assuming that Mrs Sen cannot possibly speak English and choosing not to address her directly – but are isolated from their communities’ collective response to racism and marginalization: protests, activism, public debates etc. Whether or not patriarchal pressure is explicit (in Nazneen’s case, for instance) or implicit (Mrs Sen, Samra), the protagonists are doubly disempowered: by their status in the family and by the status of their communities in British or America society. Once again, Nazneen’s controversial story is perhaps the most eloquent: while looking for her missing daughter on the streets of London, she is unwillingly caught in the middle of a riot between an Islamicist organization and a white, anti-immigrant group. The scene is remarkable for multiple reasons: because it is an intelligent satire on the British middle-class (a couple of tourists are very disappointed when the police blockade prevents them from eating ‘authentic’ curry); because it reveals that

Nazneen's domestic problems overshadow any collective struggles, separating her from a fight that should be hers, as well; finally, because "by shying away from depicting the color-coded violence of race wars that so often rage in Britain, Ali chooses to deflect the question of migrant disenfranchisement onto the less fraught and more confused context of a riot".⁴¹ Thus, it becomes clear that, while leading a mostly domestic life, Nazneen is actually part of a concentric structure of discrimination, in which violence and danger have a ripple effect on her evolution.

At this juncture, the picture of migration and diasporic life that I have painted requires more nuance and a caveat. Walking in Homi Bhabha's footsteps, I have already mentioned the Third Space of enunciation and pointed to the connection between hybridity and diasporic agency. As Stuart Hall puts it, "far from being grounded in mere 'recovery' of the past (...) identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past".⁴² Indeed, this non-linear, performative understanding of identity has been essential in the evolution of cultural studies, from gender studies to postcolonialism. However, we must also remember that Bhabha's notion of hybridity cannot be reduced to lifelong uprootal, drifting and deconstruction; instead, since the colonial or, in our case, the diasporic subject is a human being in the flesh, as well as a producer of discourse, hybridity and movement cannot and should not exclude the possibility of belonging and community. In this sense, Paul Gilroy has come up with a very helpful perspective in his analysis of the "Black Atlantic", arguing that only

the recognition and exploration of today's transnational communities can help question the modern myth of the nation and its oppressive patterns of knowledge and governance.⁴³ This is precisely why I choose to look at the experience of Ali, Aboulela and Lahiri's protagonists through the prism of Gilroy's project and to show that their practice of agency relies on two instruments: *community* and *empathetic humor*. After all, their diasporic existence cannot be explained away as willing or circumstantial assimilation, as politically-driven resistance to Westernization *or*, for that matter, as voluntary uprootal. On the contrary, what is remarkable in their dual, oscillating perception of reality and space is the ability to counter the anxiety and the difficulties of migration through the careful recreation of family, faith, compassion and solidarity in a Western world obsessed with competition and individualism. This constitutes an alternative to the still-ethnocentric reflexes which allow the Western glorification of multiculturalism⁴⁴ and often dominate such academic fields as cultural and diaspora studies.⁴⁵

On the one hand, this is facilitated by the employment of one's free time in pursuit of human connection and togetherness rather than consumerist forms of entertainment; considering that Habermas has deemed free time instrumental in fostering a so-called "critical community", which questions political dogmas and social norms due to its ability to distance itself from capitalist accumulation and efficiency, the many friendships woven between women in Ali, Aboulela and Lahiri's fiction deserve to be credited with their real political function. As Anindya Raychaudhuri notices, the diasporic nostalgia

surrounding food and cooking in the work of Jhumpa Lahiri is always associated with the absence of or the desire for community life:⁴⁶ while Mrs Sen decries her isolation in America, as opposed to the collective cooking rituals she had grown up with, Ashima from *The Namesake* actively recreates this familial setting, using food as a pretext for meeting fellow migrants. Moreover, by the end of the novel, Ashima has negotiated her own diasporic identity and “is soon in a position to help other immigrants” by offering advice “presented in terms of food and cooking”⁴⁷ (recipes, substitutes for Indian ingredients etc.). On a similar note, I would argue that, although Nazneen’s emancipation in *Brick Lane* has been described as the rejection of patriarchy and the adoption of English social norms, her practice of diasporic agency relies on a community of women – working and living together – rather than on the endorsement of (neo)liberalism: “She prayed to God but He had already given her what she needed: Razia”.⁴⁸

On the other hand, these stories showcase a highly specific type of humor, which stems from the central role of community life: good-natured, subtle, ironic but rarely sarcastic, questioning rather than critical. To give but an example, Nazneen’s relationship with her husband’s theories – be they political, sociological or literary – has a highly entertaining evolution, as she becomes more accustomed to British society, understands the intricate ethnic and religious tensions at play and goes through a continuous process of disenchantment and emancipation from her fatalist worldview. But even once she is painfully aware of her husband’s mediocre career and unfulfilled ambitions, even when she sees

the flaws of both assimilationism (initially embodied by Chanu, who despises his own immigrant community) and radical Islam (represented by her lover, Karim), Nazneen’s inner monologue is equally witty and compassionate, resulting in amused silence and kind restraint rather than biting retort. When evaluating one of their guests, she concludes that “he came as a man of science, to observe a rare specimen: unhappiness greater than his own”;⁴⁹ when thinking about her son and her husband’s ambitions for the baby, she calls the latter “an avenger (...) A Chanu: this time with chances seized, not missed”.⁵⁰ As she treats the hardships of diasporic life (i.e., alienation, disappointment, discrimination, failure) with humor, Nazneen also protects the objects of her ridicule, who are, at the same time, the objects of her affection. Likewise, Sammar from *The Translator* is never more cheerful or mischievous than in the company of her Muslim coworker and friend, Yasmin.⁵¹ When she laughs at somebody’s awkwardness or ridiculousness, be it Yasmin’s or her husband’s, Sammar always conveys her warmth and sympathy, as well. In short, while humor has been famously theorized as the result of critical distance between people, as the incongruity between someone’s efforts and the ridiculous results⁵² or as the temporary objectification of another human being,⁵³ Ali, Lahiri and Aboulela’s protagonists prefer a type of humor deriving from connection rather than detachment or judgment. In other words, the mental space of postmigration, which they inhabit and establish as an essential part of their identity also facilitates the birth of new forms of solidarity and belonging, fostered by the migrant’s experience of displacement and vulnerability.

To conclude, the literary depiction of diasporic spatial perception and trans-cultural oscillation – as done by Ali, Lahiri and Aboulela – reveals the complex nature of migrant disempowerment *and* emancipation in Western societies, particularly British and American. Despite being subjected to double-layered oppression, due to the patriarchal structure of their families, as well as their constant racial marginalization, the protagonists find their way to what I have called *the mental space of postmigration*, refusing to be confined either to the culture that they left behind or to the rigid standards of Western modernity and capitalism. Through the affective and mutual filtering of space – both inhabited and remembered – these characters also invent different forms of community and solidarity which do not conform to any traditional narrative about migration as

rootlessness, acculturation or voluntary isolation. If literature “experiments and implements (in the strong sense) all imaginable and conceivable ontologies”,⁵⁴ as Bertrand Westphal believes, then diasporic literature is all the more suited to the negotiation of such new ways of being in the world. Thus, Ali, Lahiri and Aboulela’s stories of female migration also fulfil one of the revolutionary functions of postcolonial literature, as explained by Graham Huggan: through the “acceptance of diversity reflected in the interpretation of the map, not as a means of spatial containment or systematic organization, but as a medium of spatial perception which allows for the reformulation of links both within and between cultures”,⁵⁵ they propose and make possible a less monolithic perception of space, as well as new, specifically diasporic forms of agency.

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32. Bertrand Westphal, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
33. Edouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1997, p. 191: "The opaque is not the obscure (...) It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence".
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