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*To all those who have been part of this journey – thank you!*



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## 1 Introduction

We are living in an age of migration (Castles and Miller). This claim is rather undeniable given that most of the big cities of this world are currently populated by a diverse intercultural and international mix of people. Unfortunately, it is also undeniable that Western societies often fail to incorporate immigrants with diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds successfully and to provide them with equal opportunities. This inevitably leads to discontentment among the immigrant population and, thus, poses a threat to a peaceful co-existence. Ways need to be found to prevent that migrants who venture courageously into the unknown, leaving behind their homes and their loved ones in search of new opportunities, are utterly disappointed.

Migration and the problems it presents to modern societies are currently at the centre of public as well as scientific debate. The issue has been thoroughly researched with the help of statistical data on a macro-level. Yet, the main focus is usually on the larger society and on how it is affected by migration economically and socially. The point of view of the migrant is widely underrepresented in these studies. Since I believe that the answers personal accounts of migration can provide have long been underestimated, the present thesis focuses on representations of migration in contemporary migrant literature, a genre which offers valuable insights into experiences of and attitudes towards migration from a migrant perspective. The study focuses on processes of identity (trans)formation in migrants as portrayed in selected migrant fiction. Particular emphasis is put on the migrant protagonists' understanding of culture and identity and the way these affect their self-perception. Moreover, also the authors' conceptions of culture and identity inherent in the texts are investigated in the framework of this thesis.

With the objective of painting a diverse picture of migration in a postcolonial context, six short stories by Rohinton Mistry and Jhumpa Lahiri have been selected for analysis. Mistry was born into the Parsi community of Bombay in 1952 and migrated to Canada at the age of 23. Lahiri is a second generation immigrant born in 1967 in Great Britain and raised in the United States. Thus, the authors belong to different immigrant generations and age groups. They also differ in gender and ethnic origins. This variety is what makes this study unique for, up to date, only a few comparative analyses going beyond the imagined frontiers of ethnicity exist and, thus far, I have found none comprising my choice of authors.

Two major criteria have been decisive for the choice of texts: on the one hand, a strong presence of the experience of location, dislocation, and/ or relocation and, on the other hand, a date of publishing no earlier than the 1980ies, given that the nature of migration underwent fundamental changes in this period due to globalisation. In general, the stories analysed in this thesis contain renderings of the migratory experience, often focusing on decisive moments in the life of an immigrant or alternatively depicting everyday situations in order to point out the little obstacles that life abroad usually entails. Moreover, the narratives touch upon complicated issues such as displacement, the struggle for incorporation into society, the myth of the homeland or considerations of language and identity on a very personal level.

My main research interest lies in answering the following questions: What are the prevailing themes and the formal means deployed in order to represent them? Which narratives of migration predominate? What are the central attitudes concerning the construction of the migrant identity inherent in the texts? In what way do the different authors go beyond the traditional concept of culture by Herder? To what extent do they move toward transculturality as a way of dealing with life in-between? In other words, this thesis focuses on two main aspects of the selected short stories. On the one hand, a thorough examination of the content sheds light on the conceptions of culture prevailing in the works as well as the effects caused by different cultures meeting and the processes of identity formation triggered by migration. On the other hand, the selected short stories will be analysed concerning the narrative techniques employed in order to isolate certain characteristics deemed specific to the migrant genre.

The paper is divided into two main parts, namely a review of the diverse theoretical issues linked to the topic and the literary analysis itself. Chapter 2 commences by providing some basic information on the diasporas that the selected authors as well as their characters form part of and on the immigration policies pursued in their respective receiving countries. Subsequently, different conceptions of culture and identity are outlined and the most important features of the writings of postcolonial migrant authors are briefly summarized. Chapter 3 comprises the analysis of a sample of Rohinton Mistry's short stories and chapter 4 focuses on Jhumpa Lahiri's work. The literary analysis proceeds in the same order for both authors: First of all, the most important aspects of the author's biography are summarized and the works relevant for the analysis are presented. Then, the main themes and topics are



identified and the way they are realized literarily is described. Subsequently, the most important characters and frequent methods of characterisation are outlined. In a next step, the author's narrative technique is discussed with a focus on narrative voice and focalization, structure and language and style. To conclude the analysis, representations of culture, identity and migration inherent in the texts are isolated and summarized. Finally, in chapter 5, both authors' works are compared to illustrate the wide range of possible representations of the migratory experience and final conclusions are drawn.

## 2 Theoretical background

### 2.1 The Indian Diaspora and Life in the West

First of all, I would like to provide the reader of this thesis with some background information on the migration streams which the authors of the short stories analysed as well as their protagonists form part of as well as the attitude towards immigration prevailing in the respective receiving societies. This knowledge is essential as the problems migrants face abroad and the way they deal with them is influenced strongly by the push-and pull-factors underlying their migration as well as the immigration policy in the receiving countries. In other words, the authors' own migratory experience plays an important role in determining the narratives they employ in their fiction.

#### 2.1.1 The Indian Diaspora

The Indian diaspora is subdivided into several stages depending on the time of departure and the push- and pull factors involved. Vijay Mishra (2-4) speaks of the 'old' and the 'new Indian diaspora'. The old Indian diaspora, also termed the 'colonial wave', consisted mainly of indentured workers which found work in the tropical plantations of colonial Britain, France and the Netherlands from the 1830s onwards (Cohen 61; Pande 2). This is a typical labour diaspora, given that people left their homeland in great numbers looking for work and subsequently formed tightly-knit, socially excluded communities overseas, all the while maintaining strong links to their homelands (Cohen 61). The members of this diaspora originated from all three main ethnic groups in India, most of them being Hindu or Muslim. The Sikhs moved abroad predominantly to serve as soldiers in the British Army (Cohen 61). The post-1960s wave of departure of the educated middle classes to Western countries has been termed the 'new Indian diaspora' (Mishra 3). This diaspora is also known as the contemporary brain drain wave (Pande 2). Given that this diaspora comprises a highly qualified workforce, its members were admitted in great numbers to countries like the US and Canada (Cohen 145). Mishra (3) emphasizes the fact that both waves are not completely separable since members of the old diaspora have also come to form part of the new diaspora as they re-migrated from the tropical domains to the West after the Second World War. Nevertheless, it is an important distinction to be made as the historical conditions under which the different waves happened differ significantly from each other. While for members of the old diaspora migration meant turning their backs on their homes and

venturing on a journey with a final destination, the new wave happened in the age of globalization and modern means of communication, thus, making the journey's destination and the separation from home much less final.

Finally, some basic knowledge about the Zoroastrian diaspora is a necessary foundation for the analysis to be effected because Rohinton Mistry is part of this community and so are his characters. Zoroastrianism is an ancient religious philosophy which originated in Persia (Luhrmann 1). Its followers were forced to leave their homeland during the Muslim conquest (Luhrmann 1). Therefore, the Zoroastrian diaspora is considered a deterritorialized diaspora (Cohen 137). Many Zoroastrians moved east to where India is today, where they became an established ethnic minority known as the Parsis (Luhrmann 1).

During British colonial rule, the Parsis proved to be very able businessmen and soon established themselves as intermediaries between Indian society and the British ruling class (Luhrmann 1). Due to their privileged position, they soon grew wealthier than the Indian average and, as a by-product of their economic success, they soon began to identify more with the Western ruling class. They eventually started to educate their children following Western ideals. Luhrmann (16) argues that the Parsis seem to have adopted the "colonial ideology of progress and moral superiority, of westernization as a means to advancement, and of the British as the agents of positive change." Consequently, the end of British colonial rule in India in 1947 affected them strongly as they suddenly saw themselves deprived of their privileges as well as of their access to British education and cultural artefacts, thus experiencing a sense of loss and confusion (Luhrmann 1). Society was completely reorganized and suddenly the Parsis found themselves being a small powerless minority among the Indian Hindus, from whom they had once proudly distinguished themselves (Luhrmann 16). As a result, many emigrated to countries as diverse as Hong Kong, East Africa, Britain, continental Europe, the US, Canada and Australia (Cohen 137), which constitute the main centres of the Zoroastrian diaspora nowadays. In fact, the level of Parsi discontentment becomes clear when considering the high percentage of Parsis emigrating from India. The high level of education and good English skills of the Parsis improve their chances of being granted visas in the West (Hinnells 266-268). Despite everything, Bombay still is one of the most important centres of the Parsi diaspora worldwide.

### 2.1.2 Immigration to North America

The growth of a transnational society in the age of migration has been considered both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it encourages tolerance towards cultural difference. On the other hand, however, the cohabitation of culturally diverse groups bears potential for conflict. In general, people from diverse backgrounds migrate for manifold reasons and the way they are received often depends on their economic power and their social status. Nowadays, many Western countries compete for a steady influx of skilled labour (Castles and Miller 4). Even though they are inclined to impede less educated people from coming in, this is not always possible. This is why many countries have come to the conclusion that modern societies have to find a way to incorporate immigrants of diverse ethnic origins and social classes in order to ensure a peaceful coexistence.

Castles and Miller (246) argue that diverse strategies of coping with cultural diversity adopted by different nations have evolved out of their histories, the main distinction lying in the relationships between civic belonging and national identity. Great Britain, for example, which satisfied its initial imperial ambitions by conquering Wales, Scotland and Ireland, developed into an empire which required political loyalty from its subjects, but would allow them to maintain their ethnic or religious identities (Castles and Miller 246). The incorporation of immigrants was a prerequisite for the success of the early white settler societies in the new world and formed part of their national myths. In their beginnings, the US and Canada depended heavily on a steady influx of immigrants from European countries. They welcomed them with open arms and required them to assimilate, i.e., to adapt to the established way of life and acquire the same values so that the newcomers could blend in effortlessly (Castles and Miller 247). However, soon immigrants from all over the world started to arrive and their different physical appearance as well as increasingly distinct cultural backgrounds made assimilation difficult. Due to discrimination, they found themselves in disadvantaged work situations and members of the same ethnic minorities started to settle in the same neighbourhoods both due to financial reasons and the wish to live close to each other. Hence, tightly-knit ethnic communities started to emerge and ghettoization progressed (Castles and Miller 247). The principle that giving new arrivals a feeling of civic belonging would result in them automatically identifying with national values sooner or later no longer seemed to apply and new policies were required in order to facilitate the incorporation of new immigrants (Castles and Miller 247). In the face of rising

social problems, different countries adopted different policies. The so-called 'melting pot' model in the US accepted life in the bosom of one's own ethnic community only as an interim solution on the way to complete 'Americanization', whereas the multiculturalist approach adopted in Canada acknowledged the continued existence of ethnic identities as long as certain national key values were accepted and civic participation in all societal spheres was ensured (Castles and Miller 246-7). While incorporation into US society and the realization of the American dream remained the responsibility of the immigrant, multiculturalism became a public policy in Canada, meaning that the state would interfere in order to ensure the equality of the minorities (Castles and Miller 248-9).

## 2.2 Culture, Identity and Migration

Some basic theoretical knowledge about culture and identity is a prerequisite for discussing the issue of migration and its effects on society as a whole and the individuals undergoing it. Therefore, this subchapter deals with conceptions of culture and how they have changed over time. Similarly, it aims at unveiling how identity formation processes have been altered by globalization in general and, more specifically, how they are affected by an individual's migration from one country to another.

### 2.2.1 Conceptions of Culture over Time

Back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Herder (qtd. in Gross 46) defined cultures as “islands or spheres of inner homogeneity”. However, globalization has had a strong impact on cultures and the way they are perceived. As people and goods flow freely on the global market, and nations and their cultures are no longer separated from each other by clear-cut boundaries, a conception of culture as “an unproblematic, integrated pattern of common values” (Featherstone 89) seems to have lost its relevance. Consequently, multiculturalism and interculturalism became popular which acknowledged the increased interdependence of different cultures, but still held on to the essentialist idea of cultures as separable entities (Damböck 73). In order to do justice to the dynamics of modern society, a more processual understanding of culture became necessary. According to Damböck (73), ‘transculturalism’ meets this requirement by encouraging people to “think outside the box of one’s motherland’ and to find common values extending beyond national and cultural boundaries (Slimbach 206, 211).

Jones (145-6) stressed culture’s potential for change by defining it as „an intricate assortment of the enduring and the novel“. According to this author, cultural change is spawned by choices of community members which counter custom (Jones 261). Consequently, frequent exchange across different cultural groups is prone to foster change within cultures. Therefore, the process of globalization, which has caused national boundaries to become increasingly permeable, has undoubtedly had a strong impact on culture. The extent and direction of that impact have been fiercely contested, and scholars have predicted effects ranging from complete uniformization to increased diversity.

Nowadays many scholars seem to agree that cultural uniformity has become a myth, unattainable in modern societies (Featherstone and Lash 1; Welsch 203; Rosaldo xv). They

believe that the world moving closer together has not and will not result in a uniform global culture and find diverse explanations for this. Featherstone and Lash (1) argue that globalization has resulted in the emergence of new spaces for cultural encounter. While cultural diversity is no longer manifest strongest in the different national cultures, new diversity has developed within these due to transcultural reciprocity. Chambers (81) goes as far as to say that nowadays there is no such thing as a pure, uncontaminated national culture. In fact, the awareness that “cultural differences once maintained between societies now exist within them” has been strengthened by a steady flow of migrants from the colonies to the metropolitan centres in the post-war period, forming visible minorities (Featherstone 119). In modern society, groups which share sets of practices, bodies of knowledge, conventions and lifestyles have emerged reaching beyond national borders (Featherstone 114). Their communities are rooted in aspects as diverse as ethnicity, religion, musical preference, etc. (Merolla and Ponzanesi 3). In this context, Welsch (203) speaks of transcultural networks, rather than cultures or subcultures, in order to emphasize the dynamic nature of culture and the high degree of cultural interweaving. He explains that transcultural networks form on the basis of diverse kinds of identification markers which evoke a sense of belonging in individuals. These networks vary in their inventory as well as in their structure, for even the same elements combined in a different fashion result in a different outcome. Due to these processes, so Welsch (203), “a high degree of cultural manifoldness results.” Löschnigg and Löschnigg (10) argue that these developments have made conceptions of identity more flexible and relative, both on an individual and a communal scale.

Gross (46) goes as far as to say that due to globalization today all cultures have become essentially transcultural. Many other scholars express similar views, yet terminology changes from author to author (Rosaldo; Chambers). Rosaldo (xv), for example, speaks of hybridity rather than transculturality in this context and claims it to be an “ongoing condition of all human cultures”. The term ‘hybridity’ was introduced into postcolonial studies by Homi Bhabha in connection with the new transcultural networks emerging due to the cohabitation of indigenous people and Westerners in the colonies (Wisker 189). However, the term hybridity has been highly controversial due to its origin in horticulture, where it denominates the result of cross-breeding of different species. In order to explain the essence of the term, Bhabha repeatedly stresses that what is important is the birth of something new rather than

the fact that it can be traced back to two original moments (Rutherford 211). In other words, as Minh-ha (19) described it so accurately, hybridization in terms of culture means more than just adding a here to a there, its major contribution being the discovery of an “elsewhere-within-here/-there”.

From a postcolonial perspective, the idea that all cultures undergo transculturation is significant for two reasons. On the one hand, it “denies the essentialism of a prior given originary culture” (Rutherford 211). On the other hand, it implies that cross-cultural encounter triggered by imperialist practice affected the cultures of both the former colonizers and the colonized (Merolla and Ponzanesi 6). Therefore, the understanding of culture as continually subject to change, as inherently transcultural or hybrid, fosters counter-hegemonic discourse as it requires thinking beyond the old binaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and supports the creation of ‘in-between’ spaces of transgression and subversion (Merolla and Ponzanesi 6-7).

### **2.2.2 Identity in a Globalized World**

As the selected short stories deal with the fates of individuals, it seems advisable to shed light on the effects globalization has had on the conception of identity.

Stuart Hall (“Minimal Selves” 115) describes the link between culture and identity as follows: “Identity is formed at the unstable point where the ‘unspeakable’ stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history of a culture”. This understanding of identity formation implies that there are two major constituents of identity, namely a sort of collective cultural identity based on the shared history and ancestry of a group of people serving as a rather stable frame of reference and distinct features in which an individual differentiates him/herself from the collective (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 223-225). The individual component of identity is more dynamic as it depends on both a person’s past experience and the way that person positions him- or herself in the present, which s/he might want to alter at times (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 225).

The principle underlying the collective constituent of identity is that individuals are shaped by the people around them and the communities they form part of (Thompson 53). While this idea seems easily comprehensible, it needs to be considered also that many scholars do not regard culture as a set of qualities inherent in a group of people, but rather a construction that becomes relevant only in the context of a relationship between at least



two groups (Jameson qtd. in Bennett 2). Therefore, a sense of belonging to one group and, at the same time, the awareness of not belonging to another are major constituents of one's identity (Minh-ha 18). The nation state and the idea of a uniform national culture have always served as an important category to help people make sense of the world and for many people they still fulfil that function. These people often perceive the increased cross-cultural exchange conditioned by globalization and the blurring of national culture it entails as a threat. A common reaction to the impending cultural disorder is the affirmation of the imaginary boundaries drawn between the self and the other by turning to ethnicity, traditionalism and even fundamentalism (Featherstone 91). Nevertheless, it can be said that national culture has weakened as an identificatory anchor over the past decades and individuals increasingly seek affiliation to subcultures or transcultural networks formed on the grounds of social status, ethnicity, religious beliefs and many other factors (Chambers 3; Damböck 75). It has become common for people to feel a sense of belonging to several groups simultaneously. As a result, many scholars have reverted to conceptualizing identity not in singular, but in plural terms (Bammer 151). Teresa de Lauretis (qtd. in Thompson 51) proposes that individuals perform the different components of their identity as "part of a continuing narrative of identification" rather than them being fixed, static parts of their personality. Agnew (12) summarizes this discussion concisely by stating that "[i]dentities are socially constructed, contingent on time, place, and social context, and are therefore fluid and unstable." In other words, the way individuals position themselves in the world gains more and more importance and gradually supersedes the collective cultural identity as a central component in identity formation.

A term which has become popular in connection with questions of identity in the face of the unsettledness of people in our time is that of 'migrancy'. Merolla and Ponzanesi (3) describe migrancy as a new place of dwelling because "[i]dentity [...] transcends national boundaries and becomes deterritorialized" (Agnew 5). Many theorists consider migrancy to be a universal phenomenon which is not restricted to people who have actually undergone migration (Bammer 151; Chambers 14; Rushdie 12). Bammer (151) goes as far as to call migrancy "the human condition of our times". Salman Rushdie's famous quote (12) "The Past is a country from which we have all migrated, its loss is part of our common humanity" indicates a similar point of view. Chambers (14) describes the exposedness to multiple worlds as an overwhelming experience and suggests that individuals cope by making sense

of the world on a local level rather than seeking universally valid explanations. The author claims that this results in the dissolution of binaries such as 'us' and 'them' or 'the First' and 'the Third world' (Chambers 14).

### 2.2.3 Migration and Identity

Even though migrancy is considered a universal phenomenon, migrants do hold a special position when it comes to identity formation. As they intersect metaphoric as well as real-life boundaries (Martin Löschnigg 111), their identities are subject to complex transformations. They try to find their way between "[w]ho [they] expect to be, who they are allowed to be, and who [...] they choose to be" (Hawley qtd. in Agnew 5). Of these three components, the last one is the only one essentially based on individual preference. A migrant's expectations of incorporation in the receiving society are usually heavily influenced by other members of his/her ethnocultural minority in the receiving country. Simultaneously, the extent to which their acculturation is permitted and fostered depends strongly on the larger society's attitudes and behaviour towards that specific group of immigrants.

Therefore, John W. Berry (704-5) designed a model of acculturation which distinguishes four strategies for each perspective, the respective ethnocultural group's and the larger society's. There are two decisive elements for each perspective, namely the group's attitudes and intentions and its actual behaviour. The attitude dimension testifies to the "relative preference for maintaining one's heritage culture and identity", while the behaviour dimension expresses the "relative preference for [...] participating in the larger society". Berry's model is illustrated in figure 1 below:

ISSUE 1:  
MAINTENANCE OF HERITAGE CULTURE AND IDENTITY

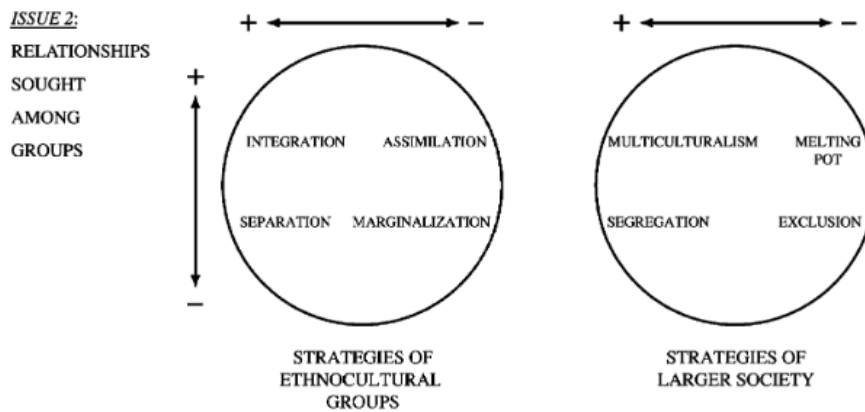


Fig. 1. Acculturation Strategies by John W. Berry (705)

As represented above, the acculturation strategies of immigrants or their respective ethnocultural groups comprise integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization (Berry 705). The terms integration and separation both refer to situations in which the immigrant intends to maintain his/her original culture and identity. They differ in the intensity of contact maintained with the larger society. Thus, integration means participating actively in the dealings of the larger society, while separation means the exact opposite. In turn, assimilation and marginalization are only possible if the immigrant is willing to renounce his/her cultural heritage to a certain extent. If simultaneously an active engagement in the larger society is pursued, Berry speaks of assimilation. If that is not the case, marginalization is the chosen acculturation strategy. According to the same criteria, Berry also defined strategies for describing the approaches followed by the larger society. Probably the two most notorious ones are multiculturalism and the melting pot, given that they are the strategies openly pursued with Canadian and US immigration policy respectively. Both foster an active interdependence between the larger society and immigrant groups. However, while multiculturalism openly approves of immigrants keeping their cultural heritage alive and sticking to their ethnic identities, the melting pot model requires immigrants to adapt to the predominant national culture. Segregation is the equivalent of separation viewed from the larger society's perspective and exclusion corresponds to marginalization.

In general, it can be assumed that individuals who acknowledge the transcultural nature of all cultures (Welsch 201) have less difficulty in accepting their own foreignness when living

abroad and, thus, experience less pressure to adapt to the predominant culture in the receiving society. This is fortunate as denying one's roots is an undertaking prone to result in frustration and exasperation. On the one hand, it usually entails the loss of one's community, history and cultural identity. On the other hand, denying one's origins cannot possibly be successful as migrants arrive at their destinations already being someone. That is to say, their culture of origin as well as their personal past experiences have left their indelible mark on them. In other words, every migrant is prone to carry luggage of some kind, be it spiritual, linguistic or material. This luggage might either hinder or foster self-discovery and the development of a sense of belonging to the new home (George 173). When an assortment of new impressions and experiences act upon individuals after migration and incite them to question their fundamental beliefs, their origins inevitably become subject to reinterpretation (Chambers 24). Additionally, merging into the receiving society can be impeded by aspects which are out of the migrant's control. Migrants can only be what society allows them to be. It is often their physical appearance which puts them in a marginalized position. In response to this rejection, migrants often turn to increased traditionalism and hold on to their home culture and language frantically (Minh-ha 14). Migrants originating from a colonial context find themselves in an especially vulnerable position as they are often confronted with racism and preconceived ideas about 'the colonized' on top of everything else (Bald 70). Additionally, they have often been indoctrinated with distorted ideas concerning their own past by the respective colonial power (Fanon 154). In this respect, Hall ("Cultural Identity" 225-6) argues that "[t]hey had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as 'Other'". This is the reason why former colonial subjects have often come to idealize the oppressor's culture and reject their own (George 192). In consequence, migrants originating from former colonies find themselves especially confused as the firmly established differences between the self and the other become even more blurred through migration (Kristeva qtd. in Bammer 151).

As mentioned before, a decisive moment in a migrant's identity transformation is his/her choice of identification. The main difficulty with making this choice lies in balancing the desire to become an acknowledged member of the newly adopted home society, participating actively and helping to fashion the social, economic and political life there, and the reluctance to let go of the customs and traditions of the homeland (Agnew 14). According to Rushdie (12), migrants experience the loss of their own past selves more

intensely than other people do as migration is often “highly charged with the legacy of the past and promises of the future” (Merolla and Ponzanesi 3). In reality, neither extreme is a real option for migrants as total assimilation as well as a return to their past are impossible. The journey they undertook can never be reversed for it has effected changes in an individual’s psyche which cannot be undone. Radhakrishnan (123) describes the dilemma as follows: „The home country is not ‘real’ in its own terms and yet is real enough to impede [assimilation], and the ‘present home’ is materially real and yet not real enough to feel authentic.“ As a result, migrants need to accommodate themselves in the in-between and find the position they are most comfortable with. Wisker (29) argues that the best coping strategy is to accept that it is the fate of all diasporics to live life in a never-ending dialogue between their adoptive homeland and the cultures they came from. Once migrants have accepted their transculturality, they also adopt a different sense of home, realizing that “homes are always provisional”, as Edward Said (185) states in his *Reflections on Exile*. Consequently, truly transcultural beings come to feel at home in “encounters, dialogues and clashes with other histories, other places, other people” (Chambers 4). Damböck (76-7) introduced the term ‘transmigration’ in connection with consciously transcultural migrants who no longer take refuge in a collective identity, but rather seek self-fulfilment in the realization of their goals independent of place and community. The author clarifies that “[f]or them, migration is understood as an opportunity and consequently not limited to one journey of departure and arrival but to the option of a global existence, transgressing distances and borders” (Damböck 83). Thus, they construct their identities around a cosmopolitan concept of society.

## 2.3 Writing migration

This subchapter serves to review the theory on the genre discussed in this thesis. It starts out with an attempt to define and name the genre that the short stories discussed belong to. Subsequently, the most important issues the genre deals with as well as literary techniques commonly used in it are thematised.

### 2.3.1 Migrant Literature

Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin (*The Empire Writes Back* 2) define postcolonialism as dealing with “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day”. However, it has been established by postcolonial critics that the postcolonial concept is more than just a temporal one (Hall, “When was the post-colonial” 247). Postcolonialism is deemed a critical concept which refers to an increasing awareness that “it is not feasible to subtract a culture, a history, a language, an identity, from the wider, transforming currents of the increasingly metropolitan world” (Chambers 74). By refraining from attempts of holistic explanations of the world, the postcolonial perspective takes account of the increasingly complex networks of cultural interaction and paints a differentiated picture of reality moving away from ethnocentrism (Bhabha 173; Chambers 74).

Literature plays an important role in establishing post-colonial discourse as it generally serves the purpose of reflecting upon the world through projections of ‘the self’ and ‘the other’. Accordingly, postcolonial literature seeks to rewrite the grand nation-centered narratives of the former imperial powers from the perspective of the suppressed (Friedman 242-3). Writings were originally considered postcolonial if they had their origins in the colonial experience or dealt with the tensions arising from that experience (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* 2). However, the term ‘postcolonial literature’ has long been set in a wider context, thus including all kinds of writings touching upon issues of cross-cultural encounter and diversity, the power relations underlying cultural production and migrancy, regardless of their direct link to European imperialism (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* 201). The overall aim of postcolonial literature is to “refashion traditional definitions of literary canons, identities, and genres” (Merolla and Ponzanesi 1). In her book *The Politics of Home*, Rosemary Marangoly George (172) claims that postcolonial discourse is propelled almost exclusively by writers and academics originating from the

former colonies, who often live and work in the West cooperating with Western publishing houses.

Literature written by people who migrated themselves or by their descendants has been subsumed under various genre denominations, among them the terms 'ethnic', 'exile' and 'diaspora literature'. As Bruner and Weisser (qtd. in Davis, *Transcultural Reinventions* 19) argue, "genre is a way of characterizing a text in terms of certain formal and content properties, but it is also a way of characterizing how a reader or listener takes a text, whatever its actual content and its formal characteristics may be". Therefore, the name given to a certain genre matters in so far as it is prone to influence reception. This is why the practice of labelling literature by certain authors as 'ethnic' has been criticised as the term carries connotations of otherness and exoticism. The term 'exile', on the other hand, carries negative connotations as it is used primarily with reference to forced migration (Nkosi 209). Consequently, it would be the wrong word to use in connection with the selected short stories, which comprise the tales of more or less voluntary migrants. Similarly, the term 'diaspora' originally denoted the migration of a whole people as a traumatising calamity (Cohen 1). Even though the meaning has been extended to include all kinds of expatriates regardless of their collective histories and their relationship to the homeland, the term still does not seem to be the right choice for the purposes of this study (Cohen 1). Denominations which seem more adequate to denote the type of literature analysed in the framework of this thesis are 'migrant literature' and 'transcultural literature'. While the term migrant literature is rather straightforward, the name transcultural literature requires some clarification. Janice Kulyk Keefer used it to describe literary works which "assert, explore, or allude to their creators' liminal position between two or more different countries, communities, cultures" (Keefer qtd. in Dagnino 3). Some authors might consider the term 'migrant literature' as problematic given that naming a genre after its authorship, a group of people often discriminated against in Western societies, might block proper reflection on the text (Lejeune qtd. in McNeill ix). Moreover, there are critics who argue that transcultural authors and their work originating in the contact zones of cross-cultural encounter reflect modern society much more accurately than the traditional literary canon and should therefore supersede it (Merolla and Ponzanesi 4; Bhabha 12). Consequently, they consider the existence of a category labelled 'ethnic' or 'migrant literature' as redundant. Nevertheless, it is the migrant's point of view that I am interested in for this analysis and,

therefore, I will subsequently use both terms interchangeably. Occasionally, the term 'literatures of migration' will be used as synonym.

The migrant experience as an often painful experience which causes an individual to embark on the search for a new identity has been considered a motor of creativity. The connection between migration and literature has been thematized by Lutz (29), who argues that "[m]igration separates people from the empirical contexts of their foundation narratives". Writing in order to realign the language and stories of the past with the author's new reality seems to be an effective trick for migrants to deal with their situation. Georg Lukács (qtd. in Said 181) views this in a slightly different way as he claims that creating new worlds and identities helps diasporics to recompense for the losses they incurred through migration. It has been argued that writing enables authors to reflect on their own experience by fictionalizing it and laying bare the processes involved in the formation of migrant identities (Chambers 10; Martin Löschnigg 111). Creating a story allows them to unfold different scenarios and as such facilitates the negotiation of a new identity (Löschnigg and Löschnigg 10). Furthermore, some literary texts on migration are full of references to the migrant author's former home. When recreating their homes in writing, migrant authors need to be especially careful as 'home' is an emotionally charged term which bears invaluable memories of the past. The same holds true for the readers who might feel tempted to regard the migrants' accounts of their homeland as authentic and truthful. In reality, however, the home that migrants project their nostalgia on ceases to exist the moment they leave (Hall, "Minimal Selves" 115). Therefore, what we often find in migrant writing are fictitious, imaginary homelands, the memories of which exist only in form of fragments and distinctive instances (Rushdie 10).

Nevertheless, migrant authors are "uniquely placed to negotiate a dialogue between their countries and cultures of origin" (Wisker 30). They paint manifold pictures of life between two cultures ranging from feeling lost and not belonging to any of the worlds to having grown to become a unique mixture of the two incorporating the best each of them has to offer. By doing so, they simultaneously represent, perform and interpret their situation in society (Hirsch and Smith qtd. in Agnew 7), thus getting readers to question what is considered as 'normal' or 'ordinary' in their daily existence. Migrant literature offers new angles on old issues and this is the reason why it is so valuable both as a source of information on the processes of migration going on in the world and as a reflection on their



effects on society. Narratives, life writings and autobiographies can achieve something that pure statistics cannot by giving the readers access to very specific and personal accounts of the migration experience. They make things personal and tangible.

### 2.3.2 Narratives of Migration

Boundaries and their transgression have always played an important part in literature, functioning as points of departure for plot developments (Lotman 332; King, Connell and White x). Such boundaries can be of various natures: geographical, political, social and/or sexual. Naturally, narratives of migration are based primarily on the crossing of geographical boundaries. However, often also other frontiers are transgressed in the process. The different kinds of boundaries share an important characteristic, namely that they have an inherent potential of ambivalence, given that they can function as an instance of separation as well as a point of contact simultaneously (Alexander and Helff 327). In migrant fiction, texts “in which the politics and experience of location (or rather of “dislocation”) are the central narratives” (George 171) play a major role. King, Connell and White include a striking summary of what the migration narrative entails in the preface to their book *Writing across Worlds*:

The migrant voice tells us what it is like to feel a stranger and yet at home, to live simultaneously inside and outside one’s immediate situation, to be permanently on the run, to think of returning but to realize at the same time the impossibility of doing so, since the past is not only another country but also another time, out of the present. It tells us what it is like to traverse borders like the Rio Grande or ‘Fortress Europe’, and by doing so suddenly became [sic] an illegal person, an ‘other’; it tells us what it is like to live on a frontier that cuts through your language, your religion, your culture. It tells of long-distance journeys and relocations, of losses, changes, conflicts, powerlessness, and of infinite sadnesses that severely test the migrant’s emotional resolve. It tells of new visions and experiences of the familiar and unfamiliar. (xv)

From this description, it becomes clear that ambivalence is an ever-present feature of the literatures of migration. Positive and negative attitudes and emotions frequently take turns and overlap in the process of self-definition that is triggered in the migrant due to his/her dwelling in the in-between where cultures clash or rather fuse to let something new evolve (Davis, *Transcultural Reinventions* 1).

This ambivalence is also reflected in the great diversity of topics prevailing in the literatures of migration. Depending on the migrant authors’ choice of narrative, certain topics and

themes are more dominant. Gadpaille (162) has identified two basic types of narratives in transcultural literature, namely the 'narrative of origin' and the 'narrative of arrival'. The basic distinction between these narratives is "memory and the degree to which it governs identity constructions" (Damböck 78).

The so-called 'narratives of origin' focus primarily on the portrayal of the past as edenic and migration as a turning point in life and a "fall into reality" (Gadpaille 162). They have been attributed mainly to the early labour diasporas from the colonies, when incorporation of the migrant communities into the host societies was not yet an issue and communication with the homeland was barely possible (Damböck 78). These narratives are usually pervaded by a sense of displacement and alienation (King, Connell and White x). As their natural relationship between self and place has been unbalanced through migration, the migrant characters are portrayed as uprooted and lost. They have lost their home, meaning that temporarily they are denied the feeling of security and safety which a stable home entails (George 2). In the narratives of origin, nostalgia and memory play a major role. On the one hand, nostalgia entails the risk of getting stuck in comforting memories of a time when life was still easy and the migrant felt a strong sense of belonging to a group (George 184). On the other hand, nostalgic memory may advance the healing process, which helps individuals figure out their present selves despite the pain it causes (Agnew 10). From a literary critic's viewpoint, "[t]he distraction and/or comfort offered by these memories of other times and places makes the immigrant more multi-faceted a figure than does the equation that delivers a subject who is marginal and therefore yearns for assimilation into the mainstream" (George 184).

'Narratives of arrival' focus on showing the other side of the coin, i.e., the arrival and adaptation process of immigrants in their newly adopted homes (Gadpaille 162). This issue has become more important for migrants when they started to come to the West to stay rather than merely temporarily forming part of a foreign workforce with the intention to return home after a limited period of time (Damböck 78). Curtis and Pajaczkowska (199-203) refer to a similar origin-arrival binarism in connection with travel and migration. They define migration as "a passage through symbolic time" with the objective of finding a place of happiness in the future by recovering a memory of happiness from the past. Applying this concept of travel to Gadpaille's classification, we could say that narratives of origin emphasize past memory whereas narratives of arrival focus on the search for happiness in

the future. These narratives are usually characterised by “a detached reading of the experience of ‘homelessness’” (George 171). As the migrant slowly starts coming to terms with his/her new situation, s/he realizes that a longing for home is, in fact, always a longing to recreate a past which cannot possibly be restored (George 175). Following this realization, the concept of home loses significance and the migrant acknowledges that identity is not necessarily linked exclusively to a specific location (George 193). The realization that “one can be at home in foreign places” (George 196) entails that identity is linked to other instances than place. It is often the migrant’s “luggage”, i.e. seemingly meaning-drained objects which remind migrants of past events which helped form their identity, which replaces place as an anchor for memory and, thus, “tells the textured tale of who the immigrant is and where s/he belongs” (George 175-6).

Early migrant literatures focused almost exclusively on the narratives of origin. They were essentially nostalgic portrayals of the migrants’ homelands (King, Connell and White xi-xii). As such, they failed to be promoted by the big publishing houses because they were considered backward-oriented and of no interest to a Western audience. Meanwhile, many migrant writers have recognized the need to look ahead rather than back and consequently narratives of arrival have continually gained importance, a development which has also been acknowledged by literary critics. Radhakrishnan (121) describes the typical narrative of arrival in the United States as follows: At the beginning, immigrants strive for complete assimilation and, thus, tend to hide their ethnicity to ensure social and economic success in the US. Usually, a phase when immigrants start feeling more confident as viable members of society and start to acknowledge the injustice of their having to deny their ethnic origins to ensure professional success and stability follows. Consequently, they decide to reassert their ethnic identity and carry it proudly into the world. Finally, a process of integration of ethnic identity with national identity sets in, which, at least in the US, usually results in immigrants accepting their state as ethnic minority American citizens. This allows them to feel a sense of belonging to both their ethnic and their national identity at the same time. However, even this last step of integration does not guarantee a conflict-free existence.

Damböck (78-84) has discerned a third kind of narrative, the ‘narratives of transmigration’. They represent a shift from fiction dealing with collective identity constructions to individual accounts of migration, less focused on the struggles and hardships it entails. Instead, transmigration narratives depict migration as an opportunity which is not limited to a certain

place, but based on a cosmopolitan existence. Most importantly, these tales are characterized by the absence of trauma caused by migration. Moreover, the aim of transmigrant authors seems to be perfecting the art of storytelling rather than weaving their political agenda into their writings (Damböck 78-84).

To summarize, there are three narratives which prevail in migrant fiction: narratives of origin, narratives of arrival and narratives of transmigration. They differ primarily in the way the migratory experience is portrayed and allow conclusions as to the authors' attitudes towards migration. Therefore, discerning the narratives predominant in each author's work will be a central step in the literary analysis of the selected texts.

### 2.3.3 Narrative Technique in the Literatures of Migration

Migrant literature is more than just a report on migration. It is also an art form. Therefore, it is not enough to deal with content exclusively. It is also paramount to examine the textual strategies employed to deal with these themes for, as Davis (*Transcultural Reinventions* 1-2) argues, this is where most of the genre's merits lie. Therefore, selected features of the literatures of migration are summarized in the subsequent paragraphs.

I would like to commence discussing the **structural particularities** of the genre. Maria Löschnigg (135-6) summarizes them quite strikingly with the following sentence: "Histories of migration are frequently disruptive and fractured, resisting smooth linear chronologies and homogeneous localities". A sense of ambiguity and double consciousness often pervades the works of migrant authors (Maria Löschnigg 136) as their characters undergo the difficult and lengthy search for identity triggered by migration. This effect is enforced by the fact that memories, often fragmentary in their nature, play an important role in narratives of migration (Rushdie 11). As the balance which a migrant manages to establish between the former self and the new one tends to be a delicate one which is easily disturbed, every now and then, the reader gets the impression of experiencing a *déjà-vu*. In other words, narratives of migration usually show a strong tendency towards repetition and echoes (George 171). These are often realized in migrant literature by means of a multi-generational cast of immigrants portraying how each generation went through similar stages of adaptation to their new life (George 171).

Due to these structural requirements, the short story genre lends itself well to telling tales of migration. On the one hand, it is a relatively new form which evades categorization due to

the large variety of styles it comprises (Shaw 6). Its structural limitations require a balance between “brevity and intensity, richness and concision, suggestiveness and hard outline” (Chatterjee 98). In order to manage this ambiguity, the narrative needs to skip readily from location to location, from the past to the present, from one psychological state to another, from character to character, therefore reflecting perfectly the fractured state of mind of the migrant. Awadalla and March-Russell (3) argue that short story authors tend to avoid lengthy descriptions of character and plot development. Instead, they attempt to make use of the limited space available by using distilled language, explaining complex issues through metaphor, symbolisms or comparison and contrast and, thus, “crystallizing meaning on a level other than plot” (Shaw 12, 154, 194).

However, it needs to be pointed out that the characteristics of the postcolonial short story diverge from those of the traditional short story according to Poe in several aspects. Poe (571) argues that it is the “unity of effect” which makes a literary piece powerful and a prerequisite for this unity is brevity. Accordingly, short story authors should concentrate on achieving “a certain unique or single effect” and they should not waste a single word on issues not linked with the intended effect (Poe 572). These requirements seem to have been interpreted less strictly by postcolonial authors and certain characteristics have been altered or neglected altogether in order to establish the genre of the postcolonial short story. On the one hand, postcolonial short story authors typically rely on a large cast of characters to create a large mosaic of life consisting of manifold small fragments, thus giving a voice also to minor figures (Awadalla and March-Russell 3, 7). Consequently, the short story genre is notorious as “a literary voice of marginalized groups” (Maria Löschnigg 136). This capacity for counter-discourse is enforced by the fact that the short story is a genre which was denied literary recognition for a long time due to its commerciality owed to it being published primarily in popular magazines (Awadalla and March-Russell 3). On the other hand, the postcolonial short story is a form heavily associated with the oral roots of folk culture (Awadalla and March-Russell 3). Accordingly, it involves literary techniques, such as pauses, hesitations and digressions, which create the illusion of oral speech. This helps establish a relationship of solidarity between the readers and the story teller, thus fostering the emotional involvement of the reader (Awadalla and March-Russell 2-3). This effect is enforced by many short stories making it hard to distinguish between narrators and characters (Shaw 115). Moreover, postcolonial short stories often imitate the cyclical

structure of oral narratives, digressing frequently from the main plot seemingly to let the reader know something the narrator just thought about and repeating certain parts of the tale to remind the reader of their importance (Davis, *Transcultural Reinventions* 13-14).

Rohinton Mistry's stories have been published as parts of a short story cycle. Therefore, it seems essential to mention a few particularities about this genre as well. Essentially, a short story cycle consists of a group of disparate stories, often about various different characters, connected usually through manifold connective patterns in a way which allows them to re-affirm their individuality while still clearly forming part of a larger unit (Chatterjee 98; Ingram 15; Maria Löschnigg 135-6; Davis, *Transcultural Reinventions* 11, 14). In this respect, clear parallels can be drawn between this genre and the experience of living abroad in terms of the tensions existing "between the assertion of the individual [...] and the whole of the community" (Maria Löschnigg 135-6). This is one of the reasons this particular literary form has been widely used for the representation of migration narratives. "Stories assume different shapes in the company of other stories", as Henighan (qtd. in Maria Löschnigg 137) phrased it so eloquently. Consequently, in the short story cycle, meaning is created on two different levels (Maria Löschnigg 137), requiring the reader to modify his/her interpretation from story to story and, thus, being actively involved in the meaning-making process (Ingram 13; Davis, *Transcultural Reinventions* 11, 18). To ensure unity, there is usually one or several underlying coherence principles, be it a specific character, a certain place or a thematic one (Maria Löschnigg 137). Nevertheless, the most important feature of this form is its fragmentation, which makes it ideal for representing the fragmented and dynamic personalities of migrants (Chatterjee 98). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that a characteristic many short story cycles have in common is the thematization of the act of storytelling or writing (Davis, *Transcultural Reinventions* 13). This helps establish rapport between the teller of the tale and his audience and to get the reader to be more invested emotionally into the story.

It has been argued that the popularity of the short story cycle among migrant writers and their readiness to adapt it to their uses is a sign of a new confidence of minority groups in a society which is becoming ever more transcultural (Davis, *Transcultural Reinventions* 9). The shorty story cycle, itself a hybrid form, (Davis, *Transcultural Reinventions* 18) seems to be well suited to reflect societal hybridity and, thus, allows for "a more accurate representation of modern sensibility" (Lynch qtd. in Davis, *Transcultural Reinventions* 6).

Subsequently, I would like to turn to selected specific features of migrant literature in terms of **language and style** as identified by various authors.

First of all, I would like to discuss the common occurrence of so-called 'metonymic gaps'. 'Metonymic gaps' occur when words or phrases in a foreign language are inserted into English language texts or when concepts are mentioned which do not form part of the reader's culture. These instances thus hinder understanding of a text or impede it altogether. The reason why migrant writers use metonymic gaps is rooted in a mismatch between the migrant's language and his/her surroundings, as the native language may be inadequate for describing his/her new surroundings and/or the English language may lack terms for speaking about his/her culture of origin. To overcome this problem, migrant writers commonly insert unknown words or whole phrases or passages in their first language into English language works (Ashcroft 75). As mentioned before, metonymic gaps can also be caused by the use of concepts, allusions and references which may be unknown to the readers due to their cultural imprints. These instances are used synecdochically for the different writers' cultures and, thus, serve them to emphasize their otherness. Metonymic gaps in literature by authors who do not write in their first language fulfil several functions. On the one hand, they impede understanding on the part of the reader, thus inverting the power relations between the two cultures and empowering the writer as a former colonial subject (Ashcroft 75). On the other hand, they require the reader to get actively engaged with another culture and its norms (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* 65), when trying to and often succeeding in inducing the meaning of certain words in the foreign language or concepts proper to another culture from context.

In order to comprehend the importance of language in the postcolonial struggle, one needs to understand that it used to be a potent instrument of oppression during colonialism (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The postcolonial studies reader* 283) and, in part, still is today as it aids the marginalization of immigrants by excluding them from the codes of the receiving country (Gadpaille 163). Therefore, the choice of language in a postcolonial context is to be equated with a choice of identity and, thus, becomes a political statement (During 125-6; Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The postcolonial studies reader* 283). Durham and Fernandez (195) argue that the frequent use of metonymy in postcolonial texts is rooted in its being a highly individualised literary device which can be adapted to the author's particular experience and circumstance. Understanding metonymy does not necessarily

depend on the writer and reader sharing a common culture. Therefore, metonymy is a literary device most suitable for challenging established conventions; something postcolonial literature sets out to do (Durham and Fernandez 198).

Given the migrant writer's lack of symbolic capital, it is common for them to focus on the literal and material realities of daily life in their work (Cooper 2). That is to say, they tend to draw on tangible objects rather than abstract concepts to construct their metonymies. Cooper (7) argues that, in fact, the marginalization of migrants is often caused mainly by their lack of understanding of everyday life in their adopted land and their reluctance to integrate foreign everyday objects into their routine as they underestimate the power linked to them. In other words, "[t]he massive weight of little events, small solid possessions and apparently insignificant happenings, are what embed one in one's time and place. [...] [t]his is the fabric that comprises social lives and identities" (Cooper 7). Therefore, so-called boundary objects, objects from one culture being adapted to use in another culture, play a major role for migrants in the confusing process of re-negotiating their identity after migration (Bowker and Star qtd. in Cooper 8). They remind migrants of their origins and, at the same time, have the power to help people accommodate to their new hybrid identities if integrated well into their new surroundings (Cooper 8). In this respect, George (171) stresses the importance of luggage in the literature of migration.

Another characteristic of migrant fiction is a strong presence of comparison and contrast, manifest primarily in the construction of place in terms of binaries and oppositions (Robertson, Mash and Tickner 2). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (*The postcolonial studies reader* 391) explain that, viewed from a postcolonial perspective, the term 'place' denotes not merely a landscape but rather a "complex interaction of language, history and environment". Places abound with cultural meaning (Neumann 95). However, the way these meanings are interpreted depends very much on the respective observer's worldview. Accordingly, the mention of a place in a literary piece evokes different reactions by the reader depending on the connotations a place has for the respective audience. Similarly, descriptions of place are never mere inventories of external realities but rather interpretations marked by the observer's background, potentially intended to either confirm or alter the reader's attitude towards it (Hargreaves 90). This is why migrant writers frequently compare and contrast representations of place and landscape symbolisms in their



stories, thereby offering the reader glimpses of their own attitude towards the cultures and places in question.

This comparison of the different places that play a role in the author's life is often enforced by a juxtaposition of characters inhabiting these places. This is why stories of migration often feature an extensive cast of characters. Characters, with their distinctive features and personality traits, can serve to emphasise the opposition between different cultures. However, they can also be used to illustrate diversity within one and the same culture and/or community. Another possible reason for migrant literature featuring numerous characters is its focus on communities and family relationships (King, Connell and White x). As discussed earlier in this thesis, national identity is losing importance and is widely replaced by other identification markers today, due to globalization. Accordingly, it is common for migrants, who often find it difficult to be accepted by the majority, to seek refuge in tightly-knit family groups or ethnic communities (George 179). An extensive and multigenerational cast serves the purpose of "straddling several times, spaces and languages at every point in the narrative" (George 178). Additionally, it helps reinforce the basic conflict inherent in any immigrant story, namely the tornness between here and there, between the present and the past. Usually, the older generations have more vivid memories of their past and, thus, tend to feel more nostalgic about their country of origin. The younger generations, in turn, are more familiar with the way of life of the adopted land. To make a peaceful coexistence possible, both sides need to be understanding for each generation having different starting points and diverging experiences. As Radhakrishnan (123) puts it: "The older generation cannot afford to invoke India in an authoritarian mode to resolve problems in the diaspora, and the younger generation would be ill-advised to indulge in a spree of forgetfulness about „where they have come from”.

Summing up, one could argue that the textual particularities of the literatures of migration described in this subchapter can be attributed to the migrant authors' state of displacement and the various effects this has on their psyche.

### 3 The Migratory Experience in Rohinton Mistry's Work

#### 3.1 The Author and the Selected Works

Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay, India, in 1952. He migrated to Canada after graduating from the University of Bombay in 1975 (Morey xii). He settled in Toronto, where he worked as a bank clerk and studied English and Philosophy part-time (British Council). Mistry's career as a writer started in 1983 when his first short story "One Sunday" won the Canadian Hart House Literary Contest (Morey xii). Other awards followed and, due to his early success as an author, Mistry was given a Canada Council grant which allowed him to leave his job at the bank to become a full-time writer (Morey xii; British Council). Since then he has published a considerable number of short stories and three successful novels, all of them set in India at different points in its history and featuring Parsi protagonists.

His short story cycle *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is said to unite some of his best early writings (British Council). As the name suggests, Firozsha Baag, a Parsi housing colony in Bombay, is the main connective pattern involved in the cycle. Therefore, all the stories included are linked to the place itself or one of its inhabitants. Since Firozsha Baag houses primarily middle-class Parsis, a strong presence of Western influence can be felt in most of the stories. Besides, not all the stories are set in the *baag*, some of them are centred partly or in their entirety in Canada, where former inhabitants of the colony or acquaintances of theirs moved to in order to find economic and professional success abroad. Therefore, the reader gets the impression that in Mistry's story world borders are rather permeable. As Morey (19) puts it, "there is a pervasive sense of an art springing not from one culture alone, but from the tension between overlapping cultures and contexts".

No doubt, this focus on cross-cultural encounter in Mistry's work is at least partly due to his own life experience. Having lived both as a member of a minority group in India and as an immigrant in Canada, the author knows perfectly well what it means to be living in between different cultures. Therefore, he seems well equipped to write about issues such as nostalgia, alienation and multiple identities. In fact, Mistry himself voiced his conviction in one of his early interviews that "[w]riters write best about what they know. In the broad sense, as a processing of everything one hears or witnesses, all fiction is autobiographical - imagination ground through the mill of memory. It's impossible to separate the two ingredients" (Lambert 6). Accordingly, a large proportion of his work, *Tales from Firozsha*

*Baag* in particular, deals with the topics mentioned in one or the other way and, thus, has been classified as postcolonial literature.

From his oeuvre, the following three short stories were selected for further analysis due to their emphasis on cross-cultural encounter through migration and its consequences: "Squatter", "Lend Me Your Light" and "Swimming Lessons". All three narratives treat the topic of migration in different ways. While "Squatter" is the story of Sarosh's 'failed' migration to Canada, "Lend Me Your Light" portrays the identity crisis caused by migration from Kersi's point of view, comparing his own personal development to his brother Percy's and to his friend Jamshed's. The third text, "Swimming Lessons", deals with life in multicultural Canada by portraying the variety of people living in a block of flats. It relates the story of Kersi's attempt at learning to swim and his failure. Since the stories form part of a short story cycle, their sequence is meaningful as it affects reception. This is why the three stories are analysed in the order in which they appear in the book.

## 3.2 Prevailing Themes and Topics

This subchapter aims at identifying the predominant themes and topics in Mistry's work in order to set the basis for subsequent enquiries concerning his views on identity, culture and migration.

### 3.2.1 Displacement and Alienation

One of the most prominent issues dealt with in Mistry's work is displacement and alienation. Displacement features in his stories in various ways, the most obvious being the fact that his protagonists Sarosh, Kersi and Jamshed emigrate from India to find economic success and happiness abroad. Their experience affects and changes these young people in very different ways, resulting in alienation and the loss of identity and, thus, forcing them to redefine who they are.

A common occurrence for migrants is that they become alienated from their family and friends back home as well as from their culture as they give in to an initial urge to assimilate to their receiving society (see chapter 2.2.3). They tend to have difficulty accepting the fact that in the binary opposition between us and them, they are viewed as forming part of the group being othered in their newly adopted home. This happens to Sarosh, who seems eager to give up everything which defined him before his departure for Canada to allow him to become Canadian. Similarly, Kersi does not write his parents very often and if he does he omits details about his new life. We know this because his father complains that "everything about his life is locked in silence and secrecy" (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 232). He answers his son's silence with silence on his part and chooses not to write either. Instead, he instructs his wife to remind their son of his roots and his Zoroastrian religion (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 236). This shows that the geographical and emotional distance eventually leads to mistrust and estrangement among family members and friends.

Kersi's silence might be rooted in him not wanting to admit to his parents that living abroad changes him or him simply feeling that they would not understand what he is going through for the experience of living abroad distinguishes him from them. As migrants often feel misunderstood by their friends and relatives back home, they turn to like-minded people who have been through a migratory experience themselves, hoping for support and solidarity. This is why people living in foreign countries often seek the company of other expatriates. In "Lend Me Your Light", the idea of the unifying power of a common diaspora

experience is thematised in the opening paragraph, when Kersi says the following about his difficult relationship with Jamshed: "As immigrants in North America, sharing this common experience should have salvaged something from our acquaintanceship" (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 173). Given the prominent position of this passage in the text, it can be concluded that Mistry himself ascribes great importance to this aspect of migration

Alienation plays a role in Mistry's short stories at many different levels. On a personal level, there are several characters who become alienated from others for manifold reasons at different stages of their life. On a more global scale, the community of Parsi expatriates in Canada is portrayed as alienated from both their host society and their fellow Indians back home in "Lend Me Your Light". On the one hand, they seem to try to hold on to their ancient customs by celebrating Parsi New Years and other traditional festivities. On the other hand, they are portrayed as alienated from their mother country, speaking of India like tourists without showing any signs of emotional involvement with it, conversing only about "the flights to and from India and the shopping that can be done in India for authentic Indian souvenirs to take back to Canada" (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 182-3). The expatriate Parsis seem to expect to be treated by their compatriots as fellow Indians. Yet, it becomes clear that they do differentiate between the Indian street vendors and themselves, when someone relates his experience on a Bombay market "God knows how, but they are able to smell your dollars before you even open your wallet. Then they try to fool you in the way they fool all the other tourists" (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 183). The speaker clearly others his fellow Indians and deliberately excludes himself from the group. There is a strong ambivalence in his wanting to be an Indian and being treated as such and, at the same time, feeling superior over lower-class Indians and othering them.

Moreover, displacement and alienation form part of Mistry's fiction in another way, which fits in perfectly with postcolonial thinking. His main characters are Parsis, a people with a history of displacement and alienation as they formed part of a deterritorialized diaspora when they first arrived in India and, subsequently, were strongly westernized as a result of the privileged position they held during colonial times. In other words, they were alienated from their own cultural heritage during colonialism and the repercussions of that are still felt today. This is reflected in Mistry's work among other things by Jamshed's attitude that in India "you can't buy any of the things you want, don't even get to see a decent English movie" (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 178). In the course of the story "Lend Me Your Light",

all three young protagonists look for ways out of their dilemma and they find different ways of coping with the situation, either by emigrating and trying their luck elsewhere or by attempting to change the Indian social situation. A further indicator of the alienation of the Parsis is the strong presence of Western status symbols in the short stories analysed, such as Nariman's Mercedes-Benz, which he guards like the apple of his eye, and his Clark Gable moustache, which imitates American idols and their look (Mistry, "Squatter" 145-6). Finally, a very strong statement concerning the alienation of Indians from their own cultural heritage caused by British colonial rule is made by means of the following internal monologue by Kersi:

What will I think of, old in this country, when I sit and watch the snow come down? For me, it is already too late for snowmen and snowball fights, and all I will have is thoughts about childhood thoughts and dreams, built around snowscapes and winter wonderlands on the Christmas cards so popular in Bombay; my snowmen and snowball fights and Christmas trees are in the pages of Enid Blyton's books, dispersed amidst the adventures of the Famous Five, and the Five Find-Outers, and the Secret Seven. My snowflakes are even less forgettable than the old man's, for they never melt. (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 244)

With this paragraph, the author hints at a common problem caused by colonialism, namely that education in the colonies was employed to promote the customs and values of the respective colonial powers. As a consequence, the colonized people often came to scorn their own cultural heritage, the repercussions of which have been severe. Furthermore, this passage refers to the immigrant's spatial separation from his/her childhood days.

Furthermore, the postcolonial rivalry between the centre and the periphery is also covertly thematised in "Squatter" by means of the opposition between India and Britain on the cricket field. The game Nariman talks about finally ends in a draw (Mistry, "Squatter" 149). This can be interpreted as an allusion to the two nations being equals, in accordance with a postcolonial world view.

Postcolonial criticism seems to pervade Mistry's work. It is especially strong in "Lend Me Your Light", when India's inferiority compared to the West is stressed repeatedly. The fact that Kersi sees his childhood home "one last time through dark glasses" (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 180) before his departure for Canada implies that his moving to the West will finally open his eyes and let him see things clearly. Also the following passage reflects the idea of superiority of the West over the East.

In just four months I would complete two years in Canada – long enough a separation, I supposed with a naïve pomposity, to have developed a lucidity of thought, which I would carry back with me and bring to bear on all of India's problems. (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 185-6)

Kersi's assumption that after two years in Canada he will return to India with the capacity of judging it from an 'objective' stance shows the reader that the protagonist has come to regard the West as superior to the East. Whether the foundation for this attitude was already set during his childhood days in Bombay due to his Anglocentric education or whether this is something he adopted during his stay in Canada is hard to tell. Nevertheless, the fact that Kersi assumes that living in Canada will help him see India more clearly hints at the presence of this kind of unbalanced thinking. And indeed, when he returns to India two years later, he does see his home country differently, namely in a much more negative light. He is suddenly overwhelmed by the noise and chaos he grew up in and struck by the poverty and the crude animality of his people (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 186-7). At the same time, Kersi seems to understand that he has to engage in the new situation properly in order to really experience India and to learn to love it again. In their totality, Kersi's attitudes and feelings can be interpreted as symptoms of the same "malady", namely the idealization of Western culture and the loss of respect for one's own roots.

Even though Kersi seems somehow conscious of the fact that he idealizes Canada and sees India from a Western point of view, he cannot help it. He realizes that his values and opinions have changed and tries to fight this change quite vigorously for he seems to be afraid of becoming as indifferent to India as his former friend Jamshed. Arriving at Firozsha Baag, the protagonist calms down as he realizes that "things were still roughly the same" (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 188) there. When all the neighbours inquire after him politely, he slowly starts to feel safe and at home again. When he returns to the city after this, he seems to feel much more at ease:

Serenely I stood and watched. The disappointment which had overcome me earlier began to ebb. All was fine and warm within this moment after sunset when the lanterns were lit, and I began to feel part of the crowds which were now flowing down Flora Fountain. (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 189)

In fact, one might say that Kersi experiences Bombay with a certain ambivalence when he returns there. At times he feels part of the crowd and at others he does not. As outlined in

chapter 2.3.2, it is common for a person living between two cultures to be ambivalent about belonging to either of the two.

### 3.2.2 Negotiating Cultural Difference

Since the three selected stories all involve one or more migrant characters, cultural difference and the way it is dealt with in cross-cultural encounters constitute another major theme. As mentioned in chapter 2.2.2, scholars argue that culture is a construction which is of relevance only in the presence of other cultures. This is probably the reason why cultural difference does play such an important role in the literatures of migration in general and in Mistry's work in particular. The stories analysed skip to and fro between Canada and India, thus creating a powerful contrast between the two realities which exist for the protagonists. As explained in chapter 2.3.3, it is the little details and events which form the essence of a culture. Rohinton Mistry manages to capture this essence most artfully, recreating the atmosphere of places by means of food and smells, everyday objects, nature and most importantly the sense of community prevailing there.

Places are important instruments for Mistry to represent distinct cultures. He relies on different aspects of everyday life in order to create the atmosphere of these places. In this respect, he seems especially fond of using food and smells in order to set the scene, obviously convinced of their power to lure the reader into another world. Accordingly, he uses the image of tea and scones being prepared to characterize a cricket game taking place in England and spices and the smell of frying fish“, crisp on the outside, yet tender and juicy inside” for Firozsha Baag (Mistry, "Squatter" 149, 151). In "Lend Me Your Light", he uses "a smell that is hard to forget, thick as swill, while the individual aromas of four hundred steaming lunches started to mingle" and contrasts it with the absence of nauseous odours in the car where Jamshed used to have his lunch (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 174). In general, it seems that the author associates pungent smells with India and more subtle scents or none at all with the West, which is portrayed as a much more sterile and impersonal place to be. This effect is enforced by the medicinal smell of the old man living in Kersi's apartment building in Toronto, which is symbolic for the sterility of the place and the aloofness of its inhabitants (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 254).

Allusions to the jungle and the tiger seem to fulfil a similar function, namely using stereotypes in order to create a sense of the place the characters move and live in. In



contrast, artificial objects such as the vacuum cleaner, the dishwasher or big, shiny cars stand for the West (Mistry, "Squatter" 155). Furthermore, the towels, lotions and magazines used by Kersi's Scottish neighbours are objects hinting at the superficiality of and the sexual liberties inherent in Western cultures (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 233). A detailed description of Kersi's swimming trunks made in Canada, which are portrayed as short and tight and as leaving little room for the imagination, sends a similar message (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 235). Female bathing garments seem to fulfil a similar function in the narrative. First, the protagonist Kersi is absolutely fascinated by his neighbours' habit of unfastening their bikini tops for the application of suntan lotion (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 232). Then, he is sent into trance by the sight of a fellow swimming student's pubic hair protruding from her pink Spandex V (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 238).

In "Swimming Lessons" cultural difference is emphasised by juxtaposing life in Firozsha Baag with life in Kersi's apartment building in Toronto. On the one hand, parallels are drawn between here and there, thus inviting the reader to compare and contrast. Both places are home to a community of people comprising similar characters, e.g. Kersi's grandfather and the nameless old man spending their time sitting in front of their flats or the two ladies responsible for the gossip in Firozsha Baag and Don Mills respectively (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 230). On the other hand, the places differ considerably in their ethnic composition and in the degree of interweaving of its inhabitants' lives. Secured with an iron gate and a watchman for the purpose of "keeping out riff-raff" and "keeping in the boys" (Mistry, "Squatter" 148), the *baag* is portrayed like a fortress of the Parsi people in multicultural India, thus indicating the community's state of isolation. In contrast, the inhabitants of Kersi's apartment complex in Don Mills form a multicultural group, among them Portuguese, Yugoslavian, Scottish and Indian people. Moreover, the relationship between the inhabitants of the Toronto building complex is portrayed as much more distanced and superficial compared to Firozsha Baag. We need to keep in mind, though, that the person relating the story is Kersi, who seems to judge the situation, adhering to Indian standards. The Scottish women living in Don Mills seem to think that the relationship with their neighbour is close enough. They voice this opinion by saying "You're not a stranger, dear, [...] you live in this building we've seen you before" (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 242). Nevertheless, the anonymity reigning in the Canadian block of flats is also indicated by many of the characters being nameless, like the Portuguese woman who is simply referred to as PW and 'the old

man' (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 236). Finally, the peace and quiet of Don Mills represents a strong contrast to the never-ending noise and bustle predominating in the *baag*.

Mistry also tends to thematise cultural difference in his stories by producing and reproducing stereotypes. In "Swimming Lessons", for example, the narrator-protagonist expresses a stereotypical judgement, saying: "Not for Portuguese Woman the furtive peerings from thin cracks or spyholes" (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 230). Yet, Kersi himself also becomes the object of such stereotypes and relates these in a very dry and factual manner, which has a certain irony to it. At one point he says:

I've been told that immigrants from hot countries always enjoy the snow the first year, maybe for a couple of years more, then inevitably the dread sets in, and the approach of winter gets them fretting and moping. On the other hand, if it hadn't been for my conversation with the woman at the swimming registration desk, they might now be saying that India is a nation of non-swimmers. (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 243)

It is ironic that Kersi, himself an immigrant, is told by other people, probably Canadians who determine the hegemonic discourse in Canada, what his attitude towards snow is supposed to be. This paragraph is undoubtedly intended to thematise the issue of 'us' and 'them' and who determines hegemonic discourse in the multicultural society of Canada.

The way cultural difference is dealt with in immigrant countries is usually determined primarily by legislation. Therefore, a country's immigration policy and measures undertaken for the incorporation of immigrants into society play a major role in the issue, and this is why Rohinton Mistry thematises it repeatedly in his work. In "Lend Me Your Light", he subtly alludes to the widely divergent models of immigrant integration which prevail in the US and Canada by sending Jamshed to one country and Kersi to the other. Undoubtedly, their destinations were a meaningful choice on the part of the author, especially since the two characters also pursue different acculturation strategies. Jamshed, who settles in the US, follows a strategy of assimilation in accordance with the melting pot model, while Kersi struggles to find a middle way, an approach which seems fitting to the cultural mosaic model which predominates in Canada (Peach 3).

Multiculturalism as one approach to the incorporation of immigrants into society is especially prominent in the short story "Squatter", where Sarosh turns to the Immigrant Aid Society for help with his 'immigration-related problems' (Mistry, "Squatter" 157). A network

of institutionalized support for immigrants exists in Canada due to multiculturalism being a public policy there. Also the fact that his employer shows understanding for these kinds of issues reflects multiculturalism being an integral part of everyday life in Canada. However, Mistry expresses some covert criticism regarding multiculturalism by means of the counsellor's comments on "[t]he ultimate goal [being] pure white Wonder Bread" (Mistry, "Squatter" 158). Undoubtedly, the objective expressed here does not correspond with the principles underlying real multiculturalism, namely the perseverance of ethnic identity accompanied by civic participation and alignment with a shared set of key values. Another shortcoming on the part of Mrs Maha-Lepate's understanding of multiculturalism becomes clear when she voices the idea that all the immigrants from the Third World share "a history of similar maladies", thus abiding by the stereotype that all the countries considered to form part of the Third World share similar cultural particularities and values (Mistry, "Squatter" 159). Also her negative attitude towards dual citizenship seems to express an underlying mistrust of the Canadian system which does allow it (Mistry, "Squatter" 159). Since as a counsellor at the Immigrant Aid Society Mrs. Maha-Lepate forms part of the institutions set in place by the state, her comments seem to mock the system itself. She represents the state's failure to implement real cultural equality among all ethnic communities. This criticism is reinforced by the narrator Nariman's explanation of what the Canadian Multicultural Department is, which he uses for some sarcastic commentary on the workings of integration in Canada (Mistry, "Squatter" 160). Furthermore, he voices his impression that the multicultural policy in Canada failed to fulfil its functions by saying that "mosaic and melting pot are both nonsense, and ethnic is a polite way of saying bloody foreigner" (Mistry, "Squatter" 160).

Finally, the fact that migrants are portrayed as being confronted with racism and mindless generalizations also hints at certain shortcomings of the policy of multiculturalism in Canada. The protagonist of "Swimming Lessons", for instance, relates how some strangers tease him using the words "Paki Paki smell like curry" (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 238). It seems that the protagonist is used to that kind of treatment, given that he also suspects his swimming instructor of racism without an obvious reason (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 239).

### 3.2.3 Self-Denial and Self-Discovery

Another major theme in the three stories which form the basis of this analysis is the search for identity and happiness. It is rather straightforward why these issues play a role in stories which focus on migration. Travel and migration go hand in hand with the quest for happiness because people who cannot seem to find happiness close-by usually start looking for it further away. At the same time, migration automatically triggers processes of change in the person who undergoes displacement. These may or may not bring happiness. What is for sure is that they will result in a redefinition of that person's identity (see chapter 2.2.3).

Identity is a major issue in the literature of migration and names play an important role as they are intimately linked with it. In Mistry's story "Squatter", Sarosh changes his name to Sid after his arrival in Canada. This change of name is symbolic for Sarosh's willingness to leave old habits behind and adapt to a host culture. However, Nariman, who tells his story to the children of the *baag*, decides to call him Sarosh anyway "for that is his proper Parsi name" (Mistry, "Squatter" 153). By doing so, he deliberately emphasises Sarosh's 'Parsiness' and denies him the liberty of deciding for himself who he intends to be. Towards the end of the story, Sarosh replies to Nariman calling him by his American name Sid "No no! No more Sid, please, that name reminds me of all my troubles" (Mistry, "Squatter" 167). This little incident in the story carries a lot of meaning as names symbolize identity and, as was pointed out in the theory chapter, identity is composed of both a person's past as well as the way they position themselves in the present. While the connotative meaning carried by the names of the people inhabiting Firozsha Baag is not so obvious, it is noticeable that two of the three people which play a role in Sarosh's life in Canada have a double name with a hyphen. On the one hand, Mrs. Maha-Lepate's double name indicates her adaptation to Western ways given that a woman carrying a double name may hint at her feminist attitude. On the other hand, the hyphen can be interpreted as an allusion to the hyphenated identity, an issue linked to multiculturalism. This migrant integration policy predominant in Canada welcomes a combination of ethnic and national identity in migrants expressed by means of a compound word linked by a hyphen, e.g. Chinese-Canadian or Nigerian-Canadian.

The story "Squatter" revolves around the quest for happiness, the main moral of the story being that success and failure are not the sole determinants of happiness, which should be everybody's ultimate goal in life (Mistry, "Squatter" 153). In order to illustrate this, the author works on two different levels. On the one hand, the frame narrative consists of

Nariman telling the children Savukshaw's story. He was the greatest cricketer before he turned into a champion bicyclist, a pole-vaulter and the mightiest hunter ever seen. Despite his success in each and every one of these activities, he remained dissatisfied and continued his search for happiness. On the other hand, he relates Sarosh's story of a failed migration and repeats his words of warning to the children of the *baag*, saying "the world can be a bewildering place, and dreams and ambitions are often paths to the most pernicious of traps" (Mistry, "Squatter" 168). Sarosh has clearly come to understand that success does not necessarily equal happiness and that many migrants are trapped in their misery abroad because they are afraid of admitting defeat and returning home. He intends to transfer this knowledge to other children of the *baag* through Nariman. Therefore, he asks him to tell his story:

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, nor set down aught in malice; tell them that in Toronto once there lived a Parsi boy as best as he could. Set you down this; and say, besides, that for me it was good and for some it was bad, but for me life in the land of milk and honey was just a pain in the posterior. (Mistry, "Squatter" 168)

The beginning of this passage is a direct quote from Shakespeare's *Othello* (5.2.349-52). This intertextual reference aids Sarosh's characterisation since the two protagonists have certain things in common. *Othello*, a black African living in a predominantly white Western society, is described by Shakespeare as "an extravagant and wheeling stranger Of here and everywhere" (1.1.134-5). Fielitz (82) argues that *Othello* is not only a stranger in Venice, but also fails to identify with the African culture because his job as a soldier requires him to spend a lot of time away from his country of birth. In other words, *Othello* is notorious for his rootlessness, a characteristic that he seems to share with Sarosh.

The theme of self-discovery also has a strong presence in the story "Lend Me Your Light". The reader is made aware of this already through the author's choice of title, which alludes to someone who lost his/her way and is looking for guidance and, thus, clearly signals that the main gist of the story will have to do with some kind of search.

By portraying three central characters who were brought up in postcolonial India under similar circumstances and who then chose different paths, the author proposes three different ways of dealing with multicultural heritage and thereby initiates an important

process of reflection in the reader. The protagonist Kersi, a particularly thoughtful character, experiences major tensions because of his multiple homes.

On the one hand, he struggles with his forming part of a minority group in India that has lost all its glory with the end of British rule. Edward Said (558), a personality who seems to have had a similar fate as a child, states that he felt “uncomfortably anomalous” and, thus, was plagued by a sense of doubt and of being out of place in his teenage years. Moreover, he described the difficulties he experienced which were caused by his Anglocentric education, which taught him about British history instead of his own roots and, at the same time, taught him to feel inferior (Said 558). Rohinton Mistry once voiced similar problems with his upbringing in an interview (Lambert 6) and given that he has admitted certain autobiographical streaks in his fiction, it can be assumed that Kersi’s identity crisis might be rooted in similar causes.

On the other hand, his migration to Canada does not seem to make things easier for him at first. When Kersi boards the plane, he already describes how he is “confused by a thousand half-formed thoughts and doubts” (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 181). The state of mind that the narrator describes forebodes the confusion and insecurity that is going to come. Once in Canada, his identity crisis is anything but solved. Kersi himself refers to his identity search as “the order [he] was trying to bring into [his] new life in Toronto” (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 190). He suffers from a bad conscience for having abandoned India. Additionally, he feels bad for taking on Canadian habits and views and not missing India enough. Back in Bombay, Kersi realizes painfully that he is not part of the crowd anymore; even if he would like to, he cannot simply blend in any longer. Symbolic for this development is his attempt at a bus ride that results in him being left behind at the bus stop with the old and feeble (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 187-8). Therefore, Kersi finds himself in between two cultures and feels that he does not belong either here or there. After his return to Canada, he finally resolves that he is nothing the wiser, neither about his home country India nor about his own identity and where he really belongs, saying:

Gradually, I discovered I’d brought back with me my entire burden of riddles and puzzles, unsolved. The whole sorry package was there, not lightened at all. The epiphany would have to wait for another time, another trip. (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 192)

Finally, also "Swimming Lessons" treats the themes of self-denial and self-discovery primarily in that it traces Kersi's development in Canada from a mere superficial knowledge of Canadian ways to his decision to be more open towards change and to allow himself to become emotionally involved with his new home and the people he shares it with (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 248-9).

### 3.2.4 Memory and Nostalgia

Nostalgia and memories of home constitute a minor theme in the short fiction analysed. However, every now and then small details that the migrant characters remember about their past lives come up in Mistry's work. These instances are often closely linked to specific places, people or objects.

In "Swimming Lessons", for instance, Kersi's memories of his grandfather, whom he was very fond of, involve the pink and white sugar-coated almonds he always used to give to his grandchildren (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 231). It is a small detail about such an important person in his life which seems insignificant, yet it is what Kersi's memories are rooted in. The same character remembers how his mother tried to teach him to swim in the filthy waters of Chaupatty Beach (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 234-5). He will always link this beach to these important moments in his life. Finally, when Kersi "comb[s] through the memories" of his first swimming lesson, "he come[s] upon the straying curls of brown pubic hair" (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 238). Even though this is only a tiny detail, it seems to have been significant for Kersi, once again stressing the contrast between India and Canada. What is more important about that quote, though, is the figurative idea of memory which it implies, namely that of a box full of snapshots which someone can simply look through searching for a particular memory.

It seems to be of relevance, too, at which point in the stories memories of the past play a role. In Mistry's short stories, they often appear before border crossings. For instance, the memories of Bombay, which appear before Sarosh's inner eye shortly before his plane back to India takes off, "give him newfound strength", thus enabling him to push harder and to finally succeed in defecating in a sitting position (Mistry, "Squatter" 165). However, this breakthrough comes too late as the protagonist is already on his way to India. Later on in the plane, he reflects on his imminent arrival back home, thinking to himself: "If he returned, what would it be like? Ten years ago, the immigration officer who had stamped his passport

had said, 'Welcome to Canada.' It was one of Sarosh's dearest memories, and thinking of it, he fell asleep" (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 166). Just when he is about to cross the border one more time, he remembers the time he crossed it for the first time and admits to himself that this has been a very significant moment in his life, and despite everything so was his ten-year-long intermezzo in Canada. Therefore, it becomes clear that memories fulfil a function which goes beyond that of merely offering consolation in times of need. They can also help an individual to come to terms with their present.

### 3.2.5 Life-Writing and the Migrant Writer

Finally, Mistry's short stories also thematise life-writing and the migrant writer. Even though present in one way or another in all three of the stories analysed, this topic is most dominant in the story "Swimming Lessons" as the passages portraying the way Kersi's migration has affected his parents also fulfil the function of thematising their son's identity as a migrant writer.

From the moment they find out about their son's book, the protagonist's parents keep discussing and analysing his writing from a theoretical viewpoint. For instance, Kersi's father claims that "all writers worked in the same way, they used their memories and experiences and made stories out of them, changing some things, adding some, imagining some, all writers were very good at remembering details of their lives" (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 243). The author's parents voice diverging opinions concerning their son's choice of topics. While his father complains about Kersi not doing justice to the glorious past of the Parsi people through his portrayal of petty nobodies, his mother praises their son's very personal approach to the topic and his attention to detail giving importance even to the most minor of characters (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 245). Both individuals are impressed by Kersi's ability to create great stories based on his rather average everyday life. His father emphasizes that "fiction can come from facts, it can grow out of facts by compounding, transposing, augmenting, diminishing, or altering them in any way" (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 250). However, he also speaks a word of warning regarding the danger of losing grasp on reality which writers are constantly exposed to (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 250).

Finally, Kersi's father, the self-confessed expert on migrant literature, refers to an interesting phenomenon concerning the topic. He argues that the reason why migrant fiction holds a particular appeal is that it provides the receiving society with another viewpoint on life.



Subsequently, he mentions an interesting phenomenon which frequently comes up in connection with migrant fiction, namely that the migrant author “changes and becomes so much like them that he will write like one of them and lose the important difference” (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 248).

### 3.3 Characters

As suggested by King, Connell and White (x), communities and family relationships play a predominant role in migrant literature. Rohinton Mistry's work complies with this characteristic of migrant fiction in so far as most of his stories feature an extensive cast of characters, most of which are portrayed with great detail and precision. To illustrate this, I would like to briefly outline the characterisation of Nariman, the storyteller. He is not a main character as such, but fulfils an important function in the Firozsha Baag community and acts as narrator in the story. He is characterised extensively through his job at the library and his exquisite storytelling technique and predilection for the use of sophisticated words. Moreover, he is portrayed as Western-oriented by means of his Mercedes-Benz car, the song he whistles, and his moustache. Most importantly, he is characterised by the way he tells his stories and by the comments he makes. Finally, also juxtaposition with the character Rustomhi, who represents a strong contrast to Nariman, helps the reader grasp the kind of person that he is (Mistry, "Squatter" 145, 156).

In the course of the three stories, the reader is introduced to numerous inhabitants of Firozsha Baag, many of which play minor roles. Nevertheless, they are all mentioned by name; Nariman, Rustomhi, Sarosh, Kersi, Viraf, Jehangir, Hirabai, Jaakaylee etc. By introducing them, Mistry manages to convey the sense of community prevailing in the housing colony and also the diversity of people living there. People are on a first-name basis in Firozsha Baag and everyone seems to know each other. On the contrary, in Canada, Sarosh's closest friends are Mrs. Maha-Lepate, Dr. No-Ilaaz and Mr Rawaana, people whose first names he does not know and to whom he only feels connected by their mutual immigrant status. Whether set in India, Canada or the US, Mistry's stories feature non-Indian characters only on very rare occasions, the exception being the story "Swimming Lessons" with Berthe, the Portuguese Woman and the two Scottish ladies. Members of the larger society are not mentioned, neither are any second-generation immigrants identified as such to the reader.

Mistry frequently uses stereotypes in order to characterise a place and its inhabitants. However, at times, he deliberately counters stereotypes in order to raise awareness for individual differences within one and the same culture. For instance, Mistry applies this technique in "Swimming Lessons", when Kersi points out that most Indians swim like fish,

but for some reason he never learned to do it, thus opposing the secretary's assumption that not being able to swim as an adult must be 'typically Indian' (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 233). Moreover, the author repeatedly uses contrasting characters with the same cultural background in order to stress diversity within one and the same culture. The most prominent examples are the three protagonists Kersi, Percy and Jamshed in "Lend Me Your Light". Also Sarosh, another Mistry character who sets out to find his luck overseas, can be added to this group. They are all young Parsi men who seem to feel a certain discontentment with the situation in Bombay and make decisions concerning their future lives.

Kersi, Jamshed and Sarosh decide to emigrate from India in the hope that life abroad will bring them prosperity and happiness. Percy is the only one to stay and fight for the improvement of his own country. This decision says a lot about his character. He is strong, determined and highly principled, all qualities which the other men seem to lack. He is willing to sacrifice himself for the greater good despite the total lack of understanding and support he receives from his family and friends. The parents' attitude towards Percy's efforts is very nicely summed up in the following statement about them: "They truly believed that Jamshed was the smart young fellow and Percy the idealist who forgot that charity begins at home" (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 188). This is very interesting given that the modern-day Parsi community has been described by Luhrmann (127) as being highly critical of themselves because of their supposed moral failure and the idea that Parsis no longer care about their community and India, where they had once found a new home. Percy seems to react to this self-criticism by making an effort to improve the situation at home as opposed to many other Parsis who have sought relief in migration.

Kersi is the one who seems most insecure about his decision to emigrate. He clearly feels guilty for leaving India and not staying to fight for its progress like his brother. He expresses this attitude, saying: "There you were, my brother, waging battles against corruption and evil, while I was watching sitcoms on my rented Granada TV" (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 184). For him, the choice was a tough one to make and he hopes for his bad conscience to abate once he arrives in Canada. The reader knows this because Kersi speaks of "the peace of mind [he] was reaching out for" (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 190). However, his arrival in Canada does not bring the desired relief. Kersi experiences great difficulties adjusting to his new life and letting go of his past. The protagonist experiences first-hand that

“[e]xpatriation is painful” (Tamilselvi 537). I assume that this difficulty is in large part due to Jamshed’s influence for he is undoubtedly a major driving force in Kersi’s life. By recurring encounters with him, Kersi is constantly reminded of the danger of becoming completely assimilated to his host culture and losing touch with his Indian roots. He is simply afraid of becoming as indifferent to India as Jamshed is. Therefore, he does not dare to engage completely in his life in Canada and remains in his state of turmoil. In fact, there is reason to believe that, if it were not for the negative example Jamshed sets, Kersi as the thoughtful person that he is would struggle much less in his situation. At the end of the story, finally, Kersi is capable of letting go of Jamshed. When Kersi symbolically turns his back on Jamshed by discarding his letters (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 193), he frees himself of a constant source of distress and confusion in his life. It seems that he is finally at ease as he realizes that his past is and will always be a part of him.

Jamshed differs from the other characters mentioned mainly because he belongs to a different social stratum. Belonging to Bombay’s upper class and residing in Malabar Hill, “Mumbai’s most exclusive neighbourhood” according to Lonely Planet, he represents a clear counter-weight to Kersi and Percy. Their humble lives are continually juxtaposed with Jamshed’s world of affluence and international orientation (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 175-6). The author emphasizes Jamshed’s preference for foreign clothes and shoes (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 175) as well as his interest in model planes, books and classical music (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 175-6). These pastimes indicate his Western lifestyle and his identification with Western values from early childhood onwards. This is said to be quite common among the Indian Parsis because of their Anglocentric education. Rohinton Mistry commented on the issue once during an interview, saying: “Part of the tragedy of the educated middle classes in Bombay was this yearning for something unattainable that came from what they read” (Mistry qtd. in Lambert 6). Jamshed is the one to familiarize Percy with Western culture. However, their mutual love for classical literature and music has very different effects on both characters. While it encourages Percy to fight for the betterment of his motherland, it leads Jamshed to desire emigration from India from early on in his childhood.

Jamshed is essentially a spoilt, class-conscious child who scorns less fortunate people and in the course of the story turns into an adult with similar attitudes who cannot wait to turn his back on India where, as he says, “[n]othing ever improves” (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light"

181). Furthermore, he claims that there is “just too much corruption. It’s all part of the *ghati* mentality” (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 181). This is why leaving India is the only valid option for him. Tamilselvi (534) describes Jamshed as a “typical migrant” who is “drawn to the west for its prosperity and success”. It can be assumed that he greatly enjoys life in the USA, which is also reflected in the ease with which he adopts local manners and beliefs in America. Without hesitation, Jamshed casts aside his old traditions and immerses in US culture. This strategy of processing a cultural encounter is called assimilation (Berry 704-5).

Finally, Sarosh sets the example of a failed migration. He decides to leave India behind, but comes to regret it dearly as he realizes that through his migration he entered a state of in-betweenness that is not going to dissolve. He comes to the conclusion that he will always be othered in Canada, unable to blend in completely. Unable to content himself with that, Sarosh finally decides to return to India, where he thinks he will be happier after all. Nariman relates his story to warn the other boys of thinking that migration always paves the way for happiness (Mistry, "Squatter" 153).

To summarize, Mistry uses a rather large cast of characters in his short stories, most of whom are of Indian descent. The minor characters serve primarily to create the sense of community which pervades his writing. Only the protagonists and the character-narrators are portrayed in detail, their characterisations often being complemented by the presence of contrasting characters. The protagonists Percy, Kersi, Jamshed and Sarosh share similar points of departure, but choose distinct paths in life and end up in totally different situations. In other words, Mistry uses his characters to recreate diverse migration scenarios.

### 3.4 Narrative Technique

The following chapter comprises an analysis of selected aspects of the narrative technique used by Rohinton Mistry in the creation of his short stories, namely narrative voice and focalization, structure as well as his cunning use of language and varied stylistic devices.

#### 3.4.1 Narrative Voice and Focalization

Subsequently, the narrative voice and focalization of the three selected short stories by Rohinton Mistry will be examined.

“Squatter” is a multi-level narrative in which an unknown narrator relates how Nariman tells stories to the children of the *baag*. Due to numerous stories being told on different levels, the narrative situation is extremely complex and difficult to describe. The frame narrative is set in Firozsha Baag and told by an omniscient external narrator in the third person. Then there are various stories related by Nariman, the most important one being that of Sarosh’s failed migration to Canada. This story comprises the main story line; it is told by Nariman from Sarosh’s point of view. Especially interesting is the moment when Nariman drives past Marina Drive towards the end of this story and meets Sarosh, who decides to tell him his story, the same story Nariman repeats to the children of Firozsha Baag (Mistry, “Squatter” 167-8). Suddenly, the third-person narrator, Nariman, turns into a first-person narrator, at the same time becoming a character of his own story. This is an instance of metalepsis in which Nariman, so far an extradiegetic narrator, suddenly becomes part of the diegetic universe (Genette qtd. in Fludernik 156). However, this metalepsis does not destroy the illusion, but rather helps affirm the truthfulness of the story. It explains how Nariman got to know Sarosh’s story and why he chose to retell it. At the same time, the conversation between Sarosh and Nariman stresses the instructive value of the stories being told and, thus, alludes to storytelling as a folk tradition. While the external narrator of the frame narrative seems to be an objective one, Nariman is rather subjective and openly conveys his own convictions, as is the case when he talks stereotypically about the Canadians, saying: “That’s the way they talk over there, nothing is ever a problem” (Mistry, “Squatter” 157).

The narrative situation in “Lend Me Your Light” and “Swimming Lessons” is different. They are both first-person narratives from Kersi’s point of view. The point of view is limited to Kersi’s knowledge of things for the most part of both stories. Usually, if the narrator seems to know a lot about what is going on in other peoples’ lives or heads, it is explained where

that knowledge comes from. The narrative situation in "Swimming Lessons" differs from that in "Lend Me Your Light" in so far as the first-person narrative is frequently interrupted by passages of third-person narrative, which are set apart from the rest of the text by formatting. They unfold in India and focus on how Kersi's emigration affects his parents' life. The use of the words *Father* and *Mother* to refer to the protagonist's parents lets us assume that also this part of the story is told from Kersi's perspective. However, he is retelling events which he cannot possibly have attended. Therefore, focalization seems to change to an omniscient point of view or it is the protagonist's future self who finds out about how his parents fared during his absence after his return and uses this information to write the story.

Telling a story in the first person from the narrator's point of view might prompt readers to identify with the characters as they get to know a personal perspective on things, supported by a detailed knowledge of thoughts and emotions in the protagonist. The fact that Kersi is portrayed as highly thoughtful and reflective enables the author to sprinkle the texts with comments on issues such as the use of language (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 176-8), life between different cultures (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 182, 187) and his views on society in general. The presence of the narrator is felt strongly as Kersi constantly reflects on things and communicates his thoughts to the audience. These reflections play a vital role in the stories because they serve to reflect critically on the Parsis' sense of self-worth at the time and their perceived future prospects in India. They help explain what things were like at the time and why so many Indians, especially members of the Parsi community, saw themselves forced to leave the country and try their luck elsewhere. According to Dodiya (94), this format is typical of Mistry's work for he seems to specialize on telling personal stories within the context of India's history and social reality. In "Swimming Lessons", the focus of these digressions shifts slightly away from India and towards Canada, including reflections about cultural difference and life in a multicultural society. The fact that Kersi does not see things only in black and white, but rather carefully weighs things against each other, tends to provoke critical reflection about culture and cultural difference in the reader.

Another striking feature of Mistry's work in connection with the narrative situation is the frequency and intensity with which he alludes to the act of storytelling. This is an element which all three stories have in common to some extent. In "Squatter", reference to the oral tradition of folk culture is most obvious because Nariman tells stories which are intended to have a moralising effect on the children, to teach them lessons about life. Also the way

Nariman engages his listeners in conversation, asking them questions to awaken their curiosity, hints at the role of the storyteller as some kind of teacher (Mistry, "Squatter" 146). Mistry also uses more subtle ways to thematise storytelling in his work. For example, he repeatedly stresses the importance of linguistic form (Clayton qtd. in Davis, *Transcultural reinventions* 13). This is what happens when the narrator comments on Nariman's use of the word 'aficionados' in "Squatter" and explains that Nariman likes to use big words in order to instruct his listeners on an intellectual level (Mistry, "Squatter" 146). Later on in that story, the author uses Jehangir to reflect on Nariman's story telling technique in the following way: "[U]npredictability was the brush he used to paint his tales with and ambiguity the palette he mixed his colours in" (Mistry, "Squatter" 147). Whether metanarrative narratorial comments enhance or destroy the illusionary effect of a story has been contested. Yet, it has been argued that narratorial mediation can add authenticity to a story if it is realistic enough that the reader gets the impression that s/he is involved in a dialogue with the narrator him-/herself (Fludernik 61). Overall, Mistry orchestrates the metanarration so skilfully that the narrator's credibility is enhanced. Nevertheless, this effect is counteracted by the author's use of various other devices that serve to generate metafictionality, such as the tale-within-a-tale structure and the instance of metalepsis, both described in more detail above (Fludernik 63).

In "Lend me your Light" and "Swimming Lessons", storytelling in its wider sense is thematised mainly through the protagonist Kersi, who is a writer himself, and allusions to his work. The young writer's love for language and literature becomes evident because of repeated comments on the use and meaning of specific words. These indicate that Kersi constantly reflects on the power of language. For instance, at one point in "Lend Me Your Light", Kersi claims that "[i]n the clichés of our speech was reflected the cliché which the idea of emigration had turned into for so many" (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 178). Furthermore, he comments on the pejorative use of the term *ghati* as well as the dominant discourse about them in general and condemns it (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 176). His knowledge of literature is also revealed when Kersi compares his observations of a crowd trying to get on a train in Bombay with a sixteenth-century morality play starring a number of archetypal characters such as Fate and Reality, Poverty and Hunger, Virtue and Vice, Apathy and Corruption (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 187). Kersi also calls on intertextuality to evoke another layer of meaning to enable him to depict his inner life more clearly, when



mentioning Tiresias in connection with his loss of eyesight shortly before his departure for Canada (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 180). All of these examples show very impressively how the author uses language and intertextual reference to draw on another layer of meaning than the literal one to create a multi-levelled narrative.

Overall, the three stories by Rohinton Mistry represent personal accounts of migration. This is why two of them are related mainly in the first-person by the protagonist himself ("Lend Me Your Light" and "Swimming Lessons"). While the third story, "Squatter", also stems from the protagonist himself and reflects his perspective on things, it is retold by a minor character in the story. Moreover, the stories are peppered with the different narrators' comments on Indian and Canadian society and custom, migration, language, etc. First-person narrators are often considered subjective and untrustworthy, even more so if their presence is felt rather strongly. Yet, this does not play a role in this particular case, since it can be assumed that creating a personal account from a migrant's point of view was the author's intention and, thus, objectivity is not really a requirement.

### 3.4.2 Structure

Subsequently, the structure of Mistry's short stories will be analysed so that inferences can be made as to the effect it evokes in the reader. Each narrative shows certain features which are unique to it so that it makes sense to discuss the structure for each story separately.

"Squatter" is a multi-level narrative which consists of a frame narrative that is set in Firozsha Baag and the respective story worlds created by Nariman, the story-teller. Both levels are interwoven in an artful manner, jumping to and fro between the different worlds and, thus, "offer[ing] enriching glimpses of communities and selves in a process of transformation and growth", as Davis ("Negotiating Place/ Re-Creating Home" 332) puts it. Nariman relates two different stories: first, the story of Savukshaw, the great cricket player, and then the story of Sarosh's experiences in Canada, which constitutes the central plot line.

To begin with, some light is shed on the relation between the frame narrative and the central story line. It seems that the different levels serve primarily to emphasize the existence of two different worlds in the story and Sarosh's state of in-betweenness. On the one hand, there is the *baag* and its inhabitants. By jumping back to Bombay from time to time, the author admits the readers into the everyday life at the housing colony, thus trying to foster their understanding of the community felt and lived there. On the other hand,

Sarosh's story revolves around his life and experiences in Canada. An attentive reader will notice that there Sarosh finds himself very much alone. The immigrant community is referred to, though. It is embodied by the counsellor Mrs Maha-Lepate, the doctor and the clerk working at the travel agency. However, the sense of community differs strongly from that in Firozsha Baag. Even though the people of Indian origin Sarosh meets in Canada show solidarity with his situation to some extent, he does not really know them. They do not live together, they do not share an everyday life. They stay mere acquaintances.

The question remains open which role Savukshaw's tale plays in the story. Even though it seems to be of minor importance, it does add another layer to the narrative by introducing a completely different aspect. It seems to fulfil the function of evoking the postcolonial theme and makes reference to issues such as the rivalry between the former metropolis and the periphery and the search for identity both on a macro- and on a micro-level.

Another interesting aspect of Mistry's short stories are the cyclical elements he includes. In "Squatter", Sarosh's story is cyclical in that he sets out for Canada from India in the beginning and returns. Even though Nariman begins the story in medias res and only later returns to Sarosh's departure, the narrative's cyclical nature is underlined by the mention of the farewell- and the welcome-home party respectively, where Scotch, soda, rum and Coke flowed in large amounts (Mistry, "Squatter" 154, 166). This repetition of the same drinks at Sarosh's departure and his return opens and closes the cycle. There is also another cyclical element discernible in the plotline, namely the ritual which Nariman seems to go through every time before telling a story in the *baag* (Mistry, "Squatter" 145-6). He drives into the housing colony, starts to polish his car whistling and the more excited his young audience gets, the more invested he seems into his polishing until, finally, he puts the rug away and starts with the story.

In the next section, the story "Lend Me Your Light" is analysed with respect to its structural particularities". It also shows a clear circular structure, starting out with a reference to the end of the acquaintance between Kersi and Jamshed (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 173) and ending at the point where Kersi throws away Jamshed's letters and, thus, draws a clear finishing line to their acquaintance (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 193). Apart from that, the story evolves in a chronological order, which is interrupted only once by a short anecdote of a family holiday Kersi and Percy went on with their parents, which is told in retrospect and

serves to clarify the social stratification in India and Kersi's attitude towards the word *ghati* (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 176-7). Overall, "Lend Me Your Light" is divided into five parts, a division determined by considerations of place, with one exception.

Structurally, "Swimming Lessons" shares certain features with the preceding story. Most importantly, in both stories place is the major determinant of structure. However, in "Swimming Lessons", the difference between the bits and pieces of the story which are set in Canada and those set back home in Firozsha Baag is clearly marked through the different font styles used for the respective paragraphs. Mistry uses this technique in order to represent the migratory experience from two different viewpoints, that of the migrant himself and that of his loved ones who stayed behind. Despite this clearly drawn division between Kersi's two homes, India also finds its way into the Canada-based part of the narrative by way of his memories and his reflections. This structural characteristic reflects the fact that in reality the two places the migrant feels a sense of belonging to are not easily separable for they both influence him/her simultaneously and their effects on the individual continually interact with each other. Samantrai (37) delivers a similar interpretation of the structure of "Swimming Lessons", stating that "[t]he simultaneity of the two narrations that constitute the final story fragments the coherence of a closed existence in one location."

Finally, there is also a cyclical element included in "Swimming Lessons". It is constituted mainly by means of a recurring theme, namely the relationship between cause and effect. This issue comes up again and again in the story. To name just a few examples, Kersi asks himself how his grandfather's decay and death came about or why it is that Parsis exhibit the highest divorce rate in the whole of India or why Chaupatty Beach is so popular despite its filthiness (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 230, 234). But also his mother is portrayed as worrying about such fundamentally philosophic life questions. She questions whether Kersi's becoming a writer is due to his unhappiness in the present and nostalgia about the past or whether the sole reason for his remembering the past is the fact that he is a writer who needs something to write about (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 243).

To summarize, the three stories analysed show a high degree of fragmentation, a characteristic which is considered typical of narratives of migration, as mentioned in chapter 2.3.3. Similarly, also the cyclical elements included in Mistry's work as well as frequent digressions from the main story line fit in well with the theory on migratory literature

previously discussed. For the most part, place functions as a major structuring element in Mistry's work, the narrative skipping readily from one place to another. However, there are also certain instances in which both realities overlap, thus indicating a kind of hybridity. This aspect of Mistry's work might be linked to his own as well as his characters' experience of migration and hybridity.

### 3.4.3 Language and Style

In general, Rohinton Mistry's style differs strongly from section to section. At times, it is very concise and characterised by an economic use of words. This is considered typical of the short story genre, given its limited word count. The following paragraph is a striking example:

I drop the Eaton's bag and wrapper in the garbage can. The swimming trunks cost fifteen dollars, same as the fee for the ten weekly lessons. The garbage bag is almost full. I tie it up and take it outside. There is a medicinal smell in the hallway; the old man must have just returned to his apartment. (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 236)

Occasionally, however, the author dedicates whole paragraphs to extremely detailed descriptions of seemingly minor aspects of the story. The subsequent passage comprises such a description:

And as we all regard her floating body, I see what was not visible outside the pool: her bush, curly bits of it, straying out of the pink Spandex V. Tongues of water lapping against her delta, as if caressing it teasingly, make the brown hair come alive in a most tantalizing manner. The crests and troughs of little waves, set off by the movement of our bodies in a circle around her, dutifully irrigate her; the curls alternately wave free inside the crest, then adhere to her wet thighs, beached by the inevitable trough. I could watch this forever, and I wish the floating demonstration would never end. (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 238)

This detailed description of a woman's private parts seems rather unorthodox. However, it fulfils two functions. On the one hand, it thematises the diverging cultural norms regarding sex and nudity in India and Canada. On the other hand, this short description is a literary masterpiece in itself, highlighting the protagonist-narrator's identity as a writer, whose strength lies in the thoroughness with which he observes his surroundings and the artfulness with which he reproduces these observations. The passage is one of many occasions in which Mistry plays with words and language with great craftiness and refinement. Also the following paragraph taken from "Lend Me Your Light" demonstrates his skills in this respect:

Jamshed did not eat in this cramped and cavernous interior. Not for him the air redolent of nauseous odours. His food arrived precisely at one o'clock in the chauffeur-driven, air-conditioned family car, and was eaten in the leather-upholstered luxury of the back seat, amid this collection of hyphenated lavishness. (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 174)

In this passage the contrast between Jamshed and his fellow classmates is represented not only through the meaning of the words, but also by means of their sound. The alliteration of short, harsh-sounding words starting with c (*cramped – cavernous*), intended to stress the undesirability of ordinary school lunch, is juxtaposed with a number of hyphenated words, which sound much more pleasing and harmonious to represent Jamshed's way of life. Examples are *chauffeur-driven, air-conditioned, leather-upholstered*. This powerful word play is complemented with a meta-linguistic comment on "hyphenated lavishness" in a very artful manner.

At this point, also the frequent occurrence of metalinguistic comments and intertextuality in Mistry's work is worth mentioning. The previous subchapter contains more detailed information on the issue.

Subsequently, I would like to draw the reader's attention to Mistry's selective use of Urdu-Hindi-Guajarati words. As outlined in chapter 2.3.3, the use of untranslated foreign words is a strategy commonly adopted by postcolonial authors. Mistry, for instance, repeatedly uses the words *ghati* (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 176) and *ghaton* (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 177) in "Lend Me Your Light". The fact that these are pejorative terms becomes clear when Kersi laments his brother's use of them and calls the word *ghati* "[a] suppurating sore of a word, oozing the stench of bigotry" (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 176). The author dedicates a whole paragraph to an anecdote of his childhood intended to illustrate the term's meaning in a way that enables Anglophone readers to comprehend its power. Even though there is no translation given and the meaning of the word cannot easily be retrieved from the internet, I would say that comprehension is in no way hindered. On the contrary, understanding is enhanced because the use of the foreign word requires the reader to engage more actively in the negotiation of meaning, thus enabling him/her to learn something about the very essence of Indian culture.

Furthermore, the author uses untranslated foreign words when his Parsi characters address other people. This is probably due to the fact that the terms carry important connotations

indicating the nature of the relationship between two people, e.g. *sahibji* (Mistry, "Squatter" 146) and *mamaiji* (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 231) or the nature of their personality, e.g. *Pesi paadmaroo* (Mistry, "Squatter" 146). Even if these terms were translated into English, their English equivalent would lack the connotative meaning inherent in the foreign word. Finally, untranslated words are employed also for everyday items which do not form part of Western life, such as garments or dishes. This seems to be the case with the words *sapaat* (Mistry, "Squatter" 148) and *dhansaak* (Mistry, "Squatter" 151) in the story "Squatter".

Sometimes Mistry puts whole phrases in the foreign language into the mouths of his characters, letting them rephrase in English right away. Hirabai, for example, says: "*Chaalo ni, Nariman, it's time*" (Mistry, "Squatter" 151). Or Sarosh's mother asks her son "*Saachoo Kahé, what brought you back?*" (Mistry, "Squatter" 167). As the meaning of the foreign words is clarified immediately, their function cannot be shifting the power balance between the colonizer and the formerly colonized (Ashcroft 75). Instead, these instances seem to lend a sense of authenticity to the characters.

It is interesting that Mistry not only uses code switching in his writing, he also thematises the issue in the story "Swimming Lessons", when he describes Berthe and how the English word booze "clunks down heavily out of the tight-flying formation of Yugoslavian sentences" (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 237). He even relates her broken English in form of direct speech: "Radiator no work, you tell me. You feel cold, you come to me, I keep you warm" (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 244). The author dedicates several lines to describing her accent and uses a wealth of metaphors to do so, thereby stressing the fact that language is alive and represents an important issue in cross-cultural encounters.

Another prominent feature of Mistry's style is his tendency to employ metonymy to represent different cultures. It has been argued in chapter 2.3.3 that the formal requirements of the short story genre foster the deployment of stylistic devices which allow the author to spare lengthy descriptions and use the limited scope of the work efficiently. This is most probably what the author intends to achieve when using objects, customs and places commonly associated with a specific culture to contrast it with those of another culture.

A large array of seemingly minor objects feature in Mistry's stories and the role they play is not to be underestimated. Several objects symbolizing the manifold contrasts between

Indian and Canadian culture have already been mentioned in chapter 3.2, in which cultural difference is dealt with as a literary theme. More examples of such objects are Sarosh's Canadian passport and citizenship card as well as the Canadian currency he brings back from Canada (Mistry, "Squatter" 167). These objects represent the young man's life in Canada and they serve as proof that he formed part of the Canadian society.

Moreover, the short stories analysed comprise numerous objects which stand synecdochically for life in-between cultures. Letters, for instance, are prototypical examples as they link the different lifeworlds of the migrant (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 247). However, also the Western-style toilet in "Squatter" as well as the bathtub and the Surf King trunks in "Swimming Lessons" fulfil a similar function in the narratives. As Cooper (7) argues, the most significant changes an immigrant experiences are the little and mundane ones, which happen when s/he integrates everyday objects of the host culture into his/her daily routines. This explains why an object as trivial as a toilet plays such an important role in "Squatter". Sarosh finds that he is unable to use a Western toilet the way it is supposed to be done. In other words, he is unable to integrate it into his everyday life, thus impeding his assimilation to Canadian standards. Therefore, the toilet stands for Sarosh's failed immigration. In "Swimming Lessons", the bathtub is portrayed as a decisive element in Kersi's acculturation process. His decision to take a bath in the tub instead of a shower represents his change of heart (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 248). This symbolic act is complemented by the following statement confirming the protagonist's wish to get to know Canada better: "The world outside the water I have seen a lot of, it is now time to see what is inside" (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 249). Finally, Kersi seems to be ready to get to know Canada better and to adopt Canadian custom at least partly. The Surf King swimming trunks, which occur earlier in "Swimming Lessons", symbolize Kersi's efforts to assimilate. They are designed in a Western style and, as expressed by the sentence "Armed with my Surf King I enter the high school", Kersi uses them like a weapon shielding him from being identified as an outsider in Canada (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 238). In other words, they help him to blend in. However, the shorts seem to lose their magic as Kersi's attempt at learning how to swim fails and, consequently, he puts them out of his sight. Additionally, these swimming trunks represent a structuring pattern in the story, as their life cycle is traced from the moment they are bought to the moment they are discarded (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 229-40). Finally, there is the revolutionary invention of the 'Crappus Non Interruptus' (CNI)

in "Squatter". This is a small device implanted in immigrants who suffer from constipation abroad because the sitting position on Western toilets impedes bowel movement. The CNI functions like an automatic garage door opener, thus, enabling immigrants to defecate any time and in any position. The device has been developed specifically for the purpose of enabling assimilation. Its drawback is that its effect cannot be reversed. As Dr. No-Ilaz explains to Sarosh, "[o]nce CNI is implanted, [...] you will never be able to live a normal life again. You will be permanently different from your family and friends" (Mistry, "Squatter" 161). Thus, the decision to implant CNI can be equated with the migrant's willingness to accept the transformations of his/her identity triggered as soon as s/he opens up to new ways. There is no going back for him/her after that. For, not only their day-to-day will change, but little by little also the way they see and interpret the world will be altered. Consequently, CNI is an object which represents the transculturality of migrants.

As mentioned in chapter 3.2.2 on "Negotiating Cultural Difference", places hold a prominent position in Mistry's work. Morey (30) argues that places "can be so vividly realised, and impact so strongly on the characters who inhabit them as almost to constitute a character in their own right". The author uses places to stand for the different cultures. In this respect, the significance of the housing colonies Firozsha Baag and Don Mills has already been discussed at great length. Another example of a place standing for a specific culture is Chaupatty Beach, which comes up repeatedly in the stories. It is a place heavily charged with semantic meaning (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 234-5). Given its significance for religious ceremonies and other secular practices as a repository of all kinds of things, it stands for everything which is Indian. However, Mistry also includes places which do not stand for any particular culture, but rather for the absence of culture and the fluidity of the identities populating them. The airport and airplane in "Squatter" represent such places. They are called non-places or places of transit and are characterised by "a lack of local referents", thus, looking the same all over the world (Sharma 129-30). That the airport in the story is such a place is expressed by the narrator's comment on airport seats being "the same almost anywhere in the world" (Mistry, "Squatter" 164). One should think a neutral space like this, where nobody belongs and everyone is a mere passer-by, might have a soothing effect on a migrant who has just seen the error of his ways and decided to give up on his life abroad. However, the airport does not seem to have this effect on Sarosh. He seems restless and



troubled, still trying to fit in even though for once this has become unnecessary. He fits in automatically just by being a traveller.

To conclude this analysis of symbolism and metonymy in Mistry's work, it needs to be pointed out that the author even thematises the issue in his story "Swimming Lessons", stating that symbols should be employed with care for an excessive use seems blunt and careless (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 234). Kersi, the protagonist-narrator, says so after realizing the abundance of water imagery in his story. Water, which is frequently understood as a symbol for life and rebirth, is a recurring theme in his narrative and appears in the form of Chaupatty Beach, the high school swimming pool and Kersi's bathtub. However, the swimming lessons in the pool initially fail to evoke Kersi's rebirth. Yet, later on in the tub he is symbolically reborn as a new, more open-minded person, willing to embrace his otherness and grasp the opportunities that his situation presents him with.

In a nutshell, the significance of language as part of one's culture and identity is emphasised on both content- and form-level. The fact that the act of storytelling and writing is thematised as well as the protagonist Kersi's identity as a writer enable Mistry to include numerous comments on language and style on a meta-level. Moreover, the author frequently uses symbols and stereotypes to represent culture. This simplified and generalized portrayal hints at the author's understanding of culture as a homogeneous sphere.

### 3.5 Representations of Culture, Identity and Migration

This chapter intends to summarize the most important things to be learned from Mistry's work concerning the identity formation processes set in motion by migration as well as the concept of culture inherent in the texts.

Overall, the three stories can be classified as narratives of arrival according to the categorisation proposed in chapter 2.3.2. There are several indicators supporting this claim: First of all, the characters involved all emigrated from India of their own accord, trying to find happiness and prosperity abroad. Secondly, they all form part of the Parsi community, a community which has long been characterized by a strong orientation towards the West. Thirdly, the reader gets the impression that most of the protagonists move to Western countries to stay there, seemingly well instructed in the Western ways and willing to do anything within their power to blend in overseas. As a result, the narratives centre around the protagonists' struggle for incorporation into a newly adopted society rather than concentrating primarily on the home left behind. Even though the narratives employed by Mistry are undoubtedly forward-oriented, there is still a strong focus on the struggles faced by migrants and collective identity still plays an important role. Consequently, the narrative of transmigration can be ruled out.

Interestingly, Mistry's stories in the given order trace a development similar to what Radhakrishnan (121) proposes (see chapter 2.3.2). Sarosh, the protagonist of "Squatter" symbolizes the first stage, which is characterized by the immigrant striving for complete assimilation and, thus, attempting to eradicate anything foreign in him/herself. This stage is followed by a severe identity crisis, exactly the phase which Kersi finds himself in in "Lend Me Your Light". According to Radhakrishnan, the immigrant eventually starts to feel more at ease with his/her situation in-between and does not despair in face of a failed attempt at assimilation. It seems that this is what happens to Kersi in "Swimming Lessons", as he finally acknowledges that through migration he entered a process which makes him 'the other' in both India and Canada. This realization absolves him from feeling forced to pick one of these two cultures to be his and, thus, opens him up for embracing his migrant identity and feeling part of a transcultural community. Subsequently, I would like to trace the development in more detail.

In "Squatter", a strong desire to move to the West is indicated by Sarosh's returning "triumphantly" from the US embassy after being granted a visa (Mistry, "Squatter" 154). At his farewell party, there are heated discussions going on about emigration being the right choice in life or not (Mistry, "Squatter" 154). Even though Sarosh does not seem to understand his friends' doubts, he pledges to return to India if he does not manage to "become completely Canadian" within ten years. This is the intention he sets out to Canada with, becoming Canadian, and it seems that he gets stuck in the first phase of incorporation set forth by Radhakrishnan (121). His longing to become completely assimilated goes so far that he starts to resent his origins and the customs they entail and openly admits to it, saying: "There had been a time when it was perfectly natural to squat. Now it seemed a grotesquely aberrant thing to do" (Mistry, "Squatter" 162). As a consequence, the protagonist soon finds himself in the situation that he wishes to but cannot shake off the remnants of his past while, at the same time, he is unable to become westernized enough for himself and his Canadian colleagues to accept him as one of their own (Mistry, "Squatter" 156). So, when he discovers that he cannot simply ignore his past, that it forms part of his identity and will always catch up with him in the most unexpected of ways, he despairs (Mistry, "Squatter" 154). He finally admits to himself that his mission of becoming completely assimilated has failed and he decides to return to India, where he is welcomed by his friends and family with open arms. But what does the fact that Sarosh finally manages to pass a motion sitting only when he is on the plane back to India mean? The event was accompanied by the words "The process of adaptation was complete" (Mistry, "Squatter" 166). This might be a hint at the impossibility of return after migration. Migrants can never return to the place that they set out from or go back to being the same person again, erasing all the experience gained abroad (see chapter 2.2.3). As Sarosh learns to use a Western-style toilet, he sets himself apart from fellow Indians. This event forebodes the problems he will probably experience back in India because neither he nor the people surrounding him will consider him part of their group again. With the decision to emigrate, he unconsciously took a step which would mark him as an other in both his country of origin and his chosen country and position him in-between different cultures. As he is not capable of acknowledging that and embracing his transculturality, his inner conflict is prone to become a liability.

The story "Lend Me Your Light" revolves around Kersi and his move to Canada. The protagonist-narrator relates how he feels the need to reaffirm his Parsi identity in response

to Jamshed's letter, in which he speaks ill of India and anything related to it (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 181-2). However, as Kersi spends more time with the other members of the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario, he realizes that their nostalgia is not authentic and that they remember India in a way tourists would, as if they never really knew it at all (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 182). Consequently, he has difficulty identifying with his fellow Parsi-Canadians. His belonging to the Canadian society is never really an issue in the story as there is little mention of his life in Canada and his relationship with other Canadians, as also his parents notice (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 243). Finally, Kersi's narration of his visit to Bombay leaves the reader with the impression that he does not feel particularly at home there either. Finally, the story concludes with Kersi's return to Canada and the realization that his visit home has not helped him confirm his Indian identity or his Canadian one. He concludes:

Gradually, I discovered I'd brought back with me my entire burden of riddles and puzzles, unsolved. The whole sorry package was there, not lightened at all. The epiphany would have to wait for another time, another trip. (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 192)

Yet, it seems that his trip has provided him with one answer at least, namely the resolution that Jamshed and "his way of seeing the worst in everything" (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 192) do not do him any good. As a consequence, he decides to end his acquaintance with him and throw away his letter unopened (Mistry, "Lend Me Your Light" 193).

Finally, in the last story, Kersi does not seem to feel the pressure to deny his heritage culture and identity anymore. Instead, he even expresses his disappointment about the lady in the pink bikini turning up for the second swimming class with her pubic hair shorn like other Canadian women (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 240). He clearly disapproves of her gesture to assimilate to the Canadian way of life and to set aside the customs of her ethnic community. Yet, it needs to be mentioned that he himself still chose to wear Western-style swimming trunks. So, he does not seem to be so sure about how to deal with his state of in-betweenness after all. Nevertheless, Kersi no longer seems to fret over each and every little decision, feeling that deciding against India would be a betrayal of his origins or vice versa. He seems to have arrived at a point in his acculturation process at which he realizes that he is free to make a choice according to his likings. And this new-found freedom finally encourages him to try out new things. With the sentence "The only ones I can identify are

maple” Kersi indicates that he believes that, even though he has already spent considerable time living in Canada, he has only begun to scratch its surface (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 241). He does not understand Canada yet, he merely knows a few things about its people and their mentality. However, the protagonist indicates his willingness to change that towards the end of the narrative when he voices his intention to buy a book of Canadian trees (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 249). Another way the protagonist signals his decision to try and make Toronto his new home is when he resolves to finally ask the old man's name (Mistry, "Swimming Lessons" 249). In other words, it seems that Kersi slowly comes to terms with the strong presence of ambivalence in his life as he starts prioritizing his own individuality over nationality and ethnicity (see chapter 2.2.2).

Overall, despite a noticeable development in Mistry's migrant protagonists towards a less rigid identification with either one of the national cultures involved, one cannot speak of their reaching a stage of outright transculturality. In the end, Kersi is resolved to give Canada a chance and to allow himself to adapt. That is a step towards a transcultural consciousness; however, the protagonist has not arrived there yet. Furthermore, the fact that Rohinton Mistry frequently reverts to stereotypes in order to compare and contrast different cultures hints at an understanding of cultures as separate entities homogenous within themselves. Aspects of the stories suggesting a more flexible and processual approach to the idea of culture are rare. Among them are the representation of airports as being the same all over the world and the fact that the members of Zoroastrian society of Toronto are portrayed as more similar to wealthy Canadians than to the Indian-based Parsis. These instances hint at processes of cultural uniformization as well as at the existence of transcultural networks leading to similarities between members of the same class transgressing national boundaries.

## 4 The Migratory Experience in Jhumpa Lahiri's Work

### 4.1 The Author and the Selected Works

Jhumpa Lahiri was born of Bengali parents in 1967 in London. Soon after her birth, her parents moved to the US, where she grew up in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. Her father working as a librarian, Lahiri's interest in literature and books dates back to her childhood days (A&E Television Networks). The author started to experiment with creative writing early on, regarding it mainly as an emotional outlet but also as a means of connecting with her classmates in an effort to create something together (Lahiri, "Trading Stories"). After finishing high school, Lahiri went on to study English Literature at Barnard College in New York and at Boston University. In 1999, her first book *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short stories, was published and immediately became a great success. It was awarded a series of literary prizes, among them the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Hemingway Award (A&E Television Networks). Since then, she has released two acclaimed novels, *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*, as well as another short story collection, titled *Unaccustomed Earth* (A&E Television Networks).

In an article published in *The New Yorker*, Lahiri describes her feelings of inadequacy as a child in an attempt to explain her development as an author. She writes the following about her former self: "I was always falling short of people's expectations: my immigrant parents', my Indian relatives', my American peers', above all my own." (Lahiri, "Trading Stories"). In her youth, reading played an important role in her life; the books that she read were English and usually revolved around American characters with typically American lives (Lahiri, "Trading Stories"). Reading them painfully made her realize that her family was different. Yet, these books also allowed her to discover American culture (Lahiri, "Trading Stories"). The more familiar she grew with the American way of life, the more estranged she felt from her parents. Lahiri openly admits to her feelings of alienation, saying: "I knew that I was a stranger to them, an American child. In spite of our closeness, I feared that I was alien." (Lahiri, "Trading Stories"). That explains why, when she started her career as a writer, Lahiri's main concern was to let her parents know that "[she] understood, on [her] own terms, in [her] own words, in a limited but precise way, the world they came from" (Lahiri, "Trading Stories"). This is reflected primarily in her choice of themes and topics and the fact that the great majority of her characters is of Bengali descent.

As mentioned earlier, Lahiri's fame as a writer is largely due to her short stories. Both her collections, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, centre around the Bengali diaspora in America. The author explores how its members adapt to their lives abroad and how their cultural identity is reconfigured over the generations. For that purpose, Lahiri relies heavily on domestic settings or, as Chatterjee (97) puts it, "[h]er fiction recreates a microcosmic Bengali world transplanted to the diasporic space of North America". The short story format enables Lahiri to render a wealth of images of immigrant life, thus illustrating effectively the great diversity of the experiences made. In addition to issues of identity and alienation, her work also shows a strong focus on universal issues, such as human relationships and gender.

The three short stories selected for this thesis are "Mrs. Sen's" and "This Blessed House" from the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* as well as "Hell-Heaven" from *Unaccustomed Earth*. All of them feature Bengali immigrants to the US from the first and the second generations. In "This Blessed House" and "Hell-Heaven", individuals adopting distinct acculturation strategies are juxtaposed, whereas the third story concentrates on portraying Mrs. Sen's approach to life in the US and her young American friend's role in the process.

## 4.2 Prevailing Themes and Topics

Since this thesis aims at discerning the migrant authors' chosen narratives of migration as well as their attitudes concerning culture, identity and migration, the first step in this analysis is the identification of the prevailing topics and themes in the samples of Lahiri's work discussed.

### 4.2.1 Displacement, Alienation and Nostalgia

The most emblematic themes in the literatures of migration, displacement, alienation and nostalgia, also have a strong presence in Lahiri's work. Subsequently, the various ways the author employs to thematise these issues will be discussed.

A strong sense of displacement pervades particularly the two stories "Mrs. Sen's" and "Hell-Heaven". In both cases, it is the women who struggle most with their new American existence. Neither Mrs. Sen nor Aparna, Usha's mother, left their homeland out of choice. Rather they considered it their duty as wives to follow their husbands abroad and to support them in the realization of their dreams. Neither of them has a job in America. As a consequence, they consider caring for their family their prime responsibility. A lack of American influence in their lives as housewives allows them to keep living their Bengali reality in the privacy of their homes, the only significant difference being solitariness. Deprived of the comfort of community, these women tend to fall prey to social isolation, which can easily lead to depression. The changes in attitude and behaviour which they perceive in their loved ones, due to them being exposed to another culture, are met with misunderstanding and irritation. Thus, they are at the root of conflicts which frequently disrupt the sanctity of the home. Consequently, the women feel even more isolated and lonesome.

Usha describes her mother's desolate life as follows: "I would return from school and find my mother with her purse in her lap and her trench coat on, desperate to escape the apartment where she had spent the day alone" (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 63). As Aparna tells her daughter towards the end of the story, her desperation was so profound that one day she decided to commit suicide and was only deterred from going through with it by a neighbour's interruption (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 82-3). Pranab's company and his attentiveness towards her improve Aparna's situation in the US a lot. However, this does not mean that her nostalgia is gone. She still indulges in nostalgic memory from time to time.



Yet, rather than throwing her off balance, her memories seem to help her to heal with Pranab at her side, listening with an understanding ear (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 66). He seems to cherish her past rather than reproaching her for getting hung up on it and not trying hard enough to make a happy future in America. Finally, alienation also plays a vital role in "Hell-Heaven". It is represented primarily through the relationship between mother and daughter. They became alienated from each other as Usha grows up and becomes more and more westernized.

Mrs. Sen's story resembles Aparna's in many ways. She, too, moved all the way to a strange country for her husband's sake and has difficulties accepting and embracing her new situation. Her alienation and uneasiness are reflected in the following statement: "Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence" (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 115). While Mr. Sen seems content enough with his whole life revolving around his work, his wife has not yet come to terms with her exile being permanent. This is probably the reason why she has not started rebuilding her life. She barely goes out, has no social ties whatsoever and, worst of all, she spends all day long in a home which seems desolate and abandoned. This is reflected in the new lampshades still being wrapped and the TV and telephone covered with pieces of fabric (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 112). Moreover, it becomes clear that she does not regard this house in America as her home when she keeps calling India her home, as Eliot notices at some point (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 116). On top of all that, Mrs. Sen also becomes alienated from her dear friends in India because she feels ashamed of her current situation in America. She tells Eliot that they often ask her to send pictures from her new life, but she cannot because "[t]hey think [she] live[s] the life of a queen" and she dares not disappoint them (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 125). Consequently, she seems to be keeping her silence, not sending them any letters at all.

Naturally, a husband who does not pay her any attention adds to Mrs. Sen's misery. Eliot, the child she is looking after in the afternoons, is the only one to keep her company. Therefore, every time Mrs. Sen picks him up from school, Eliot perceives a kind of urgency on her part for him to join her (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 119). Eliot is more than just a companion. He is also a teacher or rather an object of study for his nanny. Mrs. Sen and Eliot learn a lot from each other. They listen patiently to each other's explanations of their cultural particularities, thereby helping each other reach a more profound understanding of each other's cultural mindset. Furthermore, it seems that their relationship helps Mrs. Sen to gain

self-confidence. On the one hand, Eliot openly encourages Mrs. Sen to believe in herself and push her own limits at times (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 119-20). For example, one time in the car, he says to Mrs. Sen: "You could go anywhere" (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 119). On the other hand, the fact that she is in charge in her relationship with Eliot might be important in helping her overcome the impotence she has felt ever since the decision to move to America had been made for her. Therefore, when she is with him, she dares to transgress the boundaries of her house and eventually even sets out for the fish market (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 119, 122, 131-3, 133-4). The positive effects of her relationship prove what Chatterjee (101) said about the importance of intercultural relationships for the acculturation process: "[T]he possibility of transcending the dislocation of immigration lies in such human connections".

Finally, there is also a strong presence of nostalgia in Mrs. Sen's tale. This is reflected in the fact that the mere mention of the word *India* seems to do something to her and lets her claim in a tearful voice that "[e]verything is there" (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 113). She shows a similar reaction to a letter she receives from home. It seems that the letter makes her forget everything around her and lets her mind wander far away (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 122). Moreover, the narrator tells us that there are only two things which make Mrs. Sen happy: letters from home and fresh fish from the seaside, a meal she grew up eating twice a day in her hometown, Calcutta (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 121, 123). This also perfectly reflects the woman's homesickness and nostalgia.

Interestingly, in "This Blessed House", it is the man rather than the woman who suffers from a sense of displacement. This is reflected primarily in Sanjeev's desire to create a home for his new family according to his expectations. Twinkle's openness towards admitting foreign influences, embodied by the items of Christian paraphernalia, profoundly irritates him. It seems that he intends to hide his sense of displacement and insecurity behind the facade of the suburban cosmopolitan engineer with a preference for the exotic, especially in terms of design (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 142, 145). Christianity is generally not considered as fashionable and, therefore, does not fit well into that scheme. Sanjeev seems extremely concerned about fitting in with his work friends and acquaintances and, thus, goes to great pains to live up to their expectations. However, Sanjeev does not seem to realize that, caught up in his struggle for acceptance, he becomes more and more alienated from his wife. Despite everything, Sanjeev seems to be a little nostalgic about his past life in India.

This nostalgia is manifest in his insistence on preparing and eating complicated Indian meals on weekends (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 144).

#### 4.2.2 Negotiating Cultural Difference

Given that the stories analysed all feature migrants or their descendants as protagonists, the negotiation of cultural difference represents a prominent theme in them. Diverse strategies of acculturation are displayed by the individuals represented in the stories.

"This Blessed House" evolves around the two protagonists' different approaches to acculturation. Sanjeev, a first generation immigrant, seems to sway between assimilation and integration. Regarding the two elements determining acculturation according to Berry (see chapter 2.2.3), Sanjeev's behaviour clearly indicates that he seeks contact with the larger society. However, his attitudes are more difficult to interpret since he allows himself to maintain his Indian cultural heritage only in so far as his American colleagues and friends approve of it. He is terribly insecure and cares a lot about what other people think of him (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 150). This is why he reacts as follows to Twinkle putting up the Virgin Mary statue on the lawn: "All the neighbors will see. They'll think we're insane" (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 146). Depending on peoples' expectations, he willingly adopts some aspects of American life (interior design and classical music) while fiercely rejecting others, neglects certain elements of his Indian cultural heritage and struggles to adhere to others. Hinduism is not mentioned once in the story and, thus, does not seem to be of any importance in the protagonists' household. Yet, exhibiting Christian memorabilia in their home seems out of the question for Sanjeev. He wants to tell the realtor to remove these things from his house (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 138). Therefore, religion is obviously a topic he is very touchy about.

Twinkle, on the other hand, seems to have reached a point which Berry fails to cover with his model of acculturation. Being a second generation immigrant, a mixed cultural heritage forms the basis of her hybrid identity. This is why the question whether to maintain her heritage culture or not does not pose itself. Twinkle is also ambivalent regarding the second decisive element according to Berry, namely relationships sought with other groups. Principally, she is a communicative person and welcomes contact with other people. Yet, she is not willing to achieve it at any cost. In other words, Twinkle refuses to let herself be put into any category but rather picks and chooses whatever she likes about any culture in order

to incorporate it into her lifestyle. She also invents her own recipes and her own style in terms of fashion and interior design thanks to her self-confidence, which allows her to feel comfortable sticking out of the crowd every now and then (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 144).

The negotiation of cultural difference also plays an important role in "Hell-Heaven". Essentially, the story revolves around Pranab Chakraborty and his process of acculturation in America. The author depicts his development from following a separation approach towards adopting a strategy of integration and, finally, assimilation (see chapter 2.2.3).

When he first arrived in America, Pranab was desperate for human companionship and he found it within the Bengali expatriate community. He felt at ease there as he shared a common cultural background as well as the migratory experience with its members. However, Pranab slowly started building a life outside the Bengali community. At university, he got into contact with American students. He fell in love with an American girl and they decided to get married (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 70). A recommendation by his 'adoptive family' in the US as well as the girl's efforts to integrate into the Bengali community could not convince Pranab's parents to approve of the marriage (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 68, 71-2). Due to his parents' close-mindedness, Pranab and Deborah eventually turned their backs on the Bengali community and the rigid adherence to their customs. Probably the young man was also encouraged to do so because he perceived a certain hostility towards his wife, who was regarded as an intruder in the community. Even Aparna, his friend, indirectly accused Deborah of being a bad influence on him by saying: "He used to be so different. I don't understand how a person can change so suddenly. It's just hell-heaven, the difference." (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 68-9). However, in her case, it is unclear whether she disliked Deborah out of jealousy or out of a sense of obligation towards her cultural heritage. So, Pranab and Deborah finally celebrated a strictly American wedding with thirty guests, only three of which were of Bengali descent (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 72-3). Subsequently, the family stopped showing up at Bengali gatherings, their absence being attributed to Deborah (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 75). Only years later, Pranab reached out to Usha's family and other Bengalis by inviting them to a Thanksgiving feast at his house (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 77). However, as we find out towards the end of the story, even this attempt at reconnecting was actively encouraged by Deborah, who had always felt guilty for being the reason Pranab had had to renounce his cultural heritage and turn his back on his friends (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 82). Summing up, Pranab and Deborah's intercultural marriage is a turning-point in the young

Bengali's acculturation process. In the face of the defensive stance adopted by the Bengali community, Pranab sees no other solution than to break ties with his family and friends and to assimilate to US culture.

In general, the Bengali expatriate community is portrayed as protective and caring towards its members and as unforgiving and hostile towards outsiders. Even though Deborah treats them with respect and makes an effort to fit in, the Bengali women treat her badly (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 73). Considering that they are the ones to be living in a foreign country, their behaviour seems rather extreme. However, as mentioned in the theory chapter, it is a common phenomenon that people who feel threatened by cultural disorder, as caused for instance by living in a foreign country, turn to traditionalism to reaffirm the boundaries drawn between the self and the other (see chapter 2.2.2). This is probably what makes the Bengali community in "Hell-Heaven" hold on so desperately to their rigid cultural norms.

In contrast, the Americans are depicted primarily as open-minded people, who give the Bengalis the feeling of being welcome in America. For instance, Deborah happily complies with Pranab's request to call Usha's parents *Shyamal Da* and *Boudi*, the Bengali designations for brother and sister, and to eat certain foods with her fingers (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 67-8). She also expresses her interest in learning to say a few words in Bengali (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 69) and she serves fish to the Bengalis instead of beef at her wedding feast as a sign of respect of their customs and traditions (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 73). All these instances of the American showing a vivid interest in and respect for the Bengali way of life show impressively that acculturation is not a one-way street (see chapter 2.2.3). Overall, the reader gets the impression that Lahiri seeks to promote an understanding of acculturation as a process of mutual adaptation in her work.

Also "Mrs. Sen's" features a very open-minded American, namely the boy Eliot. He is interested in getting to know Mrs. Sen's cultural background and he does not judge her for being different. However, not every American in this story is as open-minded as Eliot. His mother conveys a certain mistrust towards Mrs. Sen and her foreignness. This is reflected by her thorough interrogation of Mrs. Sen and her tediously recording all her answers on a steno pad (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 113). Moreover, the fact that she continually refuses the biscuits she is offered by Mrs. Sen out of hospitality leads the reader to believe that either she is suspicious or she lacks the necessary instinct to know that her behaviour offends Mrs.

Sen. Also the following statement made about Eliot's mother indicates that she would probably have preferred to leave Eliot in the care of an American woman: "Most of all she was concerned that Mrs. Sen did not know how to drive" (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 113). In the end, she openly confesses her relief that their arrangement with Mrs. Sen has come to an end (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 135). Moreover, the reader is led to believe that Eliot must have felt his mother's hostility towards Mrs. Sen. The following sentence reflects that: "Eliot felt that he and Mrs. Sen were disobeying some unspoken rule" (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 118).

Mrs. Sen follows the separation strategy according to Berry's model, and little changes about that in the course of the story. Yet, a certain development can be perceived in the protagonist at times. She continually forces herself to practise driving again and again in the belief that, once she has her driving licence, everything will get better (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 119). Moreover, Mrs. Sen repeatedly summons her courage to leave the house and even to go all the way to the fish market. Nevertheless, these efforts to confront her fears and familiarize herself with America and its inhabitants seem to have come to a sudden stop when the accident happens towards the end. Even Eliot, her only link to the outside world, is taken from her then (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 134).

Furthermore, there are other means employed in this story in order to thematise cultural difference. Indian and US culture are continually juxtaposed in the course of Eliot and Mrs. Sen's conversations. Sometimes the information they exchange is purely factual. For instance, when Mrs. Sen tells Eliot that in India the driver's seat is at the right hand side of the car rather than the left (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 120) or when she explains what the function of the red vermilion powder in her hair is (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 117). At other times, Mrs. Sen complains about things she does not like about the US, like the penetrating silence or the fact that Americans get to choose from a ridiculously large array of cat food in the supermarket, but are deprived of a genuine choice of fish (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 115, 123). However, also Mrs. Sen asks Eliot a lot of questions about America, secretly expecting that his answers will confirm her suspicions. Judging from her explanations of how things are done in India, which usually follow Eliot's answers, it seems that her enquiries have another objective, namely to make Eliot reflect on his own culture. By way of example, she asks him one day: "Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?" (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 116). Eliot answers: "Maybe." Then he starts to think about his own home for a while before he makes another attempt at providing a more satisfactory

answer (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 117). This is their way of negotiating cultural difference. Slowly but surely they get to know each other better and a close friendship develops. They get so used to each other that Eliot gets irritated when his mother picks him up for she is the intruder now, in their own little world (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 118).

### 4.2.3 Love, Relationships and Gender

Chatterjee (103) argues that the main focus of Lahiri's work is "the changing Bengali family and the complexities of family life and relationships in this new milieu." This is also a theme which predominates in the three stories analysed for this thesis. Since the Bengali community is a very traditional one, the challenges which arise in arranged marriages as well as the tensions caused by gender inequality are issues which figure repeatedly in Lahiri's work.

The theme has its strongest presence in "This Blessed House", which centres on a newly-wed Bengali couple building a home together. Sanjeev and Twinkle's first encounter was arranged by their parents (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 142). At the time, Twinkle was disillusioned with love because her American boyfriend had recently abandoned her and Sanjeev was constantly reminded by his mother that he was wasting his time and needed a wife and family "to look after and love" (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 143, 148). When they first meet, they like each other well enough and so, after a few more encounters, they decide to give in to their parents' urging and get married in India (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 143). That both are not particularly emotionally invested in their union becomes clear when reading the following passage: "He did not know if he loved her. He said he did when she had first asked him [...]. Though she did not say it herself, he assumed then that she loved him too [...]." It seems that Bengalis have a rather pragmatic approach to marriage, in which love is not a priority. From Sanjeev's point of view, the aspects that determine whether a woman is a suitable wife for him are her looks, her social standing and her level of education. Accordingly, it is stated: "Now he had one, a pretty one, from a suitably high cast, who would soon have a master's degree. What was there not to love?" (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 148). Nevertheless, it seems that Sanjeev changes his opinion once they start to settle into their married life. Suddenly, there are certain things that irritate him about his wife despite her apparent suitability for him (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 142). Sanjeev's annoyance with his wife's eccentricity is expressed, for instance, in

the narrator's seemingly dry statement: "Lately he had begun noticing the need to state the obvious to Twinkle" (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 137). Later on in the story, his discontentment is expressed as follows:

He was getting nowhere with her, with this woman whom he had known for only four months and whom he had married, this woman with whom he now shared his life. He thought with a flicker of regret of the snapshots his mother used to send him from Calcutta, of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without consulting a cookbook. Sanjeev had considered these women, had even ranked them in order of preference, but then he had met Twinkle. (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 146).

This passage reveals the problems that arranged marriages entail and, thus, covertly criticises that custom.

As the couple starts building a life together, Sanjeev realizes that their totally different views on life might become a problem eventually, especially since she does have strong opinions on things and does not hesitate to express them. Especially their diverging tastes for interior design pose a problem that is a frequent cause for conflict. When Sanjeev tries to put his foot down and simply informs Twinkle that he will remove certain Christian objects from his house, he meets with open resistance. Counter to his expectations, she either openly confronts him, telling him straight out that they own the house and property together and, thus, need to decide together what is to be done with it (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 149). Or she finds ways to circumvent his prohibition by designing at least her parts of the house according to her own tastes (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 139). As a consequence, Sanjeev longingly remembers his bachelor days as a time when things were still easier for he did not have to consider or, even worse, consult anyone when taking decisions (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 138). Towards the end of the housewarming party, there is a moment when Sanjeev finds himself all alone in the house and is tempted to simply shut the door to the attic:

He thought of all the things he could do, undisturbed. He could sweep Twinkle's menagerie into a garbage bag and get in the car and drive it all to the dump, and tear down the poster of weeping Jesus, and take a hammer to the Virgin Mary while he was at it. (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 155)

Also the chores around the house are constant sources of discord. As Sanjeev gradually discovers, Twinkle does not conform to his image of the perfect housewife. Even though she works on her master thesis at home, she fails to fulfil her household duties. The manner in



which Lahiri points out these shortcomings on her part has a certain irony to it. The following passage at the very beginning of the story serves to illustrate that aspect:

She [...] places the statue on top of the fireplace mantel, which needed, Sanjeev observed, to be dusted. [...] By the end of the week the mantel had still not been dusted; it had, however, come to serve as the display shelf for a sizable collection of Christian paraphernalia. (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 137)

In this respect, the narrator also comments on Twinkle's lack of ambition in the kitchen and the fact that it is usually Sanjeev who slaves over the curries and other complicated Indian meals in the kitchen instead of her. Sometimes Sanjeev wonders quietly why Twinkle has not done certain tasks around the house in his absence since she continually complains about boredom (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 141). However, he never openly reproaches her for not fulfilling her tasks at home. While Sanjeev's worldview is seemingly based on traditional gender roles, he is able and willing to step in for his wife when she does not react to his hints. Accordingly, he makes almost all the preparations for the housewarming party himself without complaint. The reason for that, however, is possibly also to be found in the totally different character traits of the two. In contrast to Twinkle, Sanjeev cares a lot about what other people think of him. Therefore, he wants everything to be perfect for the party and, thus, is willing to do whatever it takes for it. Twinkle, on the other hand, does not seem to care too much. She is confident that she can win people over with her personality and, thus, does not attach such value to the tidiness of their household and the exquisiteness of the snacks on offer.

Towards the end of the story, the reader is led to wonder whether he was wrong about the relationship being a loveless one as Sanjeev admits to feeling "a pang of anticipation at the thought of her rushing unsteadily down the winding staircase" (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 155). He can suddenly think of a lot of tiny details that he loves about his wife and he remembers longingly how he would feel every time they had ended their telephone conversations before they got married (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 156). So maybe they were in love but temporarily forgot all about it over all the hassle that a mutual routine entails.

The two other stories feature relationships in which the household is the wife's responsibility, whereas the husband is the primary wage earner. The fact that Sanjeev is willing to contribute actively to the mutual household can possibly be attributed to his

second-generation immigrant wife. Twinkle's spending her whole life in America seems to have undermined her adherence to traditional gender roles, which Sanjeev sees himself forced to accept. She does not resign herself to being no more than a wife and future mother, as the other two women seem to have done. Mrs. Sen and Aparna are both portrayed as having few social ties outside the family. They both seem to be extremely lonely in their American homes and, thus, experience great difficulty finding happiness in the US.

Given that intercultural marriages are viewed with great scepticism among the Bengali community (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 75), the celebration of an arranged marriage prior to the young men's departure to the West seems to be a common occurrence. This is what happened in the case of both the Sens and Usha's parents. Their marriages are based exclusively on practical considerations and are, thus, represented as rather loveless. The husbands spend the bigger part of their time outside the house and pay very little attention to their wives, in spite of everything they have given up for them in accompanying them abroad. While Mr. Sen at least dedicates some time to his wife every now and then, taking her driving and shopping to the fish market, Usha's father is portrayed as absolutely unapproachable. Usha, the narrator, says the following about him: "He was wedded to his work, his research, and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate" (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 65).

Aparna has Pranab and their unusually close relationship to console her. From the very beginning, it is out of the question that something could happen between them, even though he seems to be the husband Aparna will never have. The two have a lot in common and they love spending time together. The narrator tells us that "Pranab Kaku's visits were what [her] mother looked forward to all day" and that "he wooed her as no other man had" (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 63, 67). Despite everything, Usha's father does not show any signs of jealousy. Instead, he seems relieved to know Aparna has a companion who makes her happy (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 66). Given that Pranab plays the role of her brother-in-law, their friendship is not viewed as improper by their Bengali friends and, thus, Usha's father does not need to fear defamation. Later on in life, when Pranab and Usha are gone, Aparna and her husband finally find a way to be together which seems to work for both of them (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 81).

Finally, there is another relationship to be discussed in “Hell-Heaven”, the intercultural marriage between Pranab and Deborah. Opposed by Pranab’s family and friends, their union is a challenge for everyone involved from its very beginnings. For him, it means having to bear the wrath of his family back home and the alienation from his ethnic community in the US, which has been an important pillar in his life ever since his arrival. Also Deborah faces major challenges as she feels torn between feeling guilty for making him give all that up for her and envying the Bengalis for having a connection with her husband that she can never have (Lahiri, “Hell-Heaven” 82). Despite everything, the couple seems to make things work. Usha states that “[t]heir open affection for each other, their easily expressed happiness, was a new and romantic thing to [her]” (Lahiri, “Hell-Heaven” 70). They lead a seemingly happy life surrounded by her family and raise two American children. Nevertheless, in the end, their relationship fails “after twenty-three years of marriage”, as is stressed in the story (Lahiri, “Hell-Heaven” 81). Surprisingly for Aparna, who had always prophesied that the union was doomed because Deborah was bound to leave him, it was Pranab who had strayed (Lahiri, “Hell-Heaven” 81).

#### **4.2.4 Generational Conflict**

This survey of the main themes treated in the short stories discussed would not be complete without mentioning the generational conflict. The theme only plays a role in “Hell-Heaven”, since it is the only story featuring more than one generation of immigrants. Nevertheless, I consider it a predominant theme for two reasons. On the one hand, its presence is so strong in this one story. On the other hand, Chatterjee (104), who investigated all of Lahiri’s short stories, claims that “[t]he examination of parenthood, the relationship between immigrant parents and their children, in particular, seems to be a key concern in the collection”.

In “Hell-Heaven”, the evolving distance between mother and daughter is nicely traced throughout the narration. It commences with the moment Usha first tells her mother that she hates her (Lahiri, “Hell-Heaven” 74). Soon afterwards, she starts to feel the need to hide things from her mother and to pretend to be someone she is not in order to be left in peace (Lahiri, “Hell-Heaven” 76). The estrangement culminates when Usha states that “it was clear to us both that I had stopped needing her, definitely and abruptly” (Lahiri, “Hell-Heaven” 77). Only after Usha has finally left home, do mother and daughter manage to make peace. She tells us that it was because her mother had finally “accepted the fact that [she] was not

only her daughter but a child of America as well” (Lahiri, “Hell-Heaven” 81-2). However, also the fact that Usha eventually reached an age in which she could look back on their past from a certain distance might have played a central role in their reconciliation.

### 4.3 Characters

Generally, Lahiri works with a much smaller cast of characters than Mistry. Most of the time, it is only the protagonists who are characterised extensively by means of descriptions, the things they say and think, and the way they act throughout the story.

In “This Blessed House”, for instance, only the two protagonists Sanjeev and Twinkle seem to be of importance to the story. Any other characters are given little attention. Their parents do play a role in the narrative since they prepared the ground for the marriage. Nevertheless, they are never mentioned by name and described only in terms of their place of residence, thus aiding the characterisation of the two main characters. Moreover, little effort is made to characterise Sanjeev’s acquaintances who attend the party. Their short descriptions are limited to the most obvious features and to the nature of their relationships to Sanjeev (Lahiri, “This Blessed House” 150-1, 152, 153). Minor characters are probably disregarded by the author in order to emphasise that the couple lives far away from both their families and is not particularly involved in the local Bengali community, thus countering the stereotypical image of loud and colourful gatherings of the Bengali family clan. Moreover, the fact that detailed descriptions of other minor characters are omitted allows the reader to focus his/her attention wholly and entirely on the couple and their relationship.

Judging from their names, Sanjeev’s friends’ cultural origins are evenly balanced. Douglas and Lester are his American colleagues from work, and Prabal and Sunil, with seemingly Indian roots, he seems to know from his student days. This is an interesting observation given that it implies that Sanjeev, consciously or unconsciously, seeks the company of other Bengalis while mixing with Americans only at work. Yet, it has to be pointed out that Sanjeev seems to be a loner and his professional as well as personal relationships are all portrayed as rather superficial (Lahiri, “This Blessed House” 144-5).

As briefly mentioned above, Sanjeev and Twinkle are both portrayed in great detail mainly through their exchanges, but also through the objects that they attach value to. Both seem to attach more value to Western culture and art than to their heritage culture, the only Indian object mentioned being the silk paintings that they bought on their honeymoon in Jaipur (Lahiri, “This Blessed House” 152). However, they favour different things. Despite its cheap tastelessness (Lahiri, “This Blessed House” 138), Twinkle shows great enthusiasm for

the collection of Christian memorabilia hidden all over their house. Sanjeev, on the other hand, displays a more sophisticated taste. He enjoys listening to classical music and chose a representative rather than comfortable house for himself and his wife to live in (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 139, 145).

With Sanjeev and Twinkle, Lahiri chose to portray two extremely different personalities linked by marriage. Twinkle is everything that Sanjeev is not. She is impulsive and self-confident, so much so that she dares to like what she likes rather than what she is supposed to like. He, on the other hand, always wants to do right by everyone and sticks to the rules so much that he never stops to ask himself what it is that he really wants. This is probably why he resents her carelessness and her lack of a sense of duty so much. Twinkle, however, despairs at his eagerness to please. This is expressed in her reproachfully asking him at one point in the story: "Why does it matter to you so much what other people think?" (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 147). Another important difference between the two is that they belong to different immigrant generations. This information seems to be secondary as it is given only in passing as a part of the description of how their marriage was arranged (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 142). Nevertheless, it might be a decisive factor in explaining their different approaches to dealing with cultural diversity. Twinkle, being born and raised in the US, seems to have come to terms with her hybridity by defining her identity based on aspects other than nationality and/or ethnicity. She flexibly adopts aspects originating in other cultures into her daily life. This indicates her understanding of identity as a continual process of self-definition (see chapter 2.2.2). Sanjeev does not seem to have arrived at such a stage. He still seems to conceptualize culture as a homogenous mass, which explains his impression that he needs to choose sides. In this process, he is seemingly stuck somewhere between assimilation and integration according to Berry's model (see chapter 2.2.3).

The story "Mrs. Sen's" also comprises a modest group of characters. On the one hand, this might be a measure taken to fulfil the requirements of the short story genre. On the other hand, Lahiri might have limited her cast of characters deliberately in order to provide as little cause of distraction as possible for the reader and to emphasise the extent of Mrs. Sen's isolation. Each of the characters, namely Mr. and Mrs. Sen, Eliot and his mother as well as the fishmonger and the bus driver, seems to be absolutely essential to the narrative, fulfilling a very specific role.

Mr. and Mrs. Sen represent a rather stereotypical Indian couple. Their marriage was arranged and after a big celebration in India, they moved abroad to build a life together, barely knowing each other. Their relationship adheres to traditional gender roles. Accordingly, he goes to work every day while she stays at home cooking and doing the housework. While he is characterised primarily by his absence, Mrs. Sen initially seems to define her own identity solely by means of her relationship to her husband. The fact that she presents herself as a professor's wife, not adding any actual information about herself, clearly shows her utter lack of confidence (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 111). As mentioned above, her character does undergo some development in the course of the story. However, the progress she makes seems to be ruined by the accident she causes and Eliot's subsequent removal from her care.

Eliot and his mother stand for America and its inhabitants, reflecting different standpoints on immigrants and their foreignness. Eliot functions as a friend and confidant for Mrs. Sen, navigating her carefully around the US. He does not judge her for being different, nor does he defend American culture. He accepts and respects her otherness and does not seem bothered about it. His mother, however, does not seem to trust Mrs. Sen from the very beginning. Throughout the story, she keeps her distance from Eliot's nanny and does not respond to her attempts at connecting with her. On the one hand, her mistrust may be rooted in Mrs. Sen's foreignness. On the other hand, it might also have to do with the fact that the woman is painfully reminded of her shortcomings as a mother by Mrs. Sen's devoted care for the boy. The two women seem to differ widely in their views on the upbringing of a child. At one point in the story, Mrs. Sen comments on the issue, saying:

When I think of you, only a boy, separated from your mother for so much of the day, I am ashamed. [...] When I was your age I was without knowing that one day I would be so far. You are wiser than that, Eliot. You already taste the way things must be. (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 123)

She expresses her utter lack of understanding of a mother who does not look after her own child. However, the reproach is immediately diminished when she acknowledges that it is beneficial for a child to be prepared for life far away from his/her mother. This reflects a new insight gained from her migratory experience.

Finally, the fishmonger and the bus driver are essential to indicate Mrs. Sen's opening up towards the American culture. The two represent two different reactions to an immigrant's

efforts of acculturation. The fishmonger welcomes her efforts and encourages her through his friendliness, whereas the bus driver seems rather indifferent to her (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 124, 133). Even after she confirms that she does speak English, he addresses Eliot instead of her, thus adding to her feelings of impotence.

"Hell-Heaven" comprises more characters than the other stories since it is the only one to feature more than one immigrant generation. Yet, both nuclear families are rather small and only few of their friends and relations are mentioned by name and/or play a role in the story. Therefore, there are essentially two male and three female characters the plot revolves around, namely Pranab and Usha's father, Deborah, Aparna and Usha herself. They are all characterised in great detail based on memories of the past as well as descriptions of their behaviour and attitudes in the present.

A further aspect aiding their characterisation is the fact that each figure seems to have a counterpart with certain similarities and significant differences. Aparna and Deborah, for instance, form such a pair. Their common role as wife and mother suggests comparison. However, Aparna is portrayed as rather stubborn and close-minded, constantly assuming a defensive stance towards the American girl, while Deborah is depicted as an open-minded woman, who does her best to reach out to Aparna and apparently considers her a friend (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 81).

Then there is Pranab and Usha's father. The two men could not be more different. Pranab is portrayed as a cheerful and adventurous young man, whereas Usha's father considers conversation "a chore" and advocates routines and frugality (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 65-6). The two men are both of Indian descent, but have different backgrounds (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 65). As the audience finds out from Usha's narration, Pranab was born in a neighbourhood in North Calcutta within walking distance from Aparna's house. Usha's father, on the other hand, was born and raised in what his wife seems to consider the countryside, a fact which might account for his more traditional views. While he had married Usha's mother "to placate his parents", Pranab simply liked spending time with her (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 64-5). Therefore, there is an emotional tie between Aparna and Pranab which is absent in her marriage. Lahiri might emphasise the contrast between their personalities by juxtaposing long and thorough descriptions of the two in order to illustrate that nationality only plays a minor role in identity construction (see chapter 2.2.2).



Finally, Usha's counterparts seem to be the Chakraborty twins,

[...] who barely looked Bengali and spoke only English and were being raised so differently from [Usha] and most of the other children. They were not taken to Calcutta every summer, they did not have parents who were clinging to another way of life and exhorting their children to do the same. (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 75)

Usha compares the girls to herself and the children of other Bengali immigrants, expressing her envy of the simplicity of their existence. Without the pressure from their parents to adhere to Bengali custom, they are free to choose the bits and pieces of each culture they like best so that something new can evolve. Thus, they get a chance to develop a sense of transculturality early on (see chapter 2.2.3).

In conclusion, the analysis of Lahiri's characters has revealed that she prefers working with a rather small cast of characters. These few characters are diverse in terms of their ethnocultural background as well as their immigrant generation. They are usually portrayed in great detail so that their stance on migration and where it derives from is made clear to the reader. Nevertheless, the figures Lahiri uses also display contrasting features regardless of their origins, which enables her to prioritize individual differences over cultural ones.

## 4.4 Narrative Technique

This subchapter deals with Jhumpa Lahiri's narrative technique. The examination of her stories at the discourse level includes the following aspects: narrative voice and focalization, structure and language and style.

### 4.4.1 Narrative Voice and Focalization

Narrative voice and focalization will be treated for each story separately, given that no common pattern applicable to all three stories could be discerned.

Both "Mrs. Sen's" and "This Blessed House" are third-person narratives. In Mrs. Sen's story, Lahiri uses Eliot as a focaliser. Thus, his feelings and thoughts are related to the audience in great detail. For instance, the reader is told that Eliot "didn't mind going to Mrs. Sen's after school" because "the beach was dull to play on alone" (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 113-4). However, Mrs. Sen's emotions and opinions are only accessible to the reader in so far as she reveals them to Eliot (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 123). At times, the boy also conveys his subjective impressions, as he does when saying that he "always sensed that Mrs. Sen had been waiting for some time, as if eager to greet a person she hadn't seen in years" (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 119). In other words, whatever we learn about Mrs. Sen seems to be filtered through Eliot's eyes. Pendharkar (135) argues that this narrative situation enables Lahiri to portray Mrs. Sen's experience from the "'neutral' or non-judgemental American gaze" of a child. The author might have adopted this strategy in order to avoid juxtaposing the Indian and the American cultures as binaries.

The narrative situation is very similar in "This Blessed House". Here it is Sanjeev, also one of two protagonists, whose perspective the narrator seems to recount. The reader gets to know the couple's relationship by means of his memories and thoughts. What goes on inside Twinkle is only revealed on the rare occasions that she permits Sanjeev a glance at her emotional state (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 149). Therefore, the point of view conveyed is clearly biased (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 140, 146, 147). Summing up, Lahiri offers a male view on a probably rather unconventional Bengali marriage, in which the man shows more concern for the household than the woman does.

"Hell-Heaven" is a first-person narrative told from a minor character's perspective. Usha, Aparna's daughter, tells Pranab's story in retrospect. Most of the time she relates events of Pranab's past, which she experienced first-hand, or she describes her parents and other

people who played a role in his life according to her own impressions. If that is not the case, she discloses her sources, pointing out who told her or whom she overheard talking about the issue at hand (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 61, 66). Even if the audience is not told what or who leads Usha to believe what she narrates, she openly signposts uncertain data and hedges her allegations using modal verbs or adverbs. The following sentence illustrates how the narrator marks her own suppositions: "It must have pleased her that I looked forward to his visits as well" (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 63). Whenever Usha does not use any of the techniques mentioned to hedge her claims, for instance, when talking about her parents' past in India, it can be assumed that her mother has told her about it all (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 64). There are also long periods of time which are not covered altogether by the story since Usha cannot possibly know what happened in Pranab's life during the time their two families were estranged. These periods are only mentioned in passing as the narrator refers to letters that her family got from the Chakrabortys in order to transmit the most important information they contained (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 74-5). At that stage, the focus of the story shifts slightly from Pranab to herself and the changes that she went through at the time as a rebellious teenager (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 76-7). In the end, she uses second-hand information that she gets from her mother in order to conclude the tale of Pranab's life (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 81-2). Even though such peripheral first-person narrators are potentially untrustworthy (Fludernik 153), Usha's apparent sincerity inevitably leads the reader to believe that her account is accurate and credible.

Judging from the stories analysed, Lahiri intends to give a voice to all the players of a multicultural society. This is reflected in her choosing a US citizen, a first- and a second-generation immigrant as focalisers. The fact that Lahiri uses a child to convey the US American perspective might reflect her opinion that children often deal with cultural difference more reasonably than adults. Hence, Eliot presents a rather differentiated perspective on things. While Usha is not too present as a narrator, Pranab seems to express his views much more openly, conveying a rather subjective point of view.

#### **4.4.2 Structure**

According to the theory reviewed, narratives of migration tend to be highly fragmented and often follow a cyclical structure (see chapter 2.3.3). The short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri

analysed in this thesis, however, only partly comply with these criteria and show other characteristics instead.

In general, a chronological structure prevails in all three narrations. Yet, it is disrupted in varying measure by digressions of diverse kinds in the different stories. Rather surprisingly for narrations which feature migrants, place is not a major structuring element since in most stories there is little to no reference to the respective protagonist's country of origin.

In "Hell-Heaven", events are related in the order of their occurrence with the paragraphs marking major turning points in the narration and setting different "eras" apart: life before Deborah's appearance (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 60-7), the time before Pranab and Deborah's engagement (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 67-72), the wedding (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 72-4), the Chakrabortys distancing themselves from the Bengali community (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 74-5), the alienation between mother and daughter and attempts at reconnecting by the Chakrabortys (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 75-81), and, finally, the Chakrabortys' divorce and mother and daughter making peace (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 81-3). Occasional flashbacks take the narrative back in time in order to explain certain character traits in a person or to clarify the nature of the characters' respective relationships. However, they never exceed a couple of sentences and are always firmly embedded in the main storyline.

"This Blessed House" is a little more fractured. It commences rather abruptly in medias res. Subsequently the time leading up to Sanjeev and Twinkle's house-warming party is narrated in a more or less chronological order. However, the narrator frequently digresses from the story to reveal Sanjeev's thoughts (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 141, 147). These digressions are elicited in manifold ways; sometimes a single object serves to establish the link, sometimes it is the situation as a whole which makes the narrator mention a specific past memory or reflect on Sanjeev's present situation (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 138, 142). In this aspect, this story shows certain similarities with an oral tale.

Mrs. Sen's story is disrupted most frequently. The main plot line is related chronologically, from Eliot's mother finding Mrs. Sen's advertisement to the end of their professional relationship. However, there are numerous long descriptive paragraphs, which do not further the plot as such. They primarily depict how Mrs. Sen and Eliot spend their afternoons together and what they talk about (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 113-21). Moreover, they also focus on their interaction with the outside world, embodied by Mrs. Sen's husband, Eliot's mother,

the fishmonger and the bus driver (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 121-4). They are ordered thematically or according to the people involved rather than chronologically. However, after each interruption, the chronological story line is resumed. One event after the other follows in quick succession until the story culminates rather suddenly in Mrs. Sen's car accident and Eliot's mother deciding that Eliot is better off alone at home than being looked after by Mrs. Sen (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 134-5).

Furthermore, two of the stories also comprise a cyclical element. In "Mrs. Sen's", it consists in her acculturation process. She struggles visibly against her isolation and keeps trying to become more and more independent. However, her efforts repeatedly come to nothing because some minor incident upsets her and she falls back into depression (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 127-9). The circle finally closes when she has an accident with Eliot on board and, thus, loses his mother's trust (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 134-5). Without a driving license and Eliot to look after, she finds herself in the same situation at the closing of the story as she was in when she first arrived in America. The moment when the circle closes is clearly marked by the repetition of the sentence "Mr. Sen teaches mathematics at the university" (Lahiri, "Mrs. Sen's" 112, 134). This is what Mrs. Sen tells the police after the accident. She used the same sentence to present herself at her first meeting with Eliot and his mother, when she first started opening up to the outside world.

Similarly, "Hell-Heaven" traces Pranab's cyclical development in terms of acculturation. Initially, Pranab's life in America is rather lonesome. Then he is introduced into the Bengali community of Cambridge, Mass., by Usha and her mother (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 60-2). At some point, he seems to have close ties to both his university peers and his extended Bengali family (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 67-70). However, this ends with his engagement with Deborah (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 72-4). Afterwards, he seems to lead a genuinely American life despite occasional attempts at reconnecting with his Indian friends (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 72-80). At the end of the story, the reader is informed that his marriage eventually failed because he fell in love with a Bengali woman (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 81). Pranab's apparent reorientation towards his heritage culture and community represents the closing of the circle of his development over the years.

Overall, the stories analysed feature a chronological structure with more or less frequent digressions from the plotline. Nevertheless, cyclical elements can be found in two out of three stories.

#### 4.4.3 Language and Style

Compared to Rohinton Mistry's work, Lahiri's style is much more straightforward. There is no artful wordplay or alliterations. The author makes only little use of intertextuality. The rare incidents when this happens are, for example, when she refers to Mahler's Fifth Symphony in connection with Sanjeev and Twinkle's love, or when she alludes to different biblical stories by means of the collection of Christian paraphernalia in "This Blessed House" (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 139-40).

Moreover, the author does not seem to use untranslated foreign words in order to challenge the power relations established in the past during colonialism. She employs Bengali terms only if this becomes necessary due to the lack of a suitable equivalent in English. By way of example, the word *salwar-kameez* can be found in her work, which denotes a Bengali item of clothing (Lahiri, "This Blessed House" 152), or the terms *Shyamal Da* and *Boudi* used to address one's older brother and his wife (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 60). Other Bengali words are used in connection with Pranab's American wife. For instance, Pranab teaches Deborah to say *khub bhalo* and *aacha* (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 68). The meaning of these words is not explained. Research revealed that those are basic Bengali expressions to thank someone and to express interest in a conversation (Learning Basic Bengali). Mention of these words probably serves the purpose of emphasising the effort Deborah makes to show her openness towards Bengali custom. Another function of these words might be to convey Deborah's sense of exclusion. This effect is enforced by the Indian women often deliberately speaking Bengali in her presence to stress her otherness (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 73). Usha, however, seems to lack the mistrust of anything American, which reigns among the first generation of Bengali immigrants. She is kind to Deborah and explains the term *asobbho* to her, which evokes a comic effect given the meaning of the word (Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 69).

As remarked by Davis (*Transcultural Reinventions* 13-4), allusions to oral speech as well as the thematization of the act of storytelling are characteristics frequently observed in Asian-American and Asian-Canadian short stories (see chapter 2.3.3). The only aspect of Lahiri's writing which seems to coincide with that feature is the frequent occurrence of digressions.

As described in the section on structure, the respective narrators tend to digress from the storyline whenever a situation reminds them of something or when they feel the need to clarify something by providing the reader with more background information. This is a feature typical of oral storytelling.

In “Mrs. Sen’s”, for instance, a lot of space is dedicated to Eliot’s memories of how he used to watch Mrs. Sen when she was cooking. The ingredients she uses in her cooking and the ways she prepares food are described in great detail (Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen's” 114-6). Judging from the length of these passages and the frequency of their occurrence, food plays an important role in “Mrs. Sen’s”. However, it is also a recurring motif in “This Blessed House”. According to Williams (70), food can be “the means for characters to assert agency and subjectivity in ways that function as an alternative to the dominant culture”. This seems to be at least partly true for both Mrs. Sen and Sanjeev. Both become active in order to be able to prepare and eat the dishes that they grew up with and love. However, Williams (70) argues that food can also be a means to express characters’ poverty in terms of money and emotions. This applies to Mrs. Sen, who repeatedly tries to recreate typical Bengali meals, but fails due to the lack of certain ingredients. She shows some flexibility by using the wrong kind of fish or by simply leaving out certain ingredients (Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen's” 123, 133). Yet, she is not too happy about it.

Another noticeable feature of Lahiri’s writing is the importance attributed to certain objects. This is not uncommon in migrant literature, as mentioned in chapter 2.3.3. Mrs. Sen’s blade and the use it is usually put to in India as well as its function in her life in America are described in great detail (Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen's” 114-5). Given that Mrs. Sen has not replaced the blade with an American knife and still chops her vegetables sitting on the floor, the blade can be considered some kind of boundary object (see chapter 2.3.3). It serves as a link between both cultures, especially since Eliot loves to watch Mrs. Sen when she cooks (Lahiri, “Mrs. Sen's” 114).

There are also several objects of importance in the story “This Blessed House”. The plot revolves around the discovery of little treasures alluding to US and/or Christian culture. In the course of the story, Twinkle finds “a white porcelain effigy of Christ”, “a 3-D postcard of Saint Francis done in four colors”, “a wooden cross key chain”, “a framed paint-by-number of the three wise men”, “a tile trivet depicting a blond, unbearded Jesus, delivering a sermon

on a mountaintop”, “a small plastic snow-filled dome containing a miniature Nativity scene”, “a larger-than-life size watercolor poster of Christ, weeping translucent tears the size of peanut shells and sporting a crown of thorns”, “a dishtowel that had [...] the Ten Commandments printed on it”, “a plaster Virgin Mary” and, finally, “a solid silver bust of Christ” (Lahiri, “This Blessed House” 136-7, 139, 144, 146, 156). Judging from the materials they are made of, these objects have no material worth, except for the silver bust. Also their artistic value is doubtful as they are described as rather kitschy and tasteless. The narrator states that “[c]learly they lacked a sense of sacredness” (Lahiri, “This Blessed House” 138). Nevertheless, they are semantically charged and stand synecdochically for the Christian faith. The strong presence of these objects in Lahiri’s story is especially interesting given that she tends to focus on individual differences rather than collective identity markers. Yet, the different stances of Twinkle and Sanjeev on this issue show that these objects do not necessarily have to be signs of a collective identity. Twinkle seems to regard them simply as objects she likes, thus ignoring their significance for Christendom as a collective entity.

The Christian paraphernalia set in motion a conflict between Twinkle and her husband. While Twinkle loves them and wants to exhibit them, Sanjeev opposes their exhibition in their living room and on their lawn. There are two possible reasons for Sanjeev’s reluctance. On the one hand, he doubts the objects’ artistic value and, thus, does not want to exhibit them, fearing that he will be ridiculed. On the other hand, he might consider it wrong from a moral standpoint, regarding the trivialization of these sacred objects a sin. Twinkle, however, “appropriates and reinterprets” these “objects signifying an alien faith and culture” (Jackson 114). Either she does so out of carelessness and because she does not attribute any importance to such fixed identity markers as nationality, ethnicity and religion, or she wants to make a statement by inverting the power relations between the colonial periphery and centre.

Finally, comparison and contrast does not play such an important role as it does in Mistry’s work, where the immigrants’ country of origin with its heritage culture is continually juxtaposed with the receiving society. Mrs. Sen’s story seems to be an exception in this respect, since it is the only one of Lahiri’s stories where India and the US are compared and contrasted extensively. Lahiri seems to employ that stylistic device predominantly to emphasise individual differences between characters.





## 4.5 Representations of Culture, Identity and Migration

The purpose of this subchapter is to outline the representations of culture, identity and migration predominant in Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories and, thus, to conclude the present analysis.

The categorisation of the narratives present in Lahiri's work is difficult, since the stories analysed differ in their focus (see chapter 2.3.2). "Mrs. Sen's" is the only one of the stories in which memories of the life in the immigrant's country of origin play a major role. The protagonist struggles visibly with life in America and she tends to draw on her heritage culture in order to make sense of the receiving society and her existence in it. Nevertheless, despite the strong presence of nostalgia in the story, its main focus undoubtedly lies on depicting Mrs. Sen's acculturation process in the US and her efforts to redefine her identity in line with her new environment. This is why "Mrs. Sen's" can undoubtedly be classified as a narrative of arrival.

India is barely mentioned in "Hell-Heaven". The characters' cultural heritage is embodied primarily by the Bengali community of Cambridge, Mass., which they all form part of. India is also present in the form of Pranab's parents, who call, trying to prevent their son's marriage. The fact that the story is told from a second-generation immigrant's point of view may account for the minor role which memories play in it. The wealth of immigrant characters involved allows the author to trace diverse acculturation processes over a long time span and to portray the strong influence of their respective biographies. Over the decades which pass between Pranab's first appearance and his divorce in the end all the characters define and redefine their identity repeatedly. All of them adopt different approaches to settling in their new lives and to becoming part of the receiving society. Even though "Hell-Heaven" illustrates vividly how diverse the migratory experience can be, there is still a strong focus on the ethnic community's collective identity. Moreover, migration is portrayed as both traumatic and non-traumatic depending on the respective character's personality and biography. As a consequence, this story shows more characteristics of the narrative of arrival than of the narrative of transmigration.

"This Blessed House" differs significantly from the other two narrations since the protagonists' migratory experience plays only a liminal role in it. Their relationship and the problems caused by their disparate personalities are foregrounded, while issues of

acculturation are relegated to the sidelines. Their attitudes towards foreignness and the way they deal with it does sometimes give the couple cause for conflict. Yet, Sanjeev and Twinkle basically seem incompatible as a couple because they do not seem to share the same values or the same dreams in life. The gap between fundamentally different attitudes to life, change and personal development seem almost impossible to bridge. These are issues which affect all kinds of relationships and are not necessarily linked to a migratory experience. Moreover, the complications in the couple's adaptation process in their new house raise awareness for the fact that feelings of displacement and alienation are not exclusively reserved for migrants but occur even if people move within the same country. Also Chatterjee underlines this aspect of Lahiri's work with the following statement:

The experience of displacement for these characters is not associated with immigration as it was for their parents but is rather a reality of their mobile, globalized existences, which instead of being traumatic, could also be liberating for them. (Chatterjee 105)

In other words, Lahiri presents migrants in a different light altogether, namely as ordinary people with ordinary problems. By doing so, she shifts the focus away from the hardships and troubles caused by international migration towards the challenges migrants and their descendants face as human beings. Finally, the fact that Sanjeev and Twinkle move houses within the US hints at their cosmopolitan existence. Undoubtedly, their rather detached attitude towards home and their willingness to change their place of residence repeatedly reflects the fact that their identities are not linked primarily to a place anymore and that they view migration as an opportunity rather than an ordeal. This is why this story can be classified as a narrative of transmigration.

Overall, Lahiri's work seems to reflect a rather flexible approach to culture and identity. She ascribes little importance to national culture and ethnicity as identificatory anchors since she seemingly advocates a cosmopolitan world view. Thus, she tends to prioritize the individual over the collective component of identity in her writings. This is probably why most of her stories are set in the private sphere of the protagonist's home. The Bengali ethnic community and its inherent dynamics are thematised only in one out of three stories. Focus is put exclusively on how the community affects the decisions of an individual member, Pranab. Similarly, US immigration policy is not an issue in the stories discussed. It is merely the individual American and the way s/he deals with cultural and ethnic diversity that Lahiri is interested in.

Regardless of the author's personal attitude towards culture and identity, a wide range of stances on these issues is represented in her work. Mrs. Sen seems to have an understanding of culture as a homogenous sphere and detects uncountable cultural differences between India and the US. Pranab, however, has a different approach. He seems to advocate that people judge every individual's qualities on the basis of his/her actions rather than the cultural background. This is reflected in him marrying an American woman and turning his back on the close-minded people in his life who consider culture a prime determinant of identity and, thus, declare people with contrasting cultural heritage as incompatible. Yet, the implications of his finally ending up with a Bengali woman need to be considered. Finally, Twinkle seems to have the most fluid and flexible identity. Obviously, she does not feel the need to live up to anybody's expectations but her own. It seems like she does not even realize that having mixed roots may be a source of disquiet for some people because they have trouble redefining their identity accordingly. Twinkle seems to have accepted that identity is an ongoing process. She is, thus, at ease with herself and resents being pigeon-holed by anyone.

## 5 Comparison and Conclusion

In conclusion, the short stories analysed by both migrant authors focus primarily on issues closely linked to migration, such as displacement, alienation and nostalgic memory. Moreover, the narratives reflect what happens when distinct cultures meet and how individuals handle cultural difference. That is to say, Jhumpa Lahiri and Rohinton Mistry both treat similar topics and themes. The only noticeable variation is that Mistry focuses entirely on problems that have to do with migration while Lahiri also portrays more universal difficulties of life which are not specific to migrants. Thus, Lahiri draws attention to the similarities between immigrants and the larger society rather than emphasising the differences. Instead of focusing on ethnic and cultural diversity, the author foregrounds individual differences in her work, thus promoting a paradigm shift towards a transcultural consciousness. "This Blessed House" is the story which depicts this change of perspective most strikingly. The distinction between the two writers is also manifest in their choice of characters. Lahiri depicts a rather diverse group of people from different cultural backgrounds and immigrant generations, whereas Mistry focuses exclusively on Parsi and/or Indian characters. What is more, Lahiri also portrays the migratory experience from diverse points of view rather than limiting her accounts of migration to the first-generation immigrant's perspective.

Regarding the narrative technique, Mistry seemingly attaches more value to storytelling as an art form, given that he employs a wide array of rhetorical devices with great skill and cunning. Lahiri, on the other hand, seems more focused on getting the meaning across since she writes in a rather straightforward style. Damböck (78-84) argues that transmigrant authors tend to prioritise the creation of texts of artistic value over pursuing a political agenda. Comparing the two authors according to this criterion, Mistry would be the more transmigrant of the two. However, he frequently introduces metonymic gaps into his work by using foreign words, a tactic commonly used by postcolonial authors attempting to invert power relations. Besides, Mistry's narrators Kersi and Nariman continually make comments of a political nature. As a consequence, his writing cannot possibly be described as void of a political agenda. It is both artistic and political. At the same time, the fact that Lahiri seems to put more emphasis on content than on form does not necessarily imply that she is not a transmigrant author. After all, there are other more essential characteristics defining a

narrative of transmigration that Lahiri's work complies with, such as an optimistic portrayal of migration and a focus on individual rather than collective identity construction.

Overall, it seems that the two authors examined use different techniques working towards similar ends. Mistry and Lahiri provide their readers with insights on the difficulties that migration and acculturation entail and, thus, prompt them to empathise with the migrant characters. Mistry does so by creating vivid images of life in India and Canada and by comparing and contrasting the two. Simultaneously, he uses a wide range of characters in order to underline the diversity existing not only across cultural and national borders but also within them. Nevertheless, all things considered, Mistry's representation of migration hints at a rather traditional understanding of culture and identity, an understanding which is more fixed and less fluid, more based on national and ethnic groups rather than on the individual. Lahiri, on the other hand, shows different points of view on migration, thus creating a differentiated image. She uses fewer characters, trying to evoke empathy by portraying them on a very personal level with all their strengths and weaknesses. The fact that Lahiri generally avoids ascribing differences between individuals to their diverging cultural heritage suggests that she believes in the transcultural nature of culture and identity.

One possible reason for the two authors' diverging conceptions of culture and identity might be their belonging to different immigrant generations. Mistry, having lived on two different continents and in two different cultural settings himself, emphasises the contrasting influences that migrants are typically exposed to and the struggles they undergo trying to adapt to their new situation and to redefine their identities accordingly. In contrast, Lahiri focuses on the obstacles that second-generation immigrants face on their way to a transcultural consciousness. While these observations lead to presumptions valid for the two authors discussed, no general conclusions as to the diverging self-perceptions of the first and the second immigrant generations can be drawn, given the limited scope of this study. Furthermore, I would like to stress that the experiences reflected in Mistry and Lahiri's work cannot necessarily be considered representative of the larger immigrant population since they form part of a minority of highly educated migrant intellectuals.

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## 7 Appendices

### Appendix A: German Abstract

Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit untersucht die literarische Darstellung von Migration, Kultur und Identität in den folgenden postkolonialen Kurzgeschichten verfasst von zwei Autoren mit Migrationshintergrund: nämlich „Squatter“, „Lend Me Your Light“ und „Swimming Lessons“ von Rohinton Mistry und „Mrs. Sen’s“, „This Blessed House“ und „Hell-Heaven“ von Jhumpa Lahiri.

Die Protagonisten der sechs analysierten Texte gehören überwiegend der ersten oder zweiten Migranten-Generation an. Aus diesem Grund bieten sie wertvolle Einblicke in die Migration und ihre Folgen auf einer sehr persönlichen Ebene. Hauptaugenmerk der Untersuchung liegt auf der literarischen Darstellung des Prozesses der Identitätsbildung in Migranten sowie auch auf den Kultur- und Identitätskonzepten, welche den verschiedenen Erzählungen zu Grunde liegen.

Die Werke beider Autoren weisen viele Gemeinsamkeiten aufweisen. Jedoch gibt es auch einige deutlich erkennbare Unterschiede, welche auf den leicht unterschiedlichen Vorstellungen von Kultur und Identität der Schriftsteller beruhen. Diese Abweichungen sind möglicherweise dadurch begründbar, dass Mistry und Lahiri selbst unterschiedlichen Migranten-Generationen angehören, wodurch die beiden selbst völlig unterschiedliche Ausgangslagen für das Leben zwischen zwei Kulturen hatten.

## Appendix B: English Abstract

This thesis examines literary reflections on migration, culture and identity in selected postcolonial short stories by Rohinton Mistry and Jhumpa Lahiri. The six stories analysed were authored by migrant writers and revolve around protagonists from the first or second generation of immigrants. Therefore, they offer valuable insights into migration and how it affects the people undergoing it on a personal level. Particular emphasis is put on the representation of processes of identity (trans)formation triggered by migration and on the conceptions of culture and identity underlying the narratives. While lots of parallels can be drawn between the works of both authors, there are also a few noticeable distinctions attributable to their different perceptions of culture and its role in identity formation. This divergence might be due to Mistry and Lahiri belonging to different immigrant generations and, thus, not having the same point of departure for incorporation into the larger society.



## Appendix C: Curriculum Vitae

# Johanna Barbara Czetina

### Personal Information

**Date of Birth:** 25/09/1986

**Place of Birth:** Villach

**Nationality:** Austrian

### Education and Training

- 1997 – 2005                      **Grammar School St. Martin, Villach**  
Bilingual education in English and German  
Student exchange in Ecuador 2002/2003 with AFS<sup>1</sup>
- 2006 – 2010                      **Vienna University of Economics and Business**  
Bachelor Program in Business, Economics and Social Sciences  
Major in International Business Administration
- 2010 – 2015                      **University of Vienna**  
Teacher Accreditation Program for English and Spanish

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<sup>1</sup> AFS – Austauschprogramme für interkulturelles Lernen <http://www.afs.at/>