LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Panoptic spaces and the framings of South Asian diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri’s selected short stories

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Abstract: This article carries out a (con-) textual analysis of cultural crossings, with a particular focus on the notions of assimilation and syncretism, in certain of Jhumpa Lahiri’s diasporic writings. By situating two of her short stories “This Blessed House” and “The Third and Final Continent” within the social-political context of the post-1960s America—when the country witnessed the re-emergence of Orientalism and the rise of a conflicting social phenomenon called neoliberalism—we pursue two important questions: How might the subjectivity of diasporas, under the pretext of convergences with mainstream rubrics, become a part of the apparatus of the hegemonic power? And, how can the rise of neoliberalism justify the ruptures between diverse cultural and political entities, and subsequently, be linked to the emergence of minority culture? To this end, Foucault’s notion of panoptic spaces is used to examine the politics of cultural convergences and religious synthesis, and to analyze the relationship between the formulated identities and the dominant praxes within the fabric of both narratives. We conclude that the stories celebrate convergent measures of the minority culture, reinforce pre-established stereotypes and resonate with an existing public policy interest in regulating diasporic individuals from afar.

Subjects: Asian Diaspora; Diaspora Studies; Religion & Art; Cultural Studies; Literature; Literature & Race

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story collection, Interpreter of Maladies (1999), describes the situation of South Asian immigrants in America as continually straddling between two cultures: that of their homeland and the new mainstream culture of the United States. The current study analyzes two of her short stories to map out the different strategies that the mainstream culture uses to produce immigrants who are docile, submissive and homogenous. Through reading this article, you will learn about how the very fact of general visibility leads immigrant characters to re-define their cultural and religious practices based on the prevailing norms in the process of gaining social acceptance and recognition in the new land. You will also discover that such practices of cultural assimilation and religious syncretism are rooted in the social-political context of the post-1960s America. While reading, you will enjoy the textual evidence cited from the stories to back up the theoretical framework.
1. Introduction

Stuart Hall’s description of America as the juncture point where “assimilation and syncretism” are negotiated is significant in the context of the portrayal of diaspora experience by contemporary South Asian American literary writers (2007, pp. 136–7). When describing the situation of immigrants in the new social formation, the diasporic writers often depict them as continually straddling between two cultures: the formerly central but now peripheral one of the homeland and the new mainstream culture of the host-land. Caught in an in-between space, the displaced individuals constantly struggle to negotiate between the two by integrating into the dominant praxes and simultaneously striving to preserve and reclaim their original cultural traditions.

This article seeks to carry out a (con-) textual analysis of the cultural crossings in South Asian American diasporic literature with a particular focus on the notions of assimilation and religious syncretism that loom over the field. The category, however, is not a self-explanatory one as the South Asian American literature includes writers of various cultures, religions and languages. Given their different colonial and/or postcolonial pasts, these writers have revealed how diverse South Asian Americans are in identity, experience and perspective. Yet in the literary scene of the contemporary generation, it is Indian American writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Divakaruni that have gained increasing public and critical visibility. Within the present century thus far, the most prominent among all Indian American diaspora writers is Jhumpa Lahiri (Asl, 2019), who has garnered colossal reputation for her literary endeavors—in particular for her debut short story collection Interpreter of Maladies that won her the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000.

Born in UK to an Indian family who migrated to America in the 1960s, Lahiri engrosses herself in creating displaced characters of South Asian origin who are caught in the interface between diverse traditions, religions and ways of life. The feeling of tension in diasporic characters as a result of displacement and a sense of un-/belonging to a particular place, culture and religion serves as a unifying theme in her debut short story collection Interpreter of Maladies, binding the seemingly unrelated stories and characters together (Brada-Williams, 2004, pp. 451–4). Nevertheless, two of the stories, “This Blessed House” and “The Third and Final Continent,” are more directly engaged with the notions of assimilation and religious syncretism, and vividly depict the various ways in which diasporic characters accept or contest social-political compliance and religious mingling. Both stories provide tales of Indian immigrants’ constant struggle for self-(re)definition based on the prevailing cultural, political and religious norms in the process of gaining social acceptance and recognition in the new land. “This Blessed House” relates Sanjeev’s worries about the opinions of his American neighbors and friends on his family’s religion, and “The Third and Final Continent” offers a similar depiction of the migrant male narrator’s particular carefulness in closely observing his American landlord’s dictates in a daily struggle for acceptance.

This article draws upon Michel Foucault’s theories of the gaze to examine the existing politics of cultural convergences and religious synthesis operating within the fabric of both narratives. More specifically, Foucault’s notion of panopticism is employed to analyze the relationship between the formulated diasporic identities and the mainstream culture and religion. Within a panoptic paradigm, the subjectivity of individuals and groups is shaped by pervasive fear of permanent surveillance (Foucault, 2008, pp. 51–74). From a Foucauldian perspective, the omnipresence of the panoptic eye and the very fact of being permanently “subjected to a field of visibility” and judgement is an effective strategy of exerting social control as the individuals are led to assume “responsibility for the constraints of power” and become the principle of their own subjection (Foucault, 1995, pp. 202–3). The theory is applicable to Lahiri’s stories because in both of them the fear of being watched and judged by the Americans leads the diasporic subjects, not least Sanjeev
of “This Blessed House” and the narrator-character of “The Third and Final Continent,” to exercise practices of self-monitoring and self-governmentality based on the pre-existing essentialism of racism and religism, which, for instance, presupposes Hinduism as a fixed property that defines members of the Indian community.

A Foucauldian analysis of the politics of cultural convergences and religious synthesis in both stories maps out the ways in which the panoptic gaze works as the central locus of power, governmentality and identity construction. It is argued that the look that objectifies and (re-)shapes the South Asian diasporic subjects by unearthing the oddities assigned to them does so not substantially through observable compulsion, but by occasioning an internalization of an appropriating gaze. What rationalizes the two male characters’ internalization throughout the narratives is their realization of the inescapable visibility of their diasporic subjectivities, that is their liability to being surveyed constantly by the judging eyes of the normative structures of the society. The ever-present gaze of the dominant culture leads the diasporic male characters to perfect mechanisms of self-vigilance in accordance with prescribed normalities with an effort to constitute themselves as normal citizens or members of the community. Among the principal obligations that this quintessential American subjectivity necessitates within the narrative are the national values of cultural integration and religious synthesis, both of which promote a hegemonic ideology of the host-land. Identity formation is contingent of social, cultural and religious milieu. As regards, a Foucauldian approach to the panoptic functioning of power remains highly pertinent in the study of identity formation in the interface between the self and the other as portrayed in Lahiri’s stories.

The study is relevant because the existing literature on the nature of practices of identity formation in Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies comprises a diverse and conflicting body of criticism. Whereas many scholars have commended her stories for moving away from conventional narratives of assimilation or depictions of ghettoized ethnic lives (Alfonso-Forero, 2011; Aubeeluck, 2006; Dhingra, 2012; Kumar, 2011; Shea, 2008), a few others have censured Lahiri’s stories for “inauthentic” representations of “real” problems of the post-1960s diasporic subjects in the States (Asl, 2018a, pp. 2–4; Asl et al., 2018b, pp. 90–91; Asl & Low Abdullah, 2017, pp. 124–126; Kar, 2017, p. 44), and for their skin-deep engagement with issues relating to acculturation (Asl, 2019; Kar, 2015, p. 94). The critics mainly argue that under the guise of convergence the stories are attuned to the thoroughly gendered character of ideals of individualism and self-making and are thus complicit in the dissemination of the pre-existing essentialism of the mainstream rubrics (Lynn, 2004; Srikanth, 2012). In other words, Lahiri’s stories are criticized for valorizing Western values and ideological beliefs, and for reinforcing essentialist categories of South Asian diaspora. What is notably absent in the scholarship is a study of the complexities of identity formation and the production of particular forms of subjectivities in Lahiri’s stories with respect to a strategic structuring of social conditions by the contemporary discourse of neoliberal governmentality. This article is a timely attempt to explore Lahiri’s selected stories to examine the various ways in which docile bodies are constructed to maintain social stability. By situating the stories within the post-1960s social-political context—a period of time during which America witnessed the re-emergence of Orientalism and the rise of a conflicting social phenomenon called neoliberalism—the present study expands upon the scholarship on Lahiri by pursuing two relevant questions: How might the subjectivity of diasporas, under the pretext of convergences with mainstream rubrics, become a part of the apparatus of the hegemonic power? How can the rise of neoliberalism justify the ruptures between the two political entities, and subsequently, be linked to the emergence of minority culture? Here, we seek to elaborate on the ways in which practices of convergence with pre-scripted norms are tied into technologies of domination in the selected narratives. To fully understand the panoptic functioning of power and the various ways Indian diasporic individuals exercise relatively autonomous technologies of the self to assimilate into the mainstream culture, it is crucial to explore the normative structure of the social-political context of the selected stories which revolve around the diasporic subjects’ daily experiences of the ruptures and the convergences between two cultures. It is also equally essential to explore the notions of assimilation and syncretism in relation to the stories’ contemporary social-political discourse of neoliberalism and Orientalism.
2. The post-1960s America: compliance or individuality?

The massive surge of South Asian exodus in 1960s to various metropolitan areas of the West coincided with the occurrence of two seemingly opposing social phenomena: the re-emergence of Oriental Other and the rise of Neoliberalism. Whereas the former extended the public norms into the private lives of the individuals to ensure their compliance and docility, the latter professed to promote for independent subjectivity. In the aftermath of the Cold War and within the context of the potential threat of global communism, Orientalism turned the non-whites into a racial formation and relegated them to “margins of American racial politics” (Okihiro, 2014, p. xi). It forced the diasporic individuals “to make decisions about their identifications,” and to fully assimilate into dominant culture through an internalization of social shame (Hilaire, 2006, p. 7-47), which was engendered by the acceptance and absorption of “the dominant Western” social normative scripts’ (Vertovec, 1997, p. 18). Even though the nature of such racial discrimination was established upon visible features, the disciplinary strategies were developed to monitor “even private behaviors which could be considered as socially abnormal” and which could pose a potential threat to national security (Asl, Abdullah, & Yaapar, 2016, p. 5). The unwanted intrusions of the private sphere indicated the suppression of agency and individuality in the pseudo-liberal world of the States. On the other hand, neoliberal rhetoric exonerated the state from any form of racial discrimination by trumpeting that the US promotes individuality and repudiates oppression in its any kind (Duggan, 2003; Ferguson & Hong, 2012; Koshy, 2013; McWhorter, 2013; Ong, 2006). This propagandist social phenomenon upheld the claim that “individuals must assume the risks and costs of pursuing their goals ... [and] suffer the consequences of their mistakes” (McWhorter, 2013, p. 62). Within the discourse of neoliberal governmentality, therefore, the state does not operate as a regulatory force, but intervenes less in the public and private lives of its citizens, and in so doing encourages “self-governing and self-enterprise” only to increase efficiency and rational behavior (Kimmel & Llewellyn, 2012, p. 1087).

Within this context, the notions of “assimilation” and “syncretism” have come to indicate a variety of phenomena in post-1960s diaspora studies. The former denotes a one-way process that diminishes the value and sustainability of minority cultures and urges the ethnic groups to move into the mainstream and converge with the ruling social-political system. Some sociologists have viewed this process of cultural homogeneity and forced Americanization as a form of traditional “Eurocentric hegemony,” used as a weapon by white Americans like Mrs. Croft of “The Third and Final Continent” “for putting minorities at a disadvantage by forcing them to live by cultural standards that are not their own” (Alba & Nee, 2005, p. 2). As part of this convergence, ethnic minorities like the South Asian male narrator of the same story must appreciate the new cultural traits, converge their ethnic integrity and redefine themselves within the established framings to “successfully learn the new way of life necessary for full acceptance” (Cutler, 2015, p. 11). Inherent in the one-sided nature of the convergence is thus the assumption that ethnic minorities would change almost entirely in order to acculturate (apart from the areas where they already resembled the mainstream), while the dominant culture would remain untainted. The process of acculturation, albeit not as intact acceptance of the culture of the Anglo-Saxon as it appears to be, is taking place even in the area of institutional religion.

In like manner, religious syncretism plays a crucial role in ensuring the social integrity and national security of the host-land with respect to the prevailing context of displacement, migration and cultural ruptures. Religious synthesis is an “assimilative” weapon that is generally used by state authorities to subjugate distinctive immigrant others and integrate them into mainstream standards (Stewart, 1994, p. 122). The unification of diverse religious beliefs and systems is achieved by creating a system of “ordered” and stable interreligious bonds between ethnic communities (Gavrilova, Shchetkina, Liga, & Gordeeva, 2018, p. 6). Here, religious syncretism does not occur by virtue of pre-existing similarities within religions. Rather, it denotes an ongoing systematic process of diasporic subject’s borrowings from mainstream religions, cultures or ideas occasioned by unequal power relations existing in social milieu (Shaw & Stewart, 1994, p. 10-24). This means that the voluntary mixing of religious practices, which is enthusiastically adopted by
Sanjeev’s wife in “This Blessed House,” is not an intrinsically innocent phenomenon but a socio-politically transformative experience that entails re-imagination of diasporic subject’s religion and re-construction of his/her identity (Harris, 2017, p. 209). However, the syncretic practices of a certain individual within a diasporic community may shatter the sense of unity among the diasporic community and lead to religious conflicts. In this regard, the final moment of the story when Sanjeev fantasizes about locking his wife and all of their friends into the attic becomes particularly significant. As we are told, Sanjeev “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” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 169). The disunity is created because religious syncretism is a subjective experience, and is contingent of the individual’s self-evaluation and self-regulation based on mainstream rubrics in a struggle to gain social acceptance. The significance of religious syncretism in the context of the portrayed South Asian diasporic characters in post-1960s American discourse of national security lies in the fact that its functionings are similarly predetermined by factors that “include long-standing assimilative processes” in the country to preserve social stability (Gavrilova et al., 2018, p. 11).

In what follows the study examines the workings of post-1960s phenomena of assimilation and syncretism in the interface between diverse cultures and religions to map out the ways in which the portrayed diasporic subjects conduct their own behavior through processes of inducement and fascination rather than more direct and palpable subjugation. Our focus is on how disciplinary elements are taken up through the concept of panopticon, internalized, redeployed and even multiplied throughout the narratives. The central analytic focus is how Indian diasporic individuals are regulated at a distance as the principal aim of a panoptic society is to produce a subject who is docile, submissive and homogenous; thus, “[t]he very fact of general visibility—being seeable more than being seen—will be enough to produce effective social control. Indeed, awareness of being visible makes people the agents of their own subjection” [italics original] (Reiman, 1995, p. 28). Topics covered include diasporic subjects’ racial subjectification and subjectivation, practices of religious syncretism—i.e., some Hindu Indian’s preoccupation with and commodification of Christianity—and efforts to retain their religion in the new land. It is crucial to note that the following reading does not suggest that panoptic formation of identities exclusively happens in Western societies, rather the act of looking is a universal phenomenon, and exists in all interpersonal relations regardless of geo-political specificities. Nonetheless, within the context of the selected stories, in which migrants are situated in a foreign locality, we explore the panoptic functioning of power in the interface between the two cultures of the homeland and the host-land, with a particular focus on the dominancy of the latter.

3. A blessed panoptic space

In “This Blessed House,” the encounter of South Asian diasporic Hindus in America with Christianity is depicted as inextricably bound up with reinvention of religion and production of new assimilated identities. The story revolves around the culture- and religious-contact of a newly married Indian couple, Sanjeev and Twinkle, in America. As the couple keep finding gaudy Christian paraphernalia hidden throughout their new house, they go through a complex process of assimilation and resistance to assimilation through religious synthesis. Whereas Twinkle is fascinated by the objects and finds in them opportunities for cultural assimilation or recognition, Sanjeev feels uneasy at her incorporation of Christian values, and worries that their absorption of Christian influence might alter their Hindu tradition, and in so doing, not only cause a spiritual crisis but also destabilize their social sphere of life. The disagreement between the couple thus forms the backbone of the narrative, emphasizing the significance of religion as a constant presence in the social discourse of the story. At the core of this disagreement, however, is Sanjeev’s fear of the others’ judgmental gaze, which leads to his active incorporation of panoptic rules and the regulation of his wife and his own behavior.
“This Blessed House” depicts the different ways in which religious forms of social regulation are utilized by mainstream culture to supplement its disciplinary technologies in nurturing a homogenized nation, and maintaining social order. The mainstream culture imposes itself between Twinkle, as an individual, and Christianity, as the dominant religious practice, turning the former into a consumer and the latter into commodity. In this regard, consumer culture first develops a commodification of Christianity by separating religious objects from their primary meaning and referentiality, and turning them into goods for consumption. Accordingly, the mantel of the house becomes “the display shelf for a sizable collection of Christian paraphernalia;” a 3-D postcard of Saint Francis done in four colors ... a wooden cross key chain ... a framed point-by-number of the three wise men, against a black velvet background ... a tile trivet depicting a blond, unbearded Jesus, delivering a sermon on a mountaintop” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 149). Secondly, it inculcates in Twinkle a habit of rendition and consumption, conceiving in her an unquenchable thirst for consumption, which is revealed when, on one occasion, she explains to the guests that “every day is like a treasure hunt. It’s too good. God only knows what else we’ll find” (p. 167). Indeed, much of Twinkle’s life within the narrative is spent compensating for the exilic experiences and the indispensable feelings of deprivations from the communal habitation by fabricating a new sphere to live in. It is thus not surprising that the new house, together with the set of gaudy Christian icons, provide her with an opportunity to transform her tedious daily life into a “treasure hunt.” In other words, cut off from her roots, her land and her past, and having nothing to do all day except sit at her desk (p. 153), Twinkle feels an overwhelming need to reconstitute her despairing life by choosing to see herself as part of the dominant culture, by mobilizing herself towards assimilative compromises. In addition, her adoption of new modes of thinking points to the process of a diasporic woman’s struggles to redefine herself and, accordingly, to reformulate her own social being in accordance with the normative scripts of the mainstream.

This new world, however, and logically enough, is unnatural to the traditional male protagonist, because no matter how well she may do, as Sanjeev dreads, she will still be taken as an eccentric because of her racial otherness. A telltale example of this occurs when Sanjeev introduces Twinkle to his American guests:

My wife. Tanima.
Call me Twinkle.
What an unusual name, Nora remarked.
Twinkle shrugged, “Not really. There’s an actress in Bombay named Dimple Kapadia. She even has a sister named Simple”.
Douglas and Nora raised their eyebrows simultaneously, nodding slowly, as if to let the absurdity of the names settle in. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 164)

By underscoring the inevitable structural transformation that mainstream culture has engendered in Twinkle’s identity, and the manner it structures her tackling with the new religion and culture, Sanjeev reprimands Twinkle’s exuberant commodification of the Christian paraphernalia. The process, according to him, is structural, and has led to her metaphorical conversion. Therefore, as he explores the collected items on the mantel, he becomes puzzled by the peculiar silliness of the objects. For him, as we are told, “they lacked a sense of sacredness. He was further puzzled that Twinkle, who normally displayed good taste, was so charmed. These objects meant something to Twinkle, but they meant nothing to him. They irritated him” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 150). It is noteworthy that Sanjeev is vexed as he fears Twinkle’s fascination would end in her Westernization and her domestication of Christianity—not only leading to her conversion, but immersing her within the oddities of consumer culture. From his own traditional Hindu background, Sanjeev thus suggests an uncalculated strategy to counter the “attempt” and “scheme” of the new religion. He proposes that they “should call the Realtor. Tell him there’s all this nonsense left behind. Tell him to take it away” (p. 150). The idea, however, is principally not meant to prevent the homogenizing impact of consumer culture on the immigrant family, not least on Twinkle’s everyday (religious) life experiences, and in effect, prevent the diasporic couple from
being disciplined on a religious basis. Rather, it is meant, on a normative level, to comply with the pre-established normalities of the host culture. Religion, however, with respect to the consumer culture and Twinkle’s commodification of it, is directly associated with the formation of her individual identity under the influence of communal—that is American national—identity.

All the same, both Twinkle and Sanjeev’s different ways of coping with the Christian faith and tradition account for the distinctive ways the individuals constitute their identities, whether at a structural level, as in the case of Twinkle—that is by total submission to commodifying culture—or at a normative level, as in the case of Sanjeev, by struggling to remain unaffected or at least not to be wholly submissive. In other words, Twinkle’s fascination with the new religion can be conceptualized as the diasporic subjects’ reaction to their own orthodox background, and as a voluntary appropriation of new forms of socio-cultural structures. Sanjeev’s consciousness, however, is shaped by the panoptic gaze of his American neighbors and colleagues who are going to visit their house. Here, panopticon operates as a “generalizable” model of functioning (Marroum, 2007, p. 89; Mungwini, 2012, p. 345); it is based on a system in which the society imposes order on itself because at the core of the panoptic model is the diasporic “individual’s duty to obey the law in society at large or the panoptic rules within the Panopticon” (Bozzo-Rey, 2012, p. 162). Subsequently, as the individuals like Sanjeev develop a fear of surveillance, they not only incorporate the rules but also monitor and conduct their own behavior. Thus “a watchful interiority” is created and thus a specific type of subject is formulated in relation to disciplinary technologies (Mitcheson, 2012, p. 62). The neighbor’s judgmental gaze thoroughly describes Sanjeev’s condition under mainstream culture: That it is the very image of the social scripts that compels him to survey himself with the dominant Western eyes. Such normative scripts assure that even the private spheres such as the diasporic subjects’ innermost beliefs and convictions will not be a deviation or a transgression, but rather an exertion and a practice of the prevailing civic norms.

Throughout the narrative, therefore, the panoptic system indicates the absolute visibility of the diasporic subject under a domineering social order. This is owing to the fact that the basis of the hyphenated characters’ subjectivity is their subjectivation by prevailing social normativities that constitute the subject. Through the normative scripts established by the dominant ideology, Sanjeev and Twinkle thus become visible not only to their neighbors and each other but also to themselves. Accordingly, when Twinkle decides to put a watercolor poster of Christ in her study so that Sanjeev does not have to look at it, he warns her of the people from his office coming for their housewarming who may want to see all the rooms. Sanjeev’s controlling behavior illustrates the principal characteristic of the panoptic system which is,

A type of power that is applied to individuals in the form of continuous individual supervision, in the form of control, punishment, and compensation, and in the form of correction, that is, the molding and transformation of individuals in terms of certain norms. This threefold aspect of panopticism—supervision, control, correction—seems to be a fundamental and characteristic dimension of the power relations that exist in our society. (Foucault, 2000, p. 70).

Similarly, on another occasion, when Twinkle asks to put a recently found plaster statue of Virgin Mary on their lawn, Sanjeev vehemently objects to the idea warning that “All the neighbors will see. They’ll think we’re insane ... I can’t have the people I work with see this statue on my lawn” (Lahiri, 1999, pp. 159–60). Such dynamic functionings of the gaze not only proves the direct intervention and enforcement of the officials to be unnecessary, but also indicates that the system does not accept individuality nor does it make any allowances for privacy as it might disrupt social stability by promoting a sense of freedom opposed to the social scripts of the regulatory system. This indirect intervention of the regulatory system casts light on what Hurley describes as “the collapsing of public and private into each other,” as a result of which “the public extends into the private, ensuring the social practices enacted in the private conform to those sanctioned by the public” (1997, p. 80). What remains is not the coexistence of the public and private lives but the
disappearance of the private guaranteed by the diasporic characters’ compliance with the established norms.

As a panoptic structure wherein the public collapses into the private sphere, Sanjeev’s house takes a sort of exemplary status in the functioning of America as hegemonic power. On the one hand, the cited dialogue unravels the manner American nationalism conceives national subjects out of the hyphenated citizens. Twinkle’s affiliative practices configure her as a subject of national belonging by providing her with a new identity to cross national boundaries. In her case, Americanness is constructed by religious practices. On the other, it shows that Sanjeev’s existence is constantly positioned under the gaze and judgment of the privileged others. The normalizing gaze of society has induced in Sanjeev a state of conscious and constant visibility that guarantees his self-surveillance and self-regulation. The state of being conscious of a judging observer develops in him a psychological state of controlling his own and his family’s behavior. In this sense, Sanjeev becomes his own supervisor through a process of self-disciplining behavior. The ever-present threat of the judgmental gaze of society engenders a milieu in which he strives to comply with the normalities even without being monitored. In his case, the panoptic system functions on the assumingly critical gaze of the American neighbors and colleagues which operates to prevent him from any kind of transgressions from established social norms. In this manner, “This Blessed House” stands out for portraying an Indian diasporic couple committing to a novel model of nationalism and adopting a more assimilative model of lifestyle.

4. Western eyes and the diasporas’ subjugation

The significance of the last story of Interpreter of Maladies, “The Third and Final Continent,” derives from its portrayal of a world in which a diasporic subject is homogenized and disciplined with minimum force and by voluntary servitude. The story is mainly about an Indian male protagonist who, after migrating from India to England and then to the US in 1969, attempts to adapt himself to the baffling new ways of life in the third continent. A particular focus on his daily interactions with American citizens, not least his landlady Mrs. Croft, foregrounds the power of the panoptic gaze that reshapes his identity and facilitates the modification of his behavior in accordance with mainstream neoliberal way of life. In what follows, the analysis underlines the specific ways in which such workings of the regulating gaze begin in the public sphere, and then extend to the realm of the private in the process of ensuring complete social conformity.

Indeed, the post-1960s neoliberal notions of productive citizenship, professional achievement, model minority (upward) mobility and individual progress are established in the early paragraphs of the story, which reveal the various ways in which media technologies of different kinds—from newspapers, magazines, radio and television—are employed by state power to produce and propagate the discourse of American nationalism. As we are told, prior to his entry to the United States in 1969, the diasporic male protagonist is indoctrinated through a guidebook that “[t]he pace of life in North America is different from Britain” and the rest of the world inasmuch as in America everybody strives to “get to the top” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 190). The guidebook serves as an apparatus to drive the nationalist vision of the nation-state forward, and animate the American dream for global empire and democracy. This obsession with the neoliberal notion of individual growth and developmentalism is presently culminated in a national advancement in the global intellectual, technological and political economy: “Two American men had landed on the moon” for the first time in the history of mankind as a consequence of which, the President of the country “had declared a national holiday” (p. 190). The landing, or the “voyage,” as the narrator describes to us, “was hailed as man’s most awesome achievement,” and its news was everywhere, “in the newspaper ... article upon article” (pp. 195–6). Akin to this “giant leap” of mankind, metaphorically, the narrator’s scalar leap from the indigent Indian economy, where he had only “ten dollars” to his name, to the prosperous global capital economy of the United States, which offered him a generous salary enough to support a family, portends the colonization of the diasporic subject and, in effect, the formation of human capital in him. Within this context, the male protagonist very soon realizes that as an individual he is not merely measured by his financial wealth or...
physical capital, but by his technical knowledge, professional experience and education that should contribute to the national advancement. It is within this neoliberal framework that both subjectification (government of others) and subjectivation (government of one’s self) of the diasporic character is initiated.

A tell-tale example of subjectivation occurs on one occasion when the male protagonist wants to rent an apartment before his wife’s arrival. When he discovers “a room for immediate vacancy” and dials the number, the landlady emphatically demands that she “only rent[s] rooms to boys from Harvard or Tech [i.e. MIT]” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 193). Here, the immigrant subject feels the need to strategically re-construct himself within the realms of social life and model minority under the influence of the private citizen’s eyes. Therefore, before he meets the judgmental eyes of the landlady, and more importantly, to display his affinity with the class of “American” high-achievers, he puts on formal clothes, “regarding the event as [he] would any other interview” (p. 193). This is a prime example of Foucauldian proposition that “power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations” (Foucault, 1978, p. 94), which means that power is not simply exercised on or by a single individual or site, rather it operates in the dynamic interactions between the individuals and the inspectors and between the individuals themselves. In this case, by envisaging the white woman’s privileged role of observer —i.e., before she can peer up at him “with undivided attention” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 194)—the man’s gaze is concentrated on the self to conform in obedience to the normative scripts. This self-disciplining, or subjectivation, of the diasporic male character that is caused in the public sphere by the normalizing gaze of society, is further reinforced in the private sphere by direct subjectification of him by the society’s surrogate, the American white landlady who happens to be an intensely patriotic person.

After he rents the house, the private sphere of it turns into a self-policing space, a microcosm of a larger regulating society, and its diasporic settler becomes subject to a dictatorial doctrine that he must internalize and adhere to on a daily basis. In this manner, the behavioral dyad of conformity and deviation operates even beyond the initial interplay of normativity and visibility where the male character is judged based on observable anomalous details—i.e., his formal attire—and progresses to and resides in a more private and invisible sphere of convictions. Among the principal commitments to the ideal American identity that the white woman compels the brown man to display is an ostensible glorification of America’s contemporary global ascendency—in both its literal and figurative connotations. Every day, she compels him to perform the nationalist ritual of acknowledging the Americans’ awesome achievements, in particular their landing on the moon. Upon their first encounter and following her safety instructions to the Indian man, as we are told, the martinet bellowed:

“A flag on the moon, boy! I heard it on the radio! Isn’t that splendid?”
“Yes, madame.” But she was not satisfied with my reply. Instead she commanded. “Say ‘splendid!’”

I was both baffled and somewhat insulted by the request. It reminded me of the way I was taught multiplication tables as a child, repeating after the master, sitting cross-legged, without shoes or pencils, on the floor of my one-room Tollygunge school. It also reminded me of my wedding, when I had repeated endless Sanskrit verses after the priest, verses I barely understood, which joined me to my wife. I said nothing.

“Say ‘splendid!’” the woman bellowed once again.
“Splendid,” I murmured. I had to repeat the word the second time at the top of my lungs, so she could hear ... . the reply pleased her because her next command was: “Go see the room!” (Lahiri, 1995, p. 196–7)

In spite of his primary reluctance, suggested by the usage of the verb “murmur,” the diasporic male narrator never so much as manifests a reaction against governmentality as an apparatus of administrative power that continues to permeate American society and pervades micro-politics of everyday
As suggested by the media coverage of Americans’ landing on the moon as an archetypal example of American dream of “traveling farther than anyone in the history of civilization” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 195–6)—and rejects not its influence but its whole existence in them. Even though he is to some extent “insulted by the request” (p. 196), and seemingly denounces the landlady’s domineering subjectification, he proves to be an accomplice in his own governmentality. The narrator boasts that he was “soft-spoken by nature and was especially reluctant” to raise his voice to an elderly woman, and that, “the house was empty” and “it was a small enough thing to ask” (pp. 196–200). Yet within a few days, it becomes their routine. As he recounts, when he came back home every evening,

The same thing happened: she slapped the bench, ordered me to sit down, declared that there was a flag on the moon and declared that it was splendid. I said it was splendid, too, and then we sat in silence. As awkward as it was, and as endless as it felt to me then, the nightly encounter lasted only about ten minutes. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 200)

From a Foucauldian perspective, the principal effect of the panoptic system is a continuous inspection and constant surveillance of the subject which leads to a detailed regulation and to a capillary distribution of power relations. Surveillance, albeit discontinuous in action, is permanent in its effect insofar as the subjects are “caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers” (Foucault, 1995, p. 201). Such ceaseless functioning of inspection results in self-surveillance, and facilitates the “automatic functioning of power”—a process that Foucault describes as the “internalization” of the gaze. Much like the prisoners described by Foucault, the diasporic male narrator, internalize the disciplinary power and the regulating gaze of the society’s surrogate, insofar as he “can operate the [panoptic] machine’ (p. 202); and in doing so, formulates itself through “practices of self-control, and self-examination, as that which masters itself, as opposed to allowing itself to be constituted as a subjugated subject defined through surrender and revelation to another” (Mitcheson, 2012, p. 63). During the routine encounters, the male character thus exercises panopticism even as he renounces it, and in so doing, exposes the ways his disciplined self is reproduced based on the needs of the mainstream. The type of power that is being exercised is that of panopticism’s “faceless gaze,” the white woman as an apparatus that is coextensive with the totality of mainstream culture not only by the regulating gaze that she casts on the diasporic subject, but also by the precision with which she demands the man to utter the word “splendid.” It is in such a practice that the racially different man internalizes social prescriptions through the American landlady’s progressively rigorous appropriation. The self-vigilance and the internalization is so strong that later in one of his visits to the woman’s house, when in retrospect, she tells him of her calling the police when she broke her hip, the man knew exactly what to say; “with no hesitation at all, [he] cried out, ‘Splendid!’” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 212). On the one level, such a panoptic machinery indicates that individuals are not only “amputated or alienated” from social order, but exposed to “effects of a power which [they themselves] forward by being cogs in the machinery” (Foucault, 1995, p. 193), and on the other, the mechanism underscores the dispersal of the panoptic gaze. The power of the gaze, which in Bentham’s architectural design is in absolute possession and control of the superintendent, becomes dispersed in the society. In this respect, Hurley speaks of “a visual architecture that permits the symbolic order—ideology—to deploy its authoritative gaze not merely on its subjects, but through them, each subject’s gaze positioning his neighbor even as that neighbor’s gaze positions him” (1997, p. 77). In effect, the gaze turns into a reality of “bodies gazing and being gazed at” (p. 6).

Hence, in the interface between the two cultures, the American landlady serves as an ideal apparatus through whom not only the diasporic subject’s social behavior is controlled with minimum force but also his integration into the mainstream culture is expedited. From her earliest presence within the narrative, the woman acts to control, dominate and normalize diasporic narrator’s behavior. Such a role is most explicitly demonstrated in her privileged panoptic position in the house—suggested by her “sitting on the piano bench, on the same side as the previous evening[,]” “commanding,” “ordering” and “demanding” whether he has “locked up” the door, “fastened the chain” and pressed the “button on the knob” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 199)—which literally
makes her act as a warden, and figuratively as an omnipresent supervisor who normalizes the male subject’s behavior by discouraging him from doing evil in his social lives. Therefore, the nature of portrayed power relations between the two characters proves the story to be the quintessential example of the neoliberal governmentality of diasporic subjects, and of how panopticism operates in the interface between cultures and traditions.

5. Conclusion

A panoptic reading of diasporic experiences in two of Lahiri’s stories revealed that through religious syncretism and cultural assimilation, the dominant culture of the new land is conferred upon the migrant characters with a substantial amount of disciplinary power that contributes to the surveillance and regulation of individuals’ behavior and the formation of social relations. Notwithstanding the different subjectivities that diasporic characters experience in the stories, it can be concluded that the mainstream culture exerts a severe panoptic hold on the racial other by developing a particular kind of consciousness that is liable to foster self-disciplinary behavior. Through this awareness, any deviance of the hyphenated subject is controlled with minimum force and manpower. Under the guise of converging with this dominant tone, Lahiri’s fictional characters exercise autonomous technologies of the self and advertise their exodus and diasporic condition as a “splendid” occasion. This is iconized both by Twinkle of “This Blessed House” and the Indian narrator of “The Third and Final Continent.” Twinkle is conclusively Westernized in her fascination with Christian paraphernalia, and believes the new house in America is a “blessed” one. In her case, Christian thought and its paraphernalia play a significant role in designing a comprehensive structure within which the issue of social control and the standards of homogeneity are defined and exercised. In a similar way, the Indian narrator concludes that his new life in the new continent is as “splendid” as the landing of the American astronauts on the moon. The escalating role of hegemonic regulatory mechanisms, the social prescriptions of beliefs, and the notion of the self that fosters a community of self-scrutiny—through which the hyphenated Americans’ practices of self-ordering is realized—have impacted substantially on homogenization of the diasporic family in the new world. Assimilative propensities and the subsequent transformations witnessed in migrant subjects, albeit unavoidable, establish the normalizing function of power in mainstream American culture.

In this manner, both stories celebrate convergent measures of the minority culture, reinforce pre-established stereotypes and resonate with an existing public policy interest in regulating diasporic individuals from afar. In keeping with the dominant neoliberal governmentality of individuals, the portrayed immigrant characters are systematically conducted through practices of self-government. The two major dimensions in which technologies of control exert such practices on diasporic subjects is through particular forms of visibility—that is ways of seeing and perceiving, epitomized in Twinkle’s desire to assimilate, and Sanjeev and the Indian narrator’s fear of social shame—and distinctive ways of thinking and believing that is most evidently illustrated in the American landlady’s accentuation on definite vocabularies and procedures for the production of a neoliberal truth. A prime example is the routine daily procedure in which she demands the Indian tenant to repeat the word “splendid,” and appreciate American success.

All the same, whether convergence is a remarkable or a grievous phenomenon is a socio-politically controversial issue within multicultural societies. In the selected stories of South Asian diasporic experience, however, anti-assimilation and anti-syncretism arise not in situations of multiculturalism wherein a diasporic subject attempts to preserve his/her integrity by guarding against influences of the mainstream culture; rather both phenomena ironically take place when an immigrant subject retains his/her homeland traditions and religion to avoid being accused of irregularity, and of deviating from the framed and familiarized diasporic identity. In situations of encounter with the mainstream, ethnic groups are depicted as liable to discard their own cultural traits, and extirpate elements considered to be foreign or borrowed. Hence both stories extol the nation-state in its role as the transnational regulatory apparatus of neoliberalism.
Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the short-term grant [304/PHUMANITI/6315300] from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). The authors are also indebted to two anonymous reviewers for their valuable insights on earlier version of this manuscript.

Funding

This work was supported by the short-term grant [304/PHUMANITI/6315300] from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).

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Citation information

Cite this article as: Panoptic spaces and the framings of South Asian diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri’s selected short stories, Moussa Pourya Asl, Nurul Farhana Low Abdullah & Md. Salleh Yaapar, Cogent Arts & Humanities (2020), 7: 1728022.

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