

# A Transgressive Ethics of Alterity in Jhumpa Lahiri's and Rodica Mihalis' Narratives of Uprooting

Adriana Elena Stoican

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bld. Dacia nr. 41, sector 1  
estoican@gmail.com

*The paper investigates Jhumpa Lahiri's and Rodica Mihalis' accounts of uprooting in order to highlight their common transcending mechanisms that facilitate dialogues across cultural differences. By presenting interactions between South Asian, Romanian and American characters, the authors promote a conception of cultures as changing systems that can become enriched by transfers of meanings beyond borders. Both authors illustrate how characters who come from dissimilar cultural contexts can engage in meaningful interactions. The Indian-American encounters as well as the Romanian-American intersections are portrayed as opportunities for human understanding beyond the individuals' specific affiliations. By providing examples of cultural agreement between protagonists from highly different backgrounds, both authors present ethical models of cultural interactions that reduce the possibility of cultural clashes. If we accept the premise that literary figures can serve as ethical models, the possibility of cross-cultural communication presented by Lahiri and Mihalis seems especially relevant in the contemporary context of intersecting migration routes and cultural flows. Although produced by authors from different cultural traditions, the narratives discussed promote a transcultural ethics that reveals the importance of shared values as antidotes to cultural collision.*

Keywords: literature and ethics / migrations / cultural identity / cultural values / interculturality / Lahiri, Jhumpa / Mihalis, Rodica

The paper analyses ethical models of connectedness across cultural difference illustrated in narratives of uprooting by Jhumpa Lahiri and Rodica Mihalis. The present paper aims to situate itself along the expressions of “innovative thinkers” that strive to shape “more cosmopolitan, transcultural approaches” in the study of literature (Bernheimer 13). At the same time, my discussion of authors from different cultural spaces relies on Mary Louise Pratt’s position regarding the aim of comparative literature to cultivate “deep intercultural understanding and genuinely global consciousness” (62). Both authors share histories of

transplantation from their countries of origin to the United States of America. I have chosen the syntagm “narratives of uprooting” instead of “migration literature” given that the primary corpus of this analysis is made up of different literary genres – a short story and a memoir. I have chosen these creations given their autobiographical core of transplantation, inherent in the memoir and fictionalized in the short story. Jhumpa Lahiri was born to Bengali immigrant parents in London and she grew up in New England. Her collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, focuses on the cultural effects of daily interactions between Indian immigrants and American characters. Rodica Mihalis’ memoir, *The Gypsy Saw Two Lives* presents her life in communist Romania followed by her defection in 1981.

### **Transgressive ethics: beyond humanist and poststructuralist perspectives**

My approach aligns with critical voices that invoke the emergence of an “ethical turn” in philosophy, literature and cultural theory starting from the late 1980s (Phelan np.) and moving to the mid-1990s (Grabes 3). From the perspective of everyday practices, ethics can be conceptualized as an “individual subjective theory” (Hallet 197) or a set of norms that regulate human behaviour, indicating “what is right or good, what we ought to do” (Levine 1) or helping us answer the vital question “How one should live?” (Nussbaum 15).

The present paper introduces an innovative outlook that aims to transcend the humanist and poststructuralist models of ethics. My perspective delineates itself from a deconstructionist position that privileges alterity, to the point of overlooking the possibility of communication between different voices. At the same time, this approach wishes to avoid a humanist celebration of universality that would dissolve cultural diversity into a homogeneous blend. In order to fashion a novel ethics of cultural encounters, I will follow Dorothy J. Hale’s suggestion for an intersection between poststructuralist and humanist ethics that might converse while maintaining their specific agendas (2009).

An interesting model of analysis that connects Sameness and Difference, while respecting their specificity is developed by Raimond Gaita. This philosopher argues that a great deal of spiritual and ethical considerations in art and literature attempt to illustrate how our responses to various experiences create “a sense of common humanity,

a commonness that is marked by the “we of fellowship” (286). Along similar lines, Charles Altieri advances a philosophy of “sharing without erasing boundaries” (121) that can improve our “moral philosophising” (121). Another provocative approach involves the tripartite classification of ethics developed by Marshall Brown. In order to link ethics with real life situations, Brown suggests two levels of ethical relations that should supplement Levinas’ first level of transcendental ethics. The second level refers to a horizontal ethics (53) that requires us to learn the idiom of the Other in order to “find common ground as a basis for agreement” (Brown 56). The third level, vertical ethics, involves a discipline of encounters at the local level that prepares individuals for the grand objectives of horizontal ethics, focused on the “conflicts of the Other” (60). Brown considers that literary representations are the best illustrations of how the vertical dimension, i. e. “the conflicts of the Same” (60) shapes the ethical domain (59). Since the plot of a narrative is directly correlated with ethics (Harpham 35–37), the readers are invited to investigate/decipher the “complexity of the negotiated encounter” (64), as a basic training necessary for fulfilling the requirements of horizontal and transcendental ethics:

Our ethics take their start from the most intimate, most *fragile encounters*. The newly transpiring dimension is a realm not of symbolic greatness but of the infinitely small, perhaps a kind of *transcendence from below*. Such a vertical ethics—hermeneutic, individual, flexibly uneven—is the indispensable training ground for the grander, knottier, more intractable demands of horizontal and transcendental ethics (Brown 70) (my emphasis).

I find Brown’s approach particularly fruitful as it facilitates a gradual shift from small scale, local ethics to horizontal ethics, providing potential tools for managing the dialogues with cultural others. My analysis of cross-cultural interactions between Indian/Romanian and American characters is meant as an exercise in “transcendentalism from below”. More specifically, it scrutinizes the “fragile encounters” between individuals from different cultural spaces, aiming to extract instances of connection. My discussion of cultural intersections relies on a body of theories that foreground the relationship between literature and ethics, as suggested below.

## Literature and ethics

The present section discusses theories that regard literature as an important tool in the transmission of ethical values. David Parker considers that literature is a more suitable channel of ethical speculation/thinking than philosophy, as it carries a “contextualized mode of ethical reflection” capable to filter moral issues in “ways unavailable to conventional philosophical discourse” (12). In a similar vein, Peter Levine connects the narratives created by stories with the narratives of our lives, arguing that the themes presented in stories have the potential to stimulate the readers to apply “moral reasoning” to their own lives (5). Interestingly, Hallet assumes that reading is an act of constructing ethical models (202) given the ethical dimension of the literary figures (195).

In my attempt to uncover ethical models of cultural interactions, I will focus on “the ethics of the told” (Phelan 2013), foregrounding the characters’ choices when faced with cultural otherness. The paper sets out to demonstrate that Jhumpa Lahiri and Rodica Mihalis promote a transgressive ethics of alterity, paralleled by a transcultural approach to cultural identity. To use Hallet’s words, this discussion establishes whether the literary figures from South Asian American and Romanian American narratives are likely to produce an ethical model as a “transcultural” configuration (209). The next section presents several theories that argue for the importance of cultural commonalities in the dynamics of transcultural interactions.

### Transcultural bridges: finding moments of connection

The transcultural mode highlights the fluidity of cultural boundaries, leaving room for cross-border exchanges. This approach assumes that cultures are already mixed prior to their contact and celebrates cultural fusion rather than cultural difference in itself. While cultural specificity is important in a politics of recognition that promotes respect for cultural diversity, transcultural communication cannot be conceived as interplay of unrelated cultural differences. According to W. Berg, the idea of cultures as overlapping systems can generate the occurrence of meaningful dialogues between different cultural backgrounds (9). N. Papastergiadis is also interested in examining the mechanisms by which cultures communicate across boundaries (124). Similarly, H. Siegel considers that transculturality refers to ideals that are valid beyond the cultures that explicitly recognize them (398). Considering

these observations, the body of the paper investigates manners in which the works analysed foreground the transgressive ethics of alterity as a vector of transcultural understanding. Relying on the theories presented so far, the next part of the paper analyses the ethical implications of cultural encounters in “The Third and Final Continent” and *The Gypsy Saw Two Lives*.

### Body of the paper

The main character of “The Third and Final Continent” is an Indian man who emigrates from India via England to America. While waiting for his wife’s arrival, he rents a room in an old American woman’s (Mrs. Croft) house. By meeting Mrs. Croft, the man encounters a model of womanhood whose main attribute is independence: at the age of 103, Mrs. Croft lives on her own. This aspect is shocking to the Indian man, since it contradicts his familiar coordinates of womanhood. (While his mother experiences widowhood as a trigger for madness, Mrs. Croft conceives the same condition as an opportunity for self-management).

While juxtaposing different cultural models, “The Third and Final Continent” illustrates how commonalities facilitate communication between them. This transcultural mechanism is exemplified with Mrs. Croft and the Indian man, whose ability to spot shared values facilitates their communication. The man finds out that Mrs. Croft considers him a “gentleman” (Lahiri 185), appreciating his punctuality (Lahiri 178). Similarly, the man’s pedantry seems to correspond to Mrs. Croft’s set of Puritan values. In this context, the term “Puritanism” refers to the religious system that flourished in New England starting from the seventeenth century. Considering the temporal setting of plot (the 1960s) and Mrs. Croft’s age, we may assume that she illustrates the Puritan upbringing specific to the nineteenth century America. The manner of clothing was extremely important for Puritans, the “expression of their sober and orderly life, but also [...] an outward sign of their particular piety (Bremer et al. 346–7). When he first visits Mrs. Croft, the Indian man is smartly dressed, which produces a favourable impression to the old lady: “in spite of the heat I wore a coat and a tie, regarding the event as I would any other interview” (Lahiri 177). This manner of dressing entails a ceremonial approach to the idea of a first visit, which seems to resonate with Mrs. Croft’s strict attitudes. Mrs. Croft’s reactions illustrate that she appreciates her tenant’s punctuality, courtesy and pedantry. These values represent a point of intersection, suggesting that

dialogue between an Indian immigrant and an old American woman is possible despite their different cultural origins.

Similarly, Mrs. Croft can relate with a culturally different type of womanhood, embodied by Mala, the immigrant's wife. In preparation for her visit to Mrs. Croft, Mala carefully selects her traditional outfit: a clean sari, extra bracelets (Lahiri 193). Prior to the visit, her husband considers Mala's meticulousness exaggerated, expecting Mrs. Croft to be critical of his wife:

I wondered if Mrs. Croft had ever seen a woman in a sari, with a dot painted on her forehead and bracelets stacked on her wrists. *I wondered what she would object to.* I wondered if she could see the red dye still vivid on Mala's feet, all but obscured by the bottom edge of her sari. (Lahiri 195, my emphasis)

Contrary to the man's assumptions, the old lady pronounces Mala "a perfect lady" (Lahiri 195). The American woman's appreciation illustrates that Indian Hindu and early American cultural models overlap with respect to decorousness expressed by unrevealing clothing. In the early American Puritan tradition, women's clothes were monitored in order to avoid "violations of seemliness and decency" (Bremer et al. 348). In accordance with Puritan sobriety, the length of Mala's sari corresponds to Mrs. Croft's rejection of miniskirts. Despite its marks of cultural difference (sari, the bindi dot, bracelets, henna tattoos) Mala's manner is consistent with Mrs. Croft's standards of female appearance. Caesar also remarks on the transcendent nature of this encounter, given Mrs. Croft's ability to spot the commonalities beyond herself and an Indian woman:

To Mrs. Croft, Mala is a "lady", because Mrs. Croft looks beyond the differences between herself and Mala – the dark skin, the bangles, the sari, the henna-stained feet – to see the similarities, the long skirts that she (and her furniture) wear as a sign of their propriety and concealment, the understanding of the deference owed to age, the formal manners (56).

This moment of intersection can also be explained as a partial overlapping of religious patriarchal discourses. Puritanism promotes the image of the ideal woman as "domestic, self-sacrificing, submissive wife, mother, and daughter" (Westerkamp 132). The marital image of authoritative husbands and compliant wives is an important Puritan principle (Porterfield 20). Along similar lines, the Hindu tradition prescribes womanhood as a set of relations that thwarts the idea of female autonomy while celebrating male domination (Bose 66–7, Deka 124). The intersecting gender

politics supported by Puritanism and Hinduism certainly accounts for the two characters' related outlooks. This fact suggests that a comparative perspective on gender roles, religious identity and female mobility would further nuance the analysis. I intend to develop this approach in a future research project that would examine the possibility of female emancipation in the context of transnational migration.

Interestingly, Mrs. Croft's appreciation of Mala triggers a change in the Indian husband's attitude to his own (arranged) marriage. When he finds out Mrs. Croft's positive reaction, the husband re-evaluates and eventually accepts Mala as his partner: "I like to think of that moment in Mrs. Croft's parlor as the moment when the distance between Mala and me began to lessen" (Lahiri 196). This change of outlook suggests that the validation of his cultural model by an American perspective encourages him to reconsider his own culture from a different angle. Given that Mrs. Croft, whom he respects, is impressed by his wife, the Indian husband can overstep his estrangement from Mala, transgressing the alienation usually experienced in arranged marriages. As Caesar points out, Mrs. Croft helps the two immigrants understand what they have in common with one another and with the space in which they have arrived (57). The husband's reconsideration of Mala from an American frame of reference illustrates that one can better understand one's culture from the perspective of another. This example illustrates how literature can function as a disseminator of transgressive ethical values, as it presents characters engaged in acts of crossing physical and cultural boundaries. Relying on Hallet's argument, we may consider that these literary figures can offer the readers ethical models of transcultural communication. The next part of the corpus analysis investigates analogous cultural scenarios presented in Mihalisi's memoir *The Gypsy Saw Two Lives*.

The protagonist of the memoir, Rodica, becomes an American citizen and mother of two daughters, Eva and then Natalie. The motherhood condition shapes Rodica's willingness to become assimilated into the American culture. For example, Rodica is happy to be a member of a play group made up of mothers and their young children. Rodica's belonging to this community hints at the transcultural dimension of motherhood that builds lasting friendships with American mothers:

We formed a core of neighbourly and motherly commitment not only to our children but to one another and the community [...]. The bond lasted beyond the play group, past our children's childhoods and teenage years. We still meet regularly, just as mothers. True friendships go beyond convenience and immediate needs; they last a lifetime. That was the type of bond we had (Mihalisi 266).

As well as Mrs. Croft and Mala, Rodica shares the transcultural ability to bond with women from different cultures, albeit in different circumstances. In Rodica's case, the mother-role is the main trigger of her impulse to bond with American women, while Mrs. Croft and the Indian immigrants become connected via their shared values. Rodica's bonding with American mothers helps her develop a special outlook on cultures, as spheres that need not clash on account of their dissimilarities. At some point, Rodica realizes that she cannot share her friend's (Susan) tolerance of their children's drawing on the walls. A product of communist education, Rodica advises her daughter not to repeat the drawing experience, while Susan encourages the children's artistic drive: "Truth to be told, our parenting styles were completely different. Susan was the embodiment of a free spirit. I was that of rigidity and order, traits inherited from my Eastern European upbringing. I sought perfection; Susan sought creativity" (Mihalis 266). One could argue that Rodica's perception of the two backgrounds places the American system in a superior position, as suggested by the contrast between their outlooks. Seen from this angle, the Romanian protagonist may be characterised as the holder of a "self-colonising" (Kiossev np) perspective. This status places Rodica in an "extracolonial" peripheral space from where she contemplates American values. While the centre – (lateral) periphery model has the potential to open new research directions, Rodica's choice also enables a different line of interpretation. Thus, her appreciation of a different parenting style does not necessarily imply the desire to emulate American models. Rodica is aware of the *difference*, without turning it into an obstacle to cultural interaction. I consider this a relevant dimension of her transculturality that acknowledges the validity of another system, without letting dissimilar values break communication.

Instead of becoming defensive, Rodica gains the precious insight that different outlooks can coexist without generating conflict: "I didn't want my Eva to draw on people's walls, but Susan viewed the act as a sign of creativity. I learned that not everyone had the same perception of values as I did" (Mihalis 267). Being exposed to cultural difference, Rodica accepts its existence, without trying to assess the superiority/inferiority of other cultural perspectives. This attitude suggests that Rodica can respect contrasting cultural values, without assimilating them: "I loved Susan's friendship and wanted to continue and cherish it in my life, but not her parenting style, so different from mine. Neither style was good nor bad; they were just too different from one another. They were *incompatible*" (Mihalis 267) (my emphasis).



Rodica's reflections illustrate her ability to acknowledge cultural difference not because she agrees with it, but because she realizes it is meaningful to other people. I think this kind of understanding reflects the epitome of accepting Otherness. Rodica's friendship with a person from a different culture with whom she does not always agree underscores her ability to transcend cultural alliances. This transgressive stance helps her relate to other individuals, primarily as human beings beyond their cultural belonging. At this point, Lahiri's and Mihalisi' voices overlap by presenting cultural encounters as ethical models of dealing with alterity in a manner that cuts across ideas of fix affiliation. At the same time, both authors employ the vertical dimension of ethics, situated at the level of daily interactions. By presenting quotidian encounters between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, both authors emphasize the importance of transcultural ethics as a path to minimizing cases of cultural conflict.

Another instance of transculturality is represented by Rodica's visit to Nancy Grace, an American famous socialite whom she meets at an elite party in Philadelphia. Nancy has the reputation of an eccentric personality, a rich divorcee who lives in a sumptuous house. When they meet for the first time, Nancy is intrigued by Rodica's presence and she invites the Romanian woman to pay her a visit sometime. When the visit actually happens, Rodica is impressed by the elegance of Nancy's place, a mixture of "comfort and discomfort" (Mihalisi 198). At some point, the American hostess invites Rodica to swim together in the nude in the indoor swimming pool and the Romanian woman accepts gladly. Rodica's quick response to Nancy's unusual invitation takes Nancy aback, since the latter expects Rodica to hold prejudices against naked exposure. At the same time, Rodica associates Americans with a sense of shyness and reluctance to be seen bare-skinned: "Americans had a reputation of being shy" (Mihalisi 199). Prudishness is a cultural inheritance from the early Puritan tradition that correlated nakedness with eroticism and a sense of guilt (Colwell 2007). At the same time, Rodica's own background is imbued with rigid traditions regarding sexual freedom. Ceaușescu's dictatorial rule turned Romania into a unique case in Socialist Eastern Europe, through the establishment of a dynastic form of Socialism (Irimie 279). In order to increase the labour resources of the communist state, Ceaușescu's legislation advocated a "harsh pro-natalist line" (Irimie 279) that prohibited abortion. This regime promoted a repressive attitude to nudity and sexuality, censoring sex and nudity scenes from novels, press, movies and art productions. Thus, the moral code that permeated the daily social be-

behaviour of Romanians had “a great deal in common with the puritanism, even prudery, so common in communist societies” (Irimie 279). Therefore, when applied to the Romanian context, the term “puritanism” refers to an effect of a state policy and not a religious system, as in the American case. The legal practice of nudism adopted by certain Romanian intellectuals in their summer holidays in specific areas of the Black Sea Coast represented a form of temporary escape from communist restrictions. Although nudism was not an official movement of opposition, it provided a sensation of freedom, similar to the hippy conventions (Costache 2008). Nancy’s triumphant attitude as she launches the invitation deconstructs Rodica’s cultural stereotype about Americans and makes her consider Nancy a “unique” representative of American values (Mihalis 199). At the same time, Rodica informs Nancy that she and her husband used to practice nudism in communist Romania, spending their time on the beach in the company of naked strangers: “We stayed in the nude the whole time, even when we cooked and ate” (Mihalis 199). Since Nancy hopes to impress Rodica with her eccentric ways, she is disappointed to find out that Rodica’s background involves a higher degree of non-conformism: “Perhaps her daring idea of two women swimming in the nude in a private swimming pool suddenly seemed decent and tame compared to the outrage of eating in the nude in front of strangers” (Mihalis 200). Apparently, Nancy’s unmet expectations trigger the occurrence of a cultural clash, given that she gives up her audacious proposal and ends the evening with a silent dinner.

At a deeper level, however, this episode reveals a transcultural mechanism that helps the two women reach a common ground. Both of them belong to a category of individuals who have the courage to disobey cultural/political traditions, albeit in different contexts. Whether in communist Romania or in capitalist America, Rodica and Nancy share a transcending outlook as they choose to express their freedom by violating overlapping ideals of Puritan chastity and communist prudery. Despite Nancy’s apparent discontent, she actually appreciates Rodica for the rebellious practices of her youth. As they eat together, Rodica is aware of the emerging bond between her and Nancy: “As we slowly chewed that first dinner, I knew she and I would see each other again” (Mihalis 200). This episode parallels the encounter between Mrs. Croft and Mala. Mrs. Croft’s appreciation of the Indian woman illustrates that Hindu and Puritan conventions overlap with respect to decorousness expressed by unrevealing clothing. Similarly, Rodica and Nancy adopt the same non-conformist

practice (nudism) in order to contest different repressive systems (Puritan traditions and communist policies of sexual control). In both cases, the characters succeed in crossing cultural borders as they reach a layer of common values that diminishes the separatist effects of cultural difference.

## **Conclusions**

The present discussion offers a comparative perspective on accounts of relocation by women authors coming from different cultural traditions to a common destination, the United States of America. The interpretation of the primary corpus focuses on the mechanisms of vertical ethics, illustrated by the daily interactions between American, Indian and Romanian characters. The close reading of the texts underlines the transcultural dimension of cultural encounters that is common to Lahiri's and Mihalis' visions. Considering that their protagonists manage to overstep differences and establish communication, they may represent ethical models of accepting Alterity. The pattern of vertical ethics configured in the works analysed involves the finding common of grounds while acknowledging and respecting cultural difference. This transgressive ethics of cultural interactions may serve as a starting point for the horizontal ethics of cross-cultural relations that may subsequently generate a philosophical discourse of transcendent cultural ethics. The key elements of this frame of mind would involve a focus on converging cultural values, respect for cultural difference and a non-hierarchical conception of cultures. As the analysis has demonstrated, individuals from different cultures (Indian, American and Romanian) can establish meaningful bonds by finding surprising intersections between distinct cultural codes. More specifically, the Indian-American connection is created by an overlap between Puritan conventions and Hindu norms of decency. Along similar lines, a Romanian and an American woman can build a relevant dialogue because they share similar strategies of resisting traditions of prudery and sexual control. The present analysis suggests that a comparative approach to authors from different cultures can unravel a transcultural ethics of cross-cultural relations.

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## Transgresivna etika drugosti v pripovedih o izkoreninjenosti Jhumpe Lahiri in Rodice Mihalisi

Ključne besede: literatura in etika / migracije / kulturna identiteta / kulturne vrednote / medkulturnost / Lahiri, Jhumpa / Mihalisi, Rodica

Prispevek raziskuje pripovedi o izkoreninjenosti Jhumpe Lahiri in Rodice Mihalisi z namenom, da izpostavi obema skupne presežne mehanizme, ki omogočajo vzpostavljane dialoga kljub kulturnim razlikam. Avtorici prikazujeta interakcije med liki iz Južne Azije, Romunije in Amerike ter tako uveljavljata koncepcijo kultur kot spremenljivih sistemov, ki se bogatijo s transferi pomenov prek meja. Obe ilustrirata, kako lahko liki, ki prihajajo iz različnih kulturnih kontekstov, vzpostavijo pomenljive interakcije. Srečanja med Indijo in Ameriko ter med Romunijo in Ameriko upodabljata kot možnosti za medčloveško razumevanje, ki presega specifične afiliacije posameznikov. S primeri medkulturnega sporazumevanja med protagonisti z zelo različnim ozadjem avtorici prikažeta etični model medkulturnih interakcij, ki zmanjšujejo nevarnost spopadov med kulturami. Če sprejmemo premiso, da lahko razumemo literarne like kot etične modele, se zdi možnost medkulturne komunikacije, kakor jo prikazujeta Lahiri in Mihalisi, še posebno relevantna v sodobnem kontekstu svetovne krize, kakor se kaže v sodobnih problemih migracij in

terorizma. Čeprav avtorici v svojih delih izhajata iz različnih kulturnih tradicij, obe obravnavani pripovedi uveljavljata transkulturno etiko, ki v ospredje postavlja pomembnost skupnih vrednot kot zdravilo proti spopadom kultur.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article  
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