



Universidad Nacional de Córdoba  
Facultad de Lenguas  
Licenciatura en Lengua y Literatura Inglesa



Towards the building of a Hybrid Identity. An analysis of Gloria Anzaldua's  
*Borderlands/La Frontera* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Mrs. Sen's*

**Autora de la Tesina:** Julieta Salinas

**Directora:** Mgtr. María Marcela González de Gatti

**Año:** 2014

## Index

Introduction .....	3
Theoretical Framework.....	7
The authors: Gloria Anzaldúa and Jhumpa Lahiri.....	11
1. Gloria Anzaldúa.....	11
2. Jhumpa Lahiri.....	13
ANALYSIS: Borderlands/La Frontera and “Mrs. Sen’s” .....	16
1. Construction of Identity.....	16
2. Displacement and diaspora.....	22
3. Hybrid identities .....	26
Conclusion.....	29
Works Cited.....	32

## Introduction

Cultures are characterized by diversity, and such diversity is manifested in those spaces of encounter and conflict where there is an overlap of identities which try to coexist. In the case of immigrants, once they are settled, they need to adapt to the new world. They struggle to achieve a certain adjustment without losing their own traditions, those that make up their culture and therefore, their identity.

The categories of identity and culture have been the centre of attention and the object of study in several disciplines, and ever since the introduction of postcolonial theory, they have been consistently explored, deconstructed and reassembled. Defining postcolonialism is a difficult enterprise, since a range of conflicting viewpoints preclude any simple conceptualization. Nonetheless, it is a key concept in order to understand contemporary society and its practices. Scholars that study and are exponents of postcolonial theory are Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha, or as Young (1995) calls them, “the Holy Trinity of Postcolonial Theory” (as cited in Mellino, 2005, 36). Their studies serve as a landmark in the study of this theory; therefore, their ideas will contribute to dispel part of the complexity.

Said (1993) considers that colonialism is key in history, since it has shaped modern Western thought, which has been built in opposition to an exotic or just different Other, basically a non-European other. His publication of *Orientalism* (1978) is an unquestionable landmark for postcolonial studies. In this text, Said indicates that the West has projected their self-image based on the perception of the other as primitive, barbarian, even simple; that is, the construction of the East is based on whatever the West is not.

Spivak (1990) also agrees that the West represents itself and builds its categories as a result of the encounter between the West and other non-European cultures. For her, postcolonialism implies rupture from modern theories related to the representation and evaluation of the other which had been structured based on the binary opposition us/them. That is why the deconstruction of the imperial subject is fundamental for postcolonial theory.

Bhabha (1994) is also a leading representative of postcolonial studies. He supports ideas of cultural diversity and hybridity by criticizing the colonial hegemony, and claims the need to review and deconstruct the opposition between metropole and colony as the task of the postcolonial mission. Bhabha claims that even though multiculturalism in the United States celebrates cultural diversity, it also restricts it. He remarks that

a transparent norm is constituted, a norm given by the host society or dominant culture, which says that ‘these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid’. (...) The second problem is, as we know very well, that in societies where multiculturalism is encouraged racism is still rampant in various forms. (1990, 208).

What he argues is that even though differences are recognized, there is still some degree of discrimination, of profiling of the other. In the Introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994) establishes that there is a need to focus on the articulation of cultural differences, or what he calls “in-between” spaces that allow for the construction of identities, whether individual or shared. These spaces are the ones that enable individuals to construct their identities based on their experiences while inhabiting these spaces.

In broad terms, postcolonial theory aims at deconstructing the imperial subject in order to give voice to those that have been oppressed by imperialism, and also to deconstruct the binary opposition *us-them*, making the Other heard as a significant piece in the construction of identity. The category of postcolonial should not be seen in a chronological sense, as a stage after colonialism, but as a reaction to the notions and categories imposed by colonialism and which have shaped Western thought and constructed categories that exclude a segment of society. Thus, culture is considered and reconsidered in a different way, emphasizing difference more than shared characteristics and traits.

In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft et.al. (2002) remark that postcolonial literature depicts the culture that has been affected by the imperial process, paying special consideration to place and displacement. The authors aim at refuting the value given to the peripheral and deconstructing fictions such as “West” and “East”, which are mainly ideological constructs, so as to ensure greater predominance of the Other. The spaces of resistance to the imperial dominance are considered as marginal and

permeated with ideology and politics. It is from these spaces that individuals want to give voice to their opinions, ideas, experiences, cultural beliefs.

The mainstream conception is that the Western tradition is the dominant variable. That is why the white, middle-class male represents the paradigmatic Western individual. There is no room for hybridity or heterogeneous identities which are claimed by postcolonial scholars. People with different ethnic backgrounds need to strike a balance between this double-bind they are faced with and this is negotiated on a daily basis. When any given minority group is faced with hostile acts, these minorities will aim at confirming their culture by representing “a united front against the oppressor” (Sarup, 3). It is a fact that minorities tend to suffer while trying to adapt to the new home, since they are not entirely accepted and they might even be rejected. Because of the exclusion of the other, these individuals construct their identity as migrant subjects who live between cultures, together with those who share the same traits and who are facing the same situations. As a result, heterogeneity is present, combining the local and the global, which in turn entails the lack of a dominant power vs. the minority and a coexistence of different cultures, with various ethnic backgrounds.

The present research paper aims at analyzing the writings of two authors, both of whom represent ethnic groups that portray “the other”. One of the authors is the well-known Gloria Anzaldúa with her *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and the other is the award-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri with her collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*, particularly with the short story *Mrs. Sen's*. These two writers intend to give voice to the characters and stories in their narratives, which represent marginal and oppressed groups in society in search of a sense of belonging and in the process of construction of their identities.

The present paper will focus on the analysis of cultural identity and hybridity in both literary works. In the case of cultural identity, the notions provided by Stuart Hall and Madan Sarup will be the starting point to analyze the characters and experiences in these literary works. As for hybridity, reference will be made to Stuart Hall and Madan Sarup as well, but also to García Canclini who is a well-known exponent of intercultural studies. Even if his studies are based on Latin American contexts, his notions on hybrid processes will be adapted to the present object of study. While identity issues are not

infrequent in analyses of literary texts, this paper purports to compare the construction of identities of the Indian and the Mexican world in the context of the United States and how these identities are shaped as what is called hyphenated identities.

### Theoretical Framework

In order to approach the categories of cultural identity and hybridity in both literary works, *Borderlands/La Frontera* and *Mrs. Sen's*, it is vital to address and analyze the texts in which Stuart Hall and Madan Sarup conceptualize these notions.

To begin with, Stuart Hall (1989) states that identity exists because of the dialogic relationship with the other (16). According to his perspective, one can only construct his/her identity when the other is acknowledged and he claims that “identity is a narrative of the self” (16). This means that a person’s history and experiences shape the construction of that person’s identity. At the same time, he agrees with Madan Sarup (1996) that identity is a production that never gets to be completed, thus it is constantly constructed depending on the particular positioning the individual takes in order to voice his/her concerns. Hall also claims the following:

If I think about who I am, I have been – in my own much too long experience, - several identities. And most of the identities that I have been I have only known about not because of something deep inside me – the real self – but because of how other people have recognized me. (15)

This statement further reinforces the notion of the dialogic relationship with the other that the individual needs to establish in order to build his/her own identity. It is said that the other’s perceptions help to shape such construction of identity.

Defining identity is no easy task. Gloria Anzaldúa problematizes the very notion of identity in one of her poems. Even though identity is generally linked to the notion of sharing certain attributes that enable people to belong to a certain group, the author writes the poem “Una Lucha de Fronteras/ A struggle of Borders” to challenge this common misconception.

Because I, *a mestiza*,  
continually walk out of one culture  
and into another,  
because I am in all cultures at the same time,  
*alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,*  
*me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.*  
*Estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me hablan*  
*Simultáneamente. (99)*

In this way she emphasizes the conception that identity is hybrid; therefore, the individual is full of contradictions and in constant search of a sense of belonging. This concept goes hand in hand with the idea presented by Stuart Hall (1996) that our identity is not homogeneous but that it is the product of a process in which there is a constant interaction with others. Because of its nature, identity is dynamic and it will change throughout said process. It is a fact that we communicate and express our ideas from a specific place and time, in a particular context, positioning ourselves so as to say something and, thus, define ourselves. It is when there is an “other” that such interaction helps build and construct an individual’s identity because there is the need for the other not only for the dialogic relationship but also for personal identification. Because of the postcolonial perspective on identity, concepts such as *hybridity* emerge in response to this split identity.

According to Sarup (1996), various theories establish that identity is determined, such as role theory or discourse theory among others. However, if we consider identity in Hall’s view, it is conceived not as uniform but as heterogeneous and dynamic, and as Sarup puts it, “we have several contradictory selves” (xvi). At the same time, these identities have limits and boundaries. It could be said that whatever is “outside of our concept of self could be called, perhaps, our public identity, and the ‘inside’ of our identity our private identity” (14). This is interpreted as the way in which the individual thinks about him/herself and the way the others construct his/her identity. That notion is further reinforced by Sarup when he claims that identity is related “to what one is not – the other” (47). Hence, we need the other to identify ourselves.

In Stuart Hall’s view, cultural identity can be seen in two ways. First, in terms of a shared culture in which individuals participate and have a say in a common history; therefore, they are constituted as *one people*. The second approach is related to the points of difference which make up “who we have become” (225). These notions could be depicted in the second generation of immigrants who are born in the new land and are faced with this double-bind, who have a common history with their parents’ culture but they have also constructed their own cultural identity, thus constituting their identity as hybrid. That is why conflicts arise when the second generation of immigrants born in the *new land* try to accommodate the values and traditions they receive from their



parents with what they experience by socializing within the boundaries of the Western culture. Fernando de Toro (2006) proposes the category of *displacement*, which in turn opens the way for new spaces where there is an intercultural contact among individuals. Some of the categories derived from the notion of displacement are diaspora and migrations. In both instances, the constant search for identity is prevalent. In the case of migrations, these imply a restructuring not only of territorial frontiers but also of social, cultural, and identity borders. Immigrants move in search of a better life. As previously mentioned, these immigrants' children live in-between cultures and they need to embark on a quest for a sense of belonging and identification. As Mignolo explains:

Border thinking is the notion that I am introducing now with the intention of transcending hermeneutics and epistemology and the corresponding knower and the known (...) To describe 'in reality' both sides of the border is not the problem. The problem is to do it from its exteriority (...). The goal is to erase the distinction between the knower and the known, between 'a hybrid' object and a 'pure' disciplinary or interdisciplinary subject, uncontaminated by the border matters he or she describes. (18)

In this way, Mignolo invites us to have a more open perspective that goes beyond binary oppositions so as to place ourselves in a postcolonial sphere, to speak from within the borders, from the point of view of the ones that even though they are within, represent the other.

Another scholar concerned with postcolonial and decolonial theories is García Canclini, who also speaks about cultural hybridity. He speaks of borders as the habitat for migrants. These migrants represent the other since they tend to leave their cultural group in order to settle in a new land where they find difficulty in adjusting. Thus, they are neither on one side, nor on the other, they are border subjects. Hence, migration is a key concept in postmodernity. The main characteristic of migrant subjects is that they are in a virtual space, in-between places, between the homeland and the host country. Sarup (1996) claims that "the nightmare is to be uprooted, to be without papers, stateless, alone, alienated and adrift in a world of organized others" (11). Sarup talks about this *nightmare* since the migrant feels the need to belong but does not fit in with the *new world*. It becomes difficult to reach a midpoint between fitting in or keeping the customs and traditions from the homeland. It is in this constant struggle to construct their identity that individuals become the *Other*.

This struggle and need to find their place in the world is the one the characters in both literary works are faced with. Throughout the analysis, the aim is to illustrate the categories presented in two different contexts which yet share many significant traits.

The authors: Gloria Anzaldúa and Jhumpa Lahiri

### 1. Gloria Anzaldúa

When analyzing the portrayal and construction of identity in *Bordelands/La Frontera*, it becomes imperative to go over the writer's life and experiences, since in this particular case, her impact and imprint are quite evident.

Gloria Anzaldúa stands for several varied groups, all of which represent the other; she portrays herself as a Chicana, lesbian and activist, and constantly redefines her identity. Even though most of the studies about the author deal with her perspectives on feminism and Queer Theory, the main focus of this paper will be on identity issues, and her experience as a Chicana writing about her fellow countrymen from within the system of the other; that is, from within the American system which she criticizes and blames for the suffering of her people. Indeed, Anzaldúa is an icon for the study of identity since she gives voice to the oppressed, to the ones that live in the borders whom she depicts as prisoners alienated or even isolated from culture. Through her writing, she can make those people heard and even herself, considering that her production is autobiographical.

Gloria Anzaldúa was born in Valle del Río Grande, Texas, in 1942. Her childhood could be said to have been traumatic, since she suffered from several health issues that prevented her from carrying out a normal life for a young girl. Her condition contributed to her being discriminated against throughout her life, but at the same time, that raised her awareness of the constant and lasting discrimination suffered by her people. She used to work on farms and ranches when she was young in order to help her parents with the household economy. After graduating from high school, she studied at Pan American University where she earned her BA in English, Art and Secondary Education, and later on she received an MA in English and Education from the University of Texas. Furthermore, she received several honours and awards during her lifetime which made her internationally recognized. Nowadays, most of her work,

which includes a wide variety of genres, can be found in the Benson Library in the University of Texas.

Anzaldúa saw in writing a channel to give voice to the people in the borderlands. She defined herself as a queer, and she even states that she was born this way. Thus, she has become a leading representative of Queer Theory and has managed to intermingle feminist concerns with race, gender, class and other notions as well. She has also contributed to the theory of *mestizaje* and the borderlands, turning into a leading figure of the Chicano movement. She considered *mestizaje* as much more than an “either-or” conception of identity but as a construction of a new hybrid identity. All concepts and categories voiced in her writings portray her personal experiences all along her life, most of which have been traumatic and have left a scar on her memory. Therefore, we are faced with a writer who aims at social change from an experimental perspective.

One of the aspects that have shaped her identity has to do with her Chicana status. She asserts that the Chicanos have always been economically and politically exploited by the dominant group, in this case the American society. The category of *new mestiza consciousness* that she has coined, characterizes identity as hybrid and plural, and this is what actually defines the Chicana identity. Anzaldúa stated in an interview that it is high time we created new categories, because we need to move beyond those already established notions like that of race. “As long as we use labels we will create unnecessary divisions among people” (1983, 76). However, it is us who create such labels and such divisions when in fact, “we just have different forms” (119). In this case, she is emphasizing the fact that we all have different ethnic backgrounds, and as Sarup (1996) puts it, “identities, our own and those of others, are fragmented, full of contradictions and ambiguities” (14). Anzaldúa shares with postcolonial scholars the idea that each individual has got not just an identity but that one’s identity changes as you reposition oneself. Thus, we are a “multiple entity” (160) not a single one. However, dominant groups tend to overgeneralize and see a group as the representative of an ethnicity rather than as an individual with his/her own cultural identity. It is important to mention that she wants to “go beyond victimization” (183); it is not just a matter of complaining but also of doing something, of voicing your concerns, of making yourself heard. This is what she tries to do by means of her writing. She states that “categories contain, imprison, limit and keep us from growing. We have to disrupt those

categories and invent new ones”(215). She sees her writing as a struggle against colonialism in order to break those imposed categories; in fact this is achieved by telling stories about her own experiences. She stated that when her experiences are too painful, she needs to shift places and write in the third person. In any case, she is making herself heard. She insists upon the idea that she wants Chicanos to construct their identity remembering about their origin and background, regardless of where they live. She manages to convey this message in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which she wrote in 1987 and which is a semi-autobiographical piece that deals with several borders, not just the physical border dividing the United States from Mexico.

## 2. Jhumpa Lahiri

Jhumpa Lahiri is a Hindu- American writer born in London in 1967. As she grew up in the United States, where she is currently living, she has ties with India, the United States and England, finding it difficult to build the notion of *home*. She has written several short stories and two novels, most of which have granted her well-known prizes. *Interpreter of Maladies*, object of study of this paper, was her debut work and awarded her with the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. She holds a BA in English Literature from Barnard College, an MA in English Creative Writing and Comparative Studies in Literature and the Arts and a PhD in Renaissance Studies from Boston University.

Her stories are chronicles about family relationships, migration, and identity, as well as the challenges characters have to face, such as loneliness, alienation, the longing for home always to be found elsewhere. Her characters are generally immigrants from India who migrate to the United States; therefore, their children, who represent the first American generation, live between two countries, two cultures, but they do not belong to any of them. On the one hand, they have freedom to choose whether they want to follow the ancestral rituals proposed by their parents, and with which they have no connection. On the other hand, they might feel such a strong sense of belonging to their traditions and roots that they cannot or do not want to embrace the American culture. The stories she tells are not merely about the migrating experience but they portray

current concerns and experiences of society as a whole. In several interviews, the author states that these issues are present in her stories since migrations and identity define not only the twentieth century but also humankind as such.

Lahiri herself asserts that she never had a sense of belonging towards any place; thus, she has a sense of homelessness which is present in her stories. She did not have the same idea of home as her parents did. In fact, she claims that she could not consider India as her home when she did not have enough family ties that would link her to such place.

In an interview for National Public Radio, she states that for a long time she thought she did not need to be from any particular place. Her parents never felt American, even if they had spent most of their lives in the United States, maybe it was not because people did not welcome them but because the notion of being American was not an issue to consider. She remarks that this is shown by the fact that her mother wears traditional clothes and they both have an accent, two traits that mark them whenever they are outside their comfort zone. Particularly when she was younger, she tried to detach herself from her parents since they were perceived by others as different. She was also perceived as different, even though she spoke perfect English, as it was her first language, or she did not wear traditional clothes. Still, others made fun of her. Perhaps, that is the reason why she used to think that as writer she did not have the need to belong to any given group, but with time she realized that it was not the case, that she had a cultural and ethnic background with her. She even accepts that by means of her writing, she has been able to come to terms with her own identity, a situation which she claims to be difficult and painful, but at the same time enriching and liberating.

Jhumpa Lahiri is an example of the struggle suffered by those who live between cultures. In fact, she represents a powerful, new, distinctive voice that by explaining the lives of the characters she describes, examines ideas of isolation and identity, both personal and cultural. Her characters face crises of identity because they need to reconcile American and Indian identities, which is by no means an easy task. Her narrative is vividly descriptive, making it appealing for the readers who sympathize with the characters.

Lahiri herself represents the other, in fact a double other, since she is a woman and she gives voice to those displaced. Most of the reviews on her work, particularly on *Interpreter of Maladies*, highlight her story-telling skills as well as the cultural perspective she takes on identity issues.

## ANALYSIS: Borderlands/La Frontera and “Mrs. Sen’s”

## 1. Construction of Identity

In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (1990), Stuart Hall refers to identity as a never ending process characterized by heterogeneity and difference. He remarks that cultural identity can be considered in two different ways: as shared culture, a shared history of a group, and as difference, admitting that identity is shaped not only by those things that are shared but also by difference since history has taken an active role in the individual’s construction of identity. In *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (1996), Madan Sarup indicates that “Identity can be displaced, hybrid or multiple. It can be constituted through community, family, religion, the nation-state. One crosses frontiers and boundaries” (1). Many minority groups are faced with these problems when they live on the borderlands. They do not feel at home and others feel as if they were torn between two cultures. Sarup also suggests that “identity is a construction, a consequence of a process of interaction between people, institutions and practices...” (11). Identity in both literary works, *Borderlands/La frontera* and *Mrs. Sen’s*, is constructed by different means.

In *Borderlands/La frontera*, Anzaldúa states that she does not like being told what to do, and it is culture that mandates paradigms, which shall not be questioned. The problem lies in the fact that “culture is made by those in power – men” (38). This is the starting point for her to construct her identity as a woman. As such, she is doomed to be oppressed and dominated from all fronts, by men, by whites, by Anglos, and in this way she is continually turned into a constant other. Anzaldúa, once again, talks about choices. However, these choices are not entirely free but shaped by the context. In this case, she states that for Chicano women there were few choices only: “the church as a nun, the streets as a prostitute, or the home as a mother (...) or entering the world by way of education and career becoming self-autonomous persons” (39). Yet, even if she used the inclusive “we” to portray herself as part of this intellectual group who make their own way into the world, she claims that she chose another path, “to be queer” (41).



That is the reason why she wants to talk about a new *mestiza consciousness* by which she legitimizes her place. She claims that

it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed (...) The counterstance refutes the dominant culture's views and beliefs (...) it stems from a problem with authority, it's a step towards liberation from cultural domination (100).

It is by means of this emancipation from the oppressor's control that the individual can construct his/her own identity as a member of this group. These characteristics are the ones embodied by the new *mestiza consciousness*, since the new *mestiza* needs to "juggle cultures, she has a plural personality, nothing is thrust out (...) nothing rejected (101). This plural identity goes in line with Hall and Sarup's idea of a dynamic process of construction of identity.

Madan Sarup also explains that binary oppositions polarize differences into two, in which one of the terms will represent the dominant component and the other the subordinate. Such oppositions could be *self/other*, *rational/emotional* or *metropolis/periphery* (57). He goes further by stating that what is periphery is actually central too since it is within. In both cases, *Borderlands/La Frontera* and *Mrs. Sen's*, the writers permeate the narration with binary oppositions. The most prevalent one is metropolis vs. periphery = the United States vs. India in one case and the United States vs. Mexico in the other. However, in Anzaldúa's case, the other is not always Mexico, there are some other *Others*, such as the woman, the catholic, the immigrant, the Chicano, etc. She explains:

In the gringo world, the Chicano suffers from excessive humility and self-effacement, shame of self and self-deprecation. Around Latinos he suffers from a sense of language inadequacy and its accompanying discomfort; with Native Americans he suffers from a racial amnesia which ignores our common blood, and from guilt because the Spanish part of him took their land and oppressed them. He has an excessive compensatory hubris when around Mexicans from the other side. It overlays a deep sense of racial shame (105).

This fragment clearly depicts the situation which Chicanos are faced with on a daily basis. They are neither from one nor from the other side of the border. The way their identity is constructed depends on the way others perceive them and shape their ideas about them. The bottom line is that they are not accepted, since they do not belong to

either group. Anzaldúa states that “they’d like to think that I melted on the pot. But I haven’t, we haven’t” (108). Even though they should adapt to the new land, they do not want to do so and at the same time lose their own customs and traditions which shape their cultural identity.

In the case of *Mrs. Sen’s*, Lahiri constantly defines the United States by mentioning what it is not, that is to say, India holds the traditions, customs and culture that the USA does not. She pretends to assimilate when in fact she is constantly bringing her culture to the US. Mrs. Sen has a feeling of being an outsider, a stranger, a foreigner. The fact is that she had to go to the United States because of her husband, not because of her free will. She even tells Eliot at some point, “Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me...” (115), this does not mean that she was obliged to go, but it was the role she had to comply with as an obedient wife. Her husband wants her to become more independent, as this is a trait of American culture. One of the ways in which he wants her to achieve this is by teaching her how to drive. This becomes a way for her to participate in the new culture. However, she feels a constant fear and does not dare to try it out on her own. This serves as an image of her own experience in the US and her fear of being on her own in this inhospitable land. Eliot’s mother is concerned about the fact that she cannot drive, together with other several questions she asks during the interview. One that is significant is “how long had she lived in this country?” (113). Eliot’s mother identifies Mrs. Sen as the other, someone who is not from that place, therefore an outsider. She could see that all of Mrs. Sen’s cultural traits were there in that apartment, even in her appearance.

“Mr. Sen says that once I receive my license everything will improve. What do you think Eliot? Will things improve?” – “you could go places”, Eliot suggested. “You could go anywhere”; “Could I drive all the way to Calcutta?” (119)

This conversation suggests that Mrs. Sen sees driving in a totally different way. She does not acknowledge the improvement it might bring about, since such improvement would only mean going back home. Nonetheless, the independence she might get from receiving her license does not have such value for her, since the only thing she wants is to get fish, quite a significant symbol as well since it is a sign of Bengali shared identity. Fish is essential in any Bengali meal and the fact that she needs Mr. Sen to take her to pick up the fish she has ordered is another indication of her dependency on him. At one point he tells her that as he has office hours to hold, she will have to cook chicken. She

tells Eliot that “she had grown up eating fish twice a day. She added that in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky” (124). Therefore, apart from the cultural importance fish has for her, it also serves as a symbol for home and as a sign of independence, since getting the fish all by herself is the first step. However, independence for her has a different meaning which is not exactly conveyed by getting the license and being able to get fish on her own.

The feeling and sense of displacement is not only experienced by Mrs. Sen but also by Eliot. According to Stuart Hall:

it is because this New World is constituted for us as place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to “lost origins”, to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning. (236)

Mrs. Sen is continuously longing for home and has a deep sense of belonging to her culture. On the contrary, Eliot’s mother is depicted as an independent woman, who is devoted to her job and as such, she is not too concerned about family bonds, Eliot in this case. Eliot, as an innocent boy, is the one that understands and admires Mrs. Sen’s cultural identity. When they go to meet Mr. and Mrs. Sen, Lahiri describes them fully for the reader to get a clear image of both of them, with a clear imprint of their cultural traits, though more evident in Mrs. Sen. The narrator states that “neither Mr. nor Mrs. Sen wore shoes” (112), or that she “wore a shimmering sari”. But what is quite interesting to point out is that, even though one might think that they were being described as the Other, as being part of the periphery, Eliot’s perception of his mother places her on the outside, changing the stereotypical positioning of the migrant, even if it is for a minute. “Yes, it was his mother, Eliot had thought, in her cuffed, beige shorts and her rope-soled shoes, who looked odd” (112).

Another important binary opposition which is closely related to the comparison between India and the United States is the contrast represented by the new life and home. Home is clearly portrayed by the situations that involve cooking and the explanation and description of traditions. Therefore, the new life is constructed as the lack of those elements previously mentioned.

When it comes to thinking about South Asian diasporic bodies, food is never far. (...) Discursively the terms by which “Indianness” is imagined almost always mobilizes a culinary idiom; more often than not food is situated in narratives about racial and ethnic identity as an intractable measure of cultural authenticity” (Mannur, 3)

Eliot describes with an innocent tone all the procedures Mrs. Sen follows when cooking. She does so in such a careful way because culinary art identifies her with her cultural identity. Those are the moments when she is not the Other, when she does not feel as a stranger and she actually feels home. This activity is so significant that it conveys Mrs. Sen’s feelings. Eliot realizes that something is wrong, “the blade never emerged from the cupboard, newspapers were not spread on the floor. She did not call the fish store, nor did she thaw chicken” (128). She even gives Eliot peanut butter instead of cooking the dishes she used to. This fragment intends to portray the situation as problematic, as if something is not going quite the way it should. Eliot realizes that something was wrong; in fact the reader learns later on that her grandfather had died. But the shift in mood is given by the narrator with a specific reference to cooking: “A week later Mrs. Sen began cooking again” (129). This symbol marks a change, a going back to the status quo.

Another way to construct identity is by means of language. According to Sarup (1996), culture is founded on communication, thus “it is through language that a group becomes aware of itself” (131). At a micro-level, he indicates that “through language we come to know who we are” (46); therefore, as identity is constructed by means of language, it becomes a sign of identity and culture. In chapter 5 of *Borderlands/La Frontera: How to Tame a Wild Tongue* Anzaldúa claims that, in order to belong, you need to speak the dominant language. “If you want to be American, speak ‘American’. If you don’t like it go back to Mexico where you belong” (75). Border subjects are in a constant double-bind. In this case, they need to speak the language of the oppressor in order to become active members of society, but at the same time, they need to protect their own language.

She mourns that “racially, culturally and linguistically, *somos huérfanos* – we speak an orphan tongue” (80). As language is a sign of identity, Chicanos suffer attacks on their identity as they do on their language. The Chicano language is referred to as “illegitimate, a bastard language” (80).

The whole chapter is a statement about the role of language in the construction of identity. In order to achieve that, she does so in a clever way by code-switching, mixing Spanish, English, Nahuatl. She attempts this in titles and all through the narrative as a strategy to construct the Chicano identity.

In Lahiri's short story, the reader is not faced with code-switching as explicitly as in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. To further reinforce the idea that language represents identity, when there are situations that do not have to do with everyday issues but with serious matters, Lahiri illustrates the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Sen communicate in their own language since English might become a linguistic barrier. Mrs. Sen receives a letter and, based on her reaction, Eliot realizes it might be something important. She calls her husband and states,

“Yes, is Mr. Sen there, please? It is Mrs. Sen and it is very important”. Subsequently she spoke in her own language, rapid and riotous to Eliot's ears; it was clear that she was reading the contents of the letter, word by word. As she read her voice was louder and seemed to shift in key. Though she stood plainly before him, Eliot had the sensation that Mrs. Sen was no longer present in the room with the pear-colored carpet. (122)

In this description, the reader identifies the fact that language becomes a trait of shared identity between the couple.

## 2. Displacement and diaspora

Because of migration, there is displacement, or what Stuart Hall (1993) calls diaspora. In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1993), Hall claims that the approach he wants to take to the notion of diaspora is

...defined, not by essence and purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (235)

Anzaldúa emphasizes the migrant tradition of her people and therefore, their diasporic identity. However, she emphasizes the difference between us vs. them, those binary oppositions that portrays the Mexicans as inhabiting a “war zone” (33) because as they have to leave their home to head North and find an opportunity, they are faced against hostility and dominance. She even claims that “those who make it past the checking point of the Border Patrol find themselves in the midst of 150 years of racism in Chicano *barrios* (...)” (34). Throughout this first chapter, Anzaldúa tries to characterize the immigrant and how they suffer when they are faced with the oppressor who exerts his power and control onto them. She constructs the identity of the immigrant as those workers who cross the borders in search for a better future and for an opportunity to work and feed their families. Thus, they are subdued to the desires of the oppressor.

The feelings of loneliness and alienation are suffered by those diasporic subjects who migrate to the United States, portrayed as the land of opportunities but that turns them into “economic refugees” (33). Anzaldúa aims at giving voice to her people, her people who have been subdued by the dominant power, who have been oppressed, who have been deprived of their dignity, and who suffer the consequences of Anglo dominance. She actually chooses the term *refugee* to further reinforce this idea. The reasons why people migrate have changed throughout time, that is why it is interesting to conceive immigrants that cross borders to get to the United States as “economic refugees” since the purpose of their journey is guided by economic factors among others. The idea of *refugee* could also be applied to Mrs. Sen, as she feels such

loneliness and alienation. In the case of this Indian couple, they might not be entirely *economic refugees* but Mr. Sen's academic future and professional development depend on their migration to the United States since they cannot enjoy the same opportunities back in India. However, and as previously stated, such bright future is mainly for Mr. Sen that is why Mrs. Sen feels frustrated and alone, away from home. Her interaction with the American society all along the story is by means of the interactions with Eliot; therefore, she does not have an active role in society. That might be one of the reasons why she finds it so hard to fit in, even if she is not even interested in fitting in.

Madan Sarup (1996) indicates that migrants could be living on "the border between two states" (7), either because they do not want to lose the traits and customs of their culture or because they assimilate to the new traditions and customs that the place of arrival has to offer. Thus, they become strangers not only in the new land but also towards themselves, which are the feelings evoked by Mrs. Sen. She is a stranger to herself in this new land that does not provide her with any of the comforts and gratifications she experienced while being at home, in India. She does not feel this new place as home, being hard for her to adjust. In fact, she is constantly longing for India, her mind is always set on her family, on the way they are celebrating different events, or on what they are doing. She lives in the border but in neither place at the same time.

Gloria Anzaldúa writes that "to avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows" (42). In this fragment, she makes reference to the idea that the immigrant will try to adapt to the new home at all costs, even if that means agreeing to hide some traits that identify them as Mexican. At the same time, she compares herself to a turtle, "wherever I go I carry 'home' on my back" (43). Those attributes that constitute the individual's idiosyncrasy cannot be forgotten since they are part of their identity.

When it comes to representation, Anzaldúa shifts back and forth between identifying herself with her people by means of the inclusive *we*, and detaching herself from those Mexicans that suffer the Anglo oppression. This consideration is depicted throughout the whole narrative, for example

As a person, I, as a people, we, Chicanos, blame ourselves, hate ourselves. Most of this goes on unconsciously (...) we suspect that there is something 'wrong' with us. (67)

The Chicano is led to believe that as they are not like Americans, there might be something wrong with them, something to change. However, that is the perception others have from them, and how they are represented. She goes on by saying “all her life she has been told that Mexicans are lazy. She has to work twice as hard as others to meet the standards of the dominant culture which have, in part, become her standards” (71). Thus, the writer manages to represent Chicanos as the Other, an oppressed other who fights to adapt at the same time as they try to preserve the traditions and customs which make them who they are.

In terms of representation, in the case of *The Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri chose quite purposefully to portray an American subject as a young boy, mature enough for his age, who “hosts” or welcomes Mrs. Sen into this new world for her. Quite contrary to what is expected, she gets this reassurance from Eliot, which she does not get from her husband. In Eliot’s case, he is faced with this new model of “mother” which is the exact opposite of what he has experienced all his life. In Sarup’s terms, “our identity is influenced by the experiences of our parents and what they tell us (...) discrepancies between what we expect and what we actually experience (disconnections or contradictions) make people aware of themselves and their identity” (171). What Sarup asserts is manifest both in Eliot and in Mrs. Sen. The conversations held between them and Mrs. Sen’s teachings contradict or collide with Eliot’s experience, but it still helps him to build his own identity, without interference from external pressure. In any case, he is not a diasporic subject as Mrs. Sen who is trying to find her place in the new land.

Eliot’s encounters with Mrs. Sen make him inevitably compare them to his own experiences. Eliot enjoyed watching Mrs. Sen cook. Once, while Mrs. Sen was preparing chicken, she asked Eliot,

“If I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come (...) At home that is all you have to do (...) just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighbourhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with the arrangements” (116).

These thoughts which Mrs. Sen says out loud are mirroring her feelings in this new place and how much she misses what she still considers home. The interesting thing is that Eliot answers that they might call you but only to tell you that you should keep it down. The occasions in which the narrator refers to Eliot’s mother are to show the



contrast between these women. Mrs. Sen always wants to give her something to eat which Eliot's mom is not eager to accept. Eliot tells that his mom always poured herself a glass of wine, and sometimes "she wasn't hungry for the pizza they normally ordered for dinner" (118). This fragment is a clear example of the different standards and customs these two women practise: being a devoted wife vs. not having enough time to take care of such things.

In both literary works, the authors manage to represent diasporic subjects who have migrated and experience feelings of loneliness and alienation and who are in the process of constructing their identities.

### 3. Hybrid identities

García Canclini (1995) states that nowadays nations are the determined territory where diverse cultural systems intersect and interact; therefore, identity becomes multiethnic, migrant, and made up of several elements from different cultures. (109). Consequently, subjects construct their identities as hybrid, because they become migrants when they leave their group but they do not fully belong or participate in the new culture. Hence, borders are where they settle and from where they shape their identity. García Canclini defines hybridization as a socio-cultural process which combines already existing cultural practices in order to generate new ones (8). That is why; he claims that we cannot talk about pure identities but about processes which construct a hybrid identity. Anzaldúa illustrates this notion by stating that Mexicans become “faceless, nameless, invisible (...) two worlds merge creating a frontline, a war zone. The convergence has created a shock culture, a border culture, a third country...” (33). This convergence has created a hybrid culture for those immigrants who want to keep their traditions and at the same time participate in the American system.

This new hybrid identity created from new cultural practices is constructed as ambivalent, as a mixture of voices. Chapter 7 of *Borderlands/La Frontera* entitled *La conciencia mestiza*, represents the construction of a hybrid identity which is constructed as “a consciousness of the borderlands (...) because I, a *mestiza* continually walk out of one culture and into another, because I am in all cultures at the same time (...) *me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio*” (99). The *mestiza* is “sandwiched between two cultures (...) a struggle of borders (...)” (100).

What Anzaldúa wants to achieve by means of this *mestiza* consciousness is to rebel against standards, against dominance, against oppression. She sees herself in this *mestiza* and, as herself, they do not have to be patient recipients of orders but activist fighters whose aim is to free themselves from oppression. Nonetheless, it is not an easy task. This hybrid identity that is constructed expects the subjects to reinvent themselves, since they have to synthesize “*lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto* (...) she [the *mestiza*] strengthens her tolerance for ambiguity” (104).

This chapter appears to be more optimistic in some way, since even though the writer still blames whites for the struggle and pain endured by Mexican immigrants, she admits that they have done this simply out of ignorance, so it is up to the minority to speak up and to make their voice heard. She even remarks that “*hay tantísimas fronteras que dividen a la gente, pero por cada frontera existe también un puente*” (107). What the writer aims at is recognizing that there is a ray of light, that Chicanos can also construct their identity as such without the need to change or be subjugated because of their culture.

The hybrid identity whites construct for Mexicans is conveyed by the hyphenated label *Mexican – American*. According to Sarup, “in the United States, people with single identities (for example, the English) are regarded as superior to those who have what are called *hyphenated identities*” (179). In fact, those hybrid subjects are neither one nor the other, they are border subjects trying to reach a balance between their traditions and the new world to which they necessarily need to adapt. Chapter 7 is the end of the prose section which has the purpose of legitimizing Chicanos as a valuable group whose identity is shaped by subjugation, suffering, oppression, but at the same time strength and self-determination against all odds. They might be given a hyphenated identity but they are still sure and proud of their origins.

In turn, Lahiri also portrays the same concept of hyphenated identity constructed in the case of both Mr. and Mrs. Sen. They might still be conceived as migrant subjects, as diasporic subjects who come to the new land in search for opportunities. However, second generations are the ones that are in such a double bind, as hyphenated subjects who have to fight in order to construct their own cultural identity. Mrs. Sen believes that she has a clearly defined identity when in fact she is in-between two worlds. She is submissive on the one hand but rebellious at the same time. Her submissive attitude is materialized in the car. In order for her to get food and be able to cook she has to ask her husband to pick her up and take her to the market. She does not drive if Mr. Sen is not there, so in a way it is an example of this submissiveness. At the same time, the car represents freedom; not calling Mr. Sen and driving to get the fish is an example of her rebellious attitude, since she is not doing what she usually does. In fact, the car crash she has is a metaphor for her situation in the United States, an illustration of her hybrid identity in this new land which she has to call home now.

Another example of how Mrs. Sen's identity is constructed is in opposition to Eliot's mother, who represents the typical American, the globalized world, everything which she is not. That is why her whole identity is constructed in those terms, what she is not; therefore, her identity becomes hybrid when she has to combine practices from what she considers home and her current home.

## Conclusion

In the previous analysis, the main objectives have been to examine the notions of cultural identity and hybridity in the writings of two authors, Gloria Anzaldúa and Jhumpa Lahiri, who speak about “the other” and who also represent the ethnic groups that are depicted in the characters of their stories. Using a theoretical framework which includes the contributions mainly of Stuart Hall and Madan Sarup, I have first presented and analyzed the authors’ lives, since their cultural background and heritage is of great importance. I have also addressed the issues at stake throughout the process of construction of identity, as well as the categories of displacement and diaspora, and the concept of hybrid identities.

Both authors, Anzaldúa and Lahiri share certain features as writers but differ in some others. Jhumpa Lahiri’s narrative is based on storytelling. She tells the story of an Indian couple that migrates to the United States in search of a better future, and provides a detailed description of the events and experiences encountered by the characters in an almost autobiographical shape. Even though the author claims that her stories are not entirely autobiographies, the themes she addresses are clearly connected to her own experiences as an immigrant establishing in the new land. In contrast, Gloria Anzaldúa states that her work is semi-autobiographical. She is identified in the different subjects she presents and describes whether it is a Chicana, a woman, or a neglected immigrant, among others. The main difference with Lahiri’s work is that Gloria Anzaldúa’s writing contains a strong social indictment of institutions, people, entities, herself. Her point is to voice her own opinions and ideas in a striking way, aim which is by all means accomplished. In both cases, the authors examine and criticize the American society and people’s behaviour towards immigrants who arrive with the hope of finding better opportunities for their families and for themselves.

The two literary works address the issue of identity and its construction. In the case of Anzaldúa’s *Bordelands/La frontera*, the situation of Chicanos is discussed. The author refers to them as having a hyphenated identity: Mexican-American. President Roosevelt once stated that “a hyphenated American is no American at all... the only

man who is a good American is the man who is an American and nothing else” (in Sengupta, 2008). This American identity is associated to the notions of white, male, middle-class citizens. Therefore, those who do not fit in this established pattern are subject to discrimination, or worse. In the case of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Chicanos are faced with this double bind: for their American partners they are Mexican whereas for their Mexican partners they are American. In this way, they do not belong to any of the two groups; they are in between two cultures. In the case of Lahiri’s *Mrs. Sen’s*, the main character is constantly longing for home. She tells Eliot that people back home must think she is rich and she is enjoying the luxury and comfort of the United States when, in fact, her life is characterized by nostalgia. Individuals need to construct their identity based on binary oppositions which always place them in the position of the other; that is, the opposition between *us vs. them*, between life back home and the new life. In both cases, the United States is represented as the dominant power but all their characteristics are based on the attributes and qualities life back home has and which the US does not have to offer. Immigrants will construct their identity from the borders and, as this is a dynamic process, such identity will be shaped and reshaped by the experiences individuals encounter through their lives.

In both literary works, the diasporic identity of the migrant tradition is prevalent. The objectives for the crossing of a border have to do with the quest for a better future, whether it might be economic as in *Borderlands/La frontera* or perhaps academic, as in *Mrs. Sen’s*. In both cases, the predominant feelings for those immigrants are nostalgia and alienation, feelings typically associated with displacement and diaspora. It is a fact that because of displacement immigrants suffer; they try to fit in this new home and at the same time they want to keep the traits and customs which are characteristic of their culture. Therefore, they are involved in a constant and dynamic process of transformation and construction of a cultural identity more in line with their diasporic nature.

When considering the construction of identity, the location of borders is also a point that distinguishes both literary works. On the one hand, *Bordelands/La frontera* establishes clear and close borders. Mexicans have to cross the US-Mexico frontier in order to arrive in the land of opportunities and improve their lives. Anzaldúa refers to the border as a wound which is inhabited by those individuals who decide to migrate.

This represents the notion that they are in between two cultures. Even though they might physically cross the border, their identity is not shaped by the new culture but by pieces of their traditions, and aspects from the habits and customs of the new land. It is interesting to consider that the author puts great emphasis on the idea of the state of transition and on the emotions experienced by those individuals. In the case of *Mrs. Sen's*, the location of borders is not as evident or close. Mrs. Sen makes constant reference to the other side of the border – home. She does not feel at home in the new land, she feels alienated and out of place. Even if the border divides two places which are not geographically near, Mrs. Sen is also in a state of transition as the one explained by Anzaldúa. She shifts back and forth between anecdotes about the past and comparisons between hypothetical situations and reactions of those placed on one and on the other side of the border.

Both authors succeed in presenting how individuals construct their identities based on the way they represent themselves and the way in which others perceive them, and that such process is dynamic and heterogeneous. As Gloria Anzaldúa states in an interview:

you're one entity – one person with identity. But that's not so. There are many personalities in you and your identity shifts every time you shift positions. So who are you? You are not a single entity. You're a multiple entity. (160)

Such words summarize the feeling that immigrants are faced with when they struggle to construct their identities, since their migrant condition implies that they are crossed by a reality that makes them subjects who live in between cultures, in between worlds. That is why identification with another group presupposes a contact with cultural roots and with their own identity.

## Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999. Print.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Interviews/entrevistas*. Ed. Ana Louise Keating. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. & Tiffin, H. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and practices in postcolonial literatures*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi. *El lugar de la cultura*. Buenos Aires: Manantial, 1994. Print.
- De Toro, F. "El desplazamiento de la literatura, la literatura del desplazamiento y la problemática de la identidad." *Extravío. Revista electrónica de literatura comparada*, num.5. Universitat de València (2010): Web. 4 April 2014.
- García Canclini, Néstor. "La globalización: ¿productora de culturas híbridas?" *Actas del III congreso latinoamericano IASPM – Al, Colombia, 2000*. Web. 21 August 2013.
- . *Consumidores y Ciudadanos. Conflictos multiculturales de la globalización*. Mexico: Grijalbo, 1995. Print.
- Hall, Stuart. "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference." *Radical America*. Vol. 23 n°4 (1989):9-20. Print.
- . "New Ethnicities." In: *Critical dialogues in cultural studies*. New York: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- . Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In: *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993, 222-237. Print.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. "Jhumpa Lahiri's struggle to feel American." Interview with Steve Inskeep. *Morning Edition. National Public Radio*. 25 November 2008. Web. 15 September 2013.
- . "Mrs. Sen's." *The Interpreter of Maladies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999. Print.
- Mannur, Anita. *Culinary fictions. Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010. Print.



- Mellino, M. *La crítica poscolonial. Descolonización, capitalismo y cosmopolitismo en los estudios poscoloniales*. Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2008. Print.
- Mignolo, Walter. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000. Print.
- Mizutani, Satoshi. "Hybridty and History: A Critical Reflection on Homi K. Bhabha's 'Post-historical' Thought." *Zinbun Open Journal*. 2009 n°41:1-19. Web.
- Moraña, Ana. "From Latin Americans to Latinos: Latin American Immigration in US: the Unwanted Children". *Forum on Public Policy*. Vol. 2007 n°2. Accessed August 2013, web.
- Rukundwa, Lazare & van Aarde, Andries. "The formation of Postcolonial Theory". *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*. Vol. 63, n° 3 (2007), 1171-1194. March 2013. Web.
- Rutherford, Jonathan. The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha. In: *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, 207-221. Print.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993. Print.
- Sarup, Madan. *Identity, Culture, and the Postmodern World*. Edinburgh: Edingburgh University Press, 1996. Print.
- Sengupta, Ashis. "The Hyphenated identity in contemporary multiethnic drama." *Americana e-journal of American studies in Hungary*. Vol. IV, n°1 (2008). October 2013. Web.