Nihilation of Femininity in the Battle of Looks: A Sartrean Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter"

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ABSTRACT

The panoptic gaze is vested in with a constitutive impact upon the subjectivity of individuals. Feminist scholars like Luce Irigaray have charged that the metaphor of vision is intimately connected with the construction of gender and sexual difference. By pointing to the masculine logic of Western thought, Irigaray confirms that a woman's entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies her inevitable confinement to passivity. This essay aims to examine the sexual politics of metaphors of vision in a literary text that is controversially argued to be a voice for the subordinated Indian immigrant women in the US. As one of the most influential schools of thought in Western philosophy, the Sartrean paradigm of sexual difference is employed to investigate this allegation by identifying the latent binary system at work in the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri, who has garnered substantial yet controversial critical attention over her representations of gender. Specifically, this essay focuses on Lahiri's prefatory story to her Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000), to unravel the manner her exercise of vision in this narrative perpetuates the dichotomies of a male subject and a female object pre-established in the traditional hierarchies of gender in the West. In this story, Lahiri (un)wittingly privileges masculinity over femininity and reduces the latter to a typically disgusting Sartrean female body of holes and slime. Hence, notwithstanding infrequent emasculated images of the male subject, it is ultimately the masculine that, in the battle of looks between male and female, nihilates the Other to the state of "being-in-itself" and enjoys supremacy over the feminine.

Keywords: masculine; feminine; gaze; hole and slime; hierarchies of gender

INTRODUCTION

The gaze matters; looking and being looked at, together construct hierarchies of power, "the premise of the politics of identity" (Sen, 2007, p. 151). Feminists scholars have charged the metaphor of vision with being intimately connected with the construction of gender and sexual difference[1] (Mulvey, 1975; Irigaray, 1985, 1990, 1997; De Lauretis, 1987; Keller & Grontkowski, 2003; Butler, 2011). These critics believe "the traditional privilege of vision acts to perpetuate the privilege of masculinity in modern writing practices" (Storr, 1994, p. 2). In her influential project "Visual Pleasure" (1975), Mulvey (1975) explained how the pleasure in looking "has been split between active/male and passive/female" (p. 11). The

exercise of vision then necessarily enacts and enables the construction of a male subject and a female object. The woman appears; she is passive, the object; and she "holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). The masculine, on the other hand, is constructed as the subject, the active party, and the one who gazes. The prevalence of this gaze in Western metaphysics plays a significant role in the production of sexist-norms and in its privileging the masculine. Feminist scholars take the subsequent subjectivity of women as inevitably bound up with the patriarchal structure of the look and the unavoidable localization of the eye as authority. In terms of visibility, the woman thus "carries her own Panopticon with her wherever she goes, her self-image a function of being for another" (Copjec, 1994, p. 288). This position gives the panoptic gaze a constitutive impact upon the subjectivity of the individuals, in that to materially penetrate the body in depth, it no longer depends on the mediation of the subject's own representations. As a result, the refusal of and the resistance against the gaze, or the power, might turn out to be futile, or to employ Foucauldian terminology, "a sham," meaning that even where resistance exists, "it is taken into account in advance; indeed, merely serves to incite new and more subtle processes of oppression" (Krips, 2010, p. 95).

Pointing to the patriarchal nature of visuality in Western metaphysics, contemporary feminists argue that one of the chief sources of the oppression of women lies in the way women "have been consigned to visuality," and that "visuality [is], precisely, the nature of the social object that feminism should undertake to criticize" (Chow, 1992, pp. 14-5). This was also the motive for Irigaray's (1985) thoroughly elaborated critique of the privilege of vision in Western thought. She pointed to the non-visible, therefore non-theorisable nature of woman's sex and pleasure to confirm that "any theory of the subject has always been appropriated *by* the masculine" (Gill, 1985, p. 32). In *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), Irigaray (1985) elaborated that,

> Woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks. Within this logic, the predominance of the visual, and of the discrimination and individualization of form, is particularly foreign to female eroticism. Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her confinement to passivity. (p. 34)

As one of the most influential philosophers in Western thought, Sartre has in feminist terms confined women to the feminine and simultaneously defined the feminine not in relation to the masculine, but, to utilize Irigaray's (1985) argument, by his own masculine logic. In the course of expounding his philosophical theories, Sartre reduced gender to sexual difference and privileged masculinity in so doing. In Sartrean ontology, in a similar vein to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the woman becomes the object, the body, whereas the masculine is granted the power of asserting his nihilating look at the feminine as *the* passive object. This essay does not aim to discredit or disprove Sartre's theories, only to highlight their inherent masculinity in the process of proposing the self-contradictory consequence of metaphors of vision occurring in a literary text that is expected to be a voice for the subordinated Indian American women. To achieve this single aim, we intend to trace and analyze the metaphors of vision in Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter" (2000) in the light of a Sartrean paradigm of sexual difference.

Specifically, we focus on the sexualization of what might be termed as the battle of looks in a story, which revolves around the interactions of an ethnic Indian couple, Shukumar and Shoba, who live in America. We argue that the mode of vision in Lahiri's narrative not only fails to decenter the traditionally imposed sexist hierarchies and cannot therefore be

considered a voice for Indian women in particular, and *the* woman in general, but it also enables and enacts the construction of the dichotomy of the male subject and the female object as it exists in the traditional gender hierarchies of the West. Our focus is on the detailed exposition of Lahiri's privileging of the subject and our purpose is to map the process by which the author equates masculinity with subject-hood and femininity with object-hood through her appropriation of a Sartrean mind-body dichotomy. Attention will also be paid to Lahiri's repeated insistence on the horror of the female body, an aversion by which masculinity, despite its infrequent emasculated status, wins the battle of looks, and femininity loses.

THE FICTION OF A POSTCOLONIAL WOMAN WRITER

"A Temporary Matter" first appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine in 1998 and is the first story in Jhumpa Lahiri's debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000). The story is about a couple, Shoba and Shukumar, who tell each other secrets during nightly blackouts. Shoba is a lonely, alienated woman whose still birth of her first baby has made her retreat into a reclusive state of mind and as the bearer of tremendous sorrow and shame, strives to avoid any mode of communication with her husband, Shukumar. The narrative revolves around very important life events such as the death of their first child and the end of a once happy marriage, and begins with Shoba's reading of a notice of a five-day disruption of electricity in the neighborhood for one hour each day, from 8 p.m. The couple takes this opportunity to tell each other things in the dark that they had never told each other before. The narrative continues initially with revelations of trivial secrets like Shukumar's cheating on an exam and his forgetting to tip the waiter during their first dinner date. On the morning of the fifth night, the electric company informs them that the faulty line had been fixed ahead of schedule. The couple still keep the lights off, preferring to eat in the dark, but suddenly, Shoba blows out the candle and turns the light on to reveal her most outrageous secret. It is only at this point in the story that Shoba is shamelessly willing to look at Shukumar: "I want you to see my face when I tell you this" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 22), she says, using the same words she had used to announce her pregnancy. She tells him that she needs some time alone and that she has signed a lease on an apartment elsewhere. Shukumar is sickened by the startling news and reveals a secret he had promised himself he would never divulge to Shoba: That he had arrived at the hospital while she was asleep, had held the stillborn baby, and discovered that it was a boy. Shoba, who had for a long time taken solace in Shukumar's supposed ignorance about the baby, turns the lights off again, and the two weep together, "for the things they now knew" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 24).

As a highly successful and established writer of Indian diaspora, Lahiri has garnered substantial yet controversial critical attention over her representations of gender. While many have commended her for moving away from the previous generations' narratives of assimilation or representations of ghettoized ethnic existences (Kumar, 2002; Aubeeluck, 2006; Shea, 2008; Alfonso-Forero, 2011) and earlier forms of gender or racial politics (Zare, 2007; Kasun, 2009; Roy, 2010; Kemper, 2011; Dutt-Ballerstadt, 2012; Dhingra, 2012; Hai, 2012), some have criticized her works for their failure to decentralize and deconstruct previously established stereotype-based hierarchies of power (Ganguly, 2001; Bhatt, 2003; Lynn, 2004). Kemper (2011), for instance, credited Lahiri with creating original and challenging characters, her fiction thus being free of "characters that fill cliché archetypes such as the dominating, rich white man and the traditional [subservient] Indian" (p. 11). In a similar way, Shea (2008) pointed to Lahiri's situating of many characters, places, and plots within the same historical and cultural context to conclude that Lahiri "attempts to shatter

previous stereotypes" and her writings are "both carefully balanced and contrasted to create a universal representation" of social groups (p. 2)[2]. David Kipen applauded Lahiri and her *Interpreter of Maladies* for presenting "lifelike stories" and characters (as cited in Mandal, 2002, p. 28). Kasun (2009) acknowledged Lahiri for her articulation of "Indian" or "Bengali" womanism, and for her adding novel characteristics such as "intergenerational exchange". Bahmanpour (2010) claimed that in her writings, Lahiri gives voice to the female subaltern. Contrarily, Dhingra (2012), argued that the male characters formulate the major part of Lahiri's writings and even in those stories where the protagonist seems to be female, her "male characters play a critical role to influence the action and the point of view" (p. 140). In doing so, according to Dhingra (2012), Lahiri evokes new definitions of masculinity, and thus deviates from stereotypical portrayals of male and female characters and even gently satirizes the Bengali American writers and intellectuals who conform to stereotypical cultural or gender roles. Rani Sinha suggested that Lahiri, being a diaspora herself, has merely "lent voice to her own feelings" (as cited in Mandal, 2002, p. 29), a claim that takes much attention when read in tandem with Lahiri's own words. In an interview in 2008, for example, she acknowledged her own empathy towards the male protagonists:

> In the beginning I think it was mainly curiosity. I have no brothers, and growing up, men generally seemed like mysterious creatures to me. Except for an early story I wrote in college, the first thing I wrote from the male point of view was the story "This Blessed House," in *Interpreter of Maladies*. It was an exhilarating and liberating thing to do, so much so that I wrote three stories in a row, all from the male perspective. It's a challenge, as well. I always have to ask myself, would a man think this? Do this? I always knew that the protagonist of *The Namesake* would be a boy. (cited in Dhingra, 2012, p. 141)

Koshy (2013) related Lahiri's representations of gender to the epistemological transformation of neoliberalism, arguing that under a neoliberal governmentality and in contrast to earlier ideologies, Lahiri reproduces free individuals as exemplary neoliberal subjects. She emphasized that Lahiri "offers a multi-layered critique of … gender norms, and hetero-sexual forms through which intergenerational bonds are forged in the crucible of neoliberal economic migration" (p. 366). Feminist scholars, however, censure this image for its homogenizing and heterosexist tendencies[3]. Reddy (2013), for instance, situated Lahiri's fiction within a transnational beauty assemblage and argued that her stories constitute a critical shift in focus within the contemporary South Asian, diasporic literature. "Lahiri's stories," Reddy observed, "deprivilege the (neo)liberal feminist subject while maintaining a critical focus on the cosmopolitan Indian feminine body/subject in order to theorize how the racialized, classed, and sexual subjectivities of white women and South Asian American men converge with it" (p. 34).

Lahiri's feminist critique draws attention to the existing abundant yet controversial criticism on the gendered politics of her narratives. By examining the degree to which she conforms to or deviates from the pre-established notions of a masculine-feminine dyad, this essay makes two major interventions into existing feminist scholarship. First, it maps the sexual politics that lie at the heart of Western thought, in particular within the Sartrean philosophy, as a prevailing discourse of Western metaphysics. Second, by means of a close reading of Lahiri's story "A Temporary Matter," in the light of this dominating discourse, the essay posits Lahiri as a failure with respect to her attempt to deviate from conventional gender roles. Unless one appreciates the Sartrean articulations of sexist-norms, crucial in the formulation of the dichotomies of active-passive, subject-object, and feminine-masculine,

one would not be able to identify the hierarchical gender relations produced in the battle of looks between Lahiri's male and female characters.

ONTOLOGICAL HIERARCHY: THE MASCULINE AND THE FEMININE IN THE BATTLE OF LOOKS

At the crux of the proposed reading of Lahiri is Sartre's idea that consciousness is explicitly equated with the activity of looking and the body with the passivity of being looked at. This is parallel with the discourse of contemporary Western culture, where masculinity is identified with activity and femininity with passivity. The dichotomy of active and passive is considered fundamental to the establishment of subject-object relations that formulates the backbone of dominant constructions of human subjectivity. These dichotomous oppositions (Presence/Absence, Being/Nothingness, Active/Passive, Same/Other, Subject/Object, etc.) that lie at the heart of philosophical metaphysics introduce a subtle process of hierarchization that "assures the unique valorization of the 'positive' pole (that is, of a *single* term) and, consequently, the repressive subordination of all 'negativity'" (Felman, 1997, pp. 8-9). The woman is thus defined by the man as his opposite. In effect, the dichotomy of activity-passivity theoretically subordinates woman to the central notion of masculinity and necessarily leads to the establishment of masculine-feminine and subject-object dichotomies (Le Doeuff, 2007, p. 60). In a similar discussion, de Beauvoir (2011) critiques Sartrean discourse that in it, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute–she is the Other" and hence masculinity is continuously privileged (p. 16). A field that provides an appropriate platform for the realization of these hierarchies is the domain of vision.

Looking is naturally a reciprocal process. In the act of looking, the subjects both receive and transmit information. This is even true when one averts one's gaze, a moment in which something is immediately signaled to an interlocutor or observer. The one who holds the look, whether the look of surveillance as a clandestine information gathering process or the look of lust with its unavoidably sexual set of connotations, often does not want to be seen looking. Such form of looking establishes a one-way look of power, the ownership of which the subjects struggle to obtain. Likewise, in Sartrean philosophical discourse, any exchange of looks, any act of looking, is a potential battleground of the relations of seeing, where each subject attempts to save its subject-hood from obliteration—by the other's gaze—by holding ownership of the look of power. In other words, the battle of looks, according to Sartre, commences only when the other is identified as a subject. In *Being and Nothingness* (1992), Sartre differentiated between two types of being: being-in-itself and being-for-itself (p. xxxix). The former is the nature of being of non-conscious things and the latter is that of consciousness. Being-in-itself is described as a plentitude of being, while being-for-itself constitutes a lack in being and is fundamentally the nihilation of being-in-itself. Hence, in order to continually re-assert subject-hood, one needs to constitute oneself as the negation or nihilation of objects, i.e. to be active. As he explained,

> The Other is not only the one whom I see but the one who sees me ... The Other ... is presented in a certain sense as the radical negation of my experience, since he is the one for whom I am not subject but object. Therefore as the subject of knowledge I strive to determine as object the subject who denies my character as subject and who himself determines me as object. (Sartre, 1992, p. 228)

Sartre provided two principal examples to elaborate on the power relations at work in the act of looking. The first one describes a person who sees a man in a public park that is not

conscious of the person's presence and gaze. In this case, although the man has his own field of vision, since he does not return the gaze of the watcher, he remains an object in the person's universe. He belongs to the observer's distance; he is there, in the proximity of the observer, yet he is turning his back on him. Here, the man, as the Other, turns into an object. Yet, once the other returns the gaze and directs his look at the observer, the seemingly absolute subject-hood starts to be nihilated. The recognition of the possibility of being seen and judged by the other brings about Sartre's second example.

The second example illustrates the concept of shame by visualizing a situation in which the individual is engaged in a secret gaze through a keyhole at a scene on the other side. Here the observer is lost in the view. His consciousness sticks to his acts. It is his acts and his attitude that is taken by Sartre to have no outside. Once the subject realizes the possibility of the Other's look—the possibility of reversal of roles and his/her becoming the target of a similar gaze—the nothingness of consciousness experiences the most fundamental of changes, to the extent that it becomes a reified something. Christine Andrews wrote of Sartre's analysis: "my shame is a confession of the fact that I am indeed an object which the Other is looking at and judging" (as cited in Sealey, 2013, p. 107). Sartre affirmed that once the looker comprehends the possibility of his own self being watched and being an object-for-the-other, his freedom is taken away and he becomes a seen object. Subsequently, the subject can be ashamed only as his freedom escapes him in order to become a given object. This shift in the structure of the being, i.e. subject's turning into an object for the other, triggers feelings of shame that reveals to the observer that he/she is "this being, not in the mode of 'was' or of 'having-to-be' but in-itself" (Sartre, 1992, p. 262). Shame thus becomes the "fundamental experience of being an object for the other" (Gyllenhammer, 2010, p. 50), identified as a reaction on the part of the observer to the realization of the fact that he is a body in the world that is constituted not only by him, but by others as well. In this context, the triumph of the point of view of the Other over the point of view of the subject is toward him-/herself is "death" (Sartre, 1992, p. 540).

FEMININITY BODIED FORTH

Sartrean notions of the active-subject and passive-object, perpetuated within the act of looking, leads to the establishment of masculine-feminine dichotomy. These terms are founded within the classic Cartesian system of the mind-body division. In Sartrean terms, to be "pure subject" is to look without being looked at (Sartre, 1992, p. 289). For him, as soon as the being-in-itself realizes that it is—or may be—looked at by the Other, consciousness is reduced to it, and the being-in-itself amounts to that of being a body. Here, "[T]o be an object-for-others or to-be-a-body are two ontological modalities which are strictly equivalent expressions of the being-for-others and the part of the for-itself'" (Storr, 1994, p. 346). Since the body consistently attempts to constitute the being-in-itself, the consciousness, in turn, endeavors to nihilate in its emergence. In his discussion of shame before the gaze of the other, Sartre elaborates on the tension between the body as object and the consciousness as subject both modesty and the fear of being seen naked are only symbolic specifications "of original shame; the body symbolises here our defenseless state as objects. To put on clothes is to hide one's object-state; it is to claim the right of seeing without being seen; that is, to be pure subject" (Sartre, 1992, p. 289).

Sartrean "pure" subject-hood hence requires a lethal voyeurism, or a way of looking at the object without oneself being looked at. It is this appalling moment that in many ways, as we argue, forms the climax of Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter" when Shukumar finds out about his wife's unsuccessful labor and observes her passive and inert body on a hospital bed,

"When he returned to Boston it was over. The baby had been born dead. Shoba was lying on a bed, asleep ... Her placenta had weakened and she'd had a cesarean, though not quickly enough" (Lahiri, 2000, pp. 3-4). The significance of the scene is further highlighted when it is associated with the way Sartre equates in-itself with a sexual female body. In the last section of *Being and Nothingness* (1992), Sartre compared the "slimy", a "constant hysteresis", to "the flattening out of the full breasts of a woman who is lying on her back" (p. 608), as an epitome of the danger the being-in-itself constitutes to the being-for-itself of consciousness:

> [T]he For-itself is suddenly compromised. I open my hands, I want to let go of the slimy and it sticks to me, it draws me, it sucks at me ... It is a soft, yielding action, a moist and feminine sucking ... I cannot slide on this slime, all its suction cups hold me back ... It is a trap ... Slime is the revenge of the In-itself. A sickly-sweet feminine revenge which may be symbolized on another level by the quality sugary. (Sartre, 1992, p. 117)

He identified the "hole" as being-in-itself's plea to the-for-itself,

> [T]he hole is originally presented as a nothingness 'to be filled' with my own flesh ... [T]o plug up a hole means originally to make a sacrifice of my body in order that the plenitude of being may exist; that is, to subject the passion of the For-itself so as to shape, to perfect, and to preserve the totality of the In-itself ... The obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which 'gapes open'. (Sartre, 1992, p. 613)

Sartre offered the body of a full-breasted woman lying on her back as the epitome of "object-state," a state in which the female body is in a totally passive, inert status, waiting to be filled by the action of the for-itself; an object which the conscious for-itself must nihilate in order to maintain its subject-hood. Here the indecency of the feminine sex is associated with whatever that gapes open. The woman thus "appeals to a strange flesh which is to transform her into a fullness of being by penetration and dissolution. Conversely woman senses her condition as an appeal precisely because she is in the form of a hole" (Sartre, 1992, pp. 613-4). In Sartrean philosophy, the active subject-hood is aligned with the masculine and the passive object-state of being-in-itself with the feminine. For him, the man is the one who looks and the woman is the one who is being looked at.

This essay thus examines Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter" in the light of this philosophical discourse, itself being a kernel of contemporary Western metaphysics. We argue that references to looking and to the eye in "A Temporary Matter" have little possibility of operating as dead metaphors; the story is replete with modes of literal looking and observing, and with accounts of material eyes and physical faces. Shoba does not exchange glances with Shukumar and she is the one who attempts to avert her eyes. Shukumar, by contrast, spies upon her and reads her expressions. He is presented as the all-seeing figure. He "looks", "sees", "gazes", pictures", "stares", "studies", "peers", "notices", and "knows", whereas Shoba is portrayed as a passive, guilt-ridden figure who struggles to avert her eyes in the battle of glances with Shukumar as if she knows that as a woman, she must play the passive role: "she turned to him, looking not at his face, but at his shoes" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 19). Shoba's retreat from the battle of looks is vividly illuminated when Shukumar "thought of how long it had been since she looked into his eyes and smiled, or whispered his name" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 5).

SHOBA: THE WOMAN AS A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

As we have noted earlier in this paper, Sartre (1992) considered death as "the triumph of the point of view of the other" (p. 540). Death, according to him,

> is not only the always possible nihilation of my possibles, a nihilation outside my possibilities ... It is also the triumph of the point of view of the Other over the point of view which I am toward myself. This … 'transforms life into destiny' ... When the for-itself 'ceases to live' [t]he disappearance of the nihilating being [i.e. the for-itself, which nihilates the in-itself] does not touch that part of its being which is of the type of the in-itself; it is engulfed in the in-itself .... The unique characteristic of a dead life is that it is a life of which the Other makes himself the guardian.
>
> (Sartre, 1992, pp. 540-1)

In the battle of looks, each for-itself strives to nihilate the Other to the status of being-in-itself by fixing it with its look. When the for-itself disappears, it leaves behind the body, the living body, which, in his system, is of ambiguous ontological status. The body is thus defined as the contingent form assumed by the necessity of contingency. It is in essence the same as the for-itself, "not an in-itself in the for-itself, for in that case it would solidify everything. But it is the fact that the for-itself is not its own foundation and this fact is expressed by the necessity of existing as an engaged, contingent being among other contingent beings" (Sartre, 1992, p. 309).

Hence, the body is paradoxically both the necessary condition of being-for-itself (I could not exist without a body) and the contingency or facticity of being which the for-itself strives to nihilate: It is what the subject nihilates, meaning that "It is the in-itself which is surpassed by the nihilating for-itself and which re-apprehends the for-itself in this very surpassing" (Sartre, 1992, p. 309). But once the for-itself ceases to exist, the in-itself of the body is no longer surpassed; the body loses the ambiguity of being it received from consciousness and lapses into the status of a mere thing, an object like any other object in the Other's field of vision. "[T]o die is to lose all possibility of revealing oneself as subject to an Other" (Sartre, 1992, p. 297). It is when I am dead that the Other will be able to look at me in the certain knowledge that I will never be able to return the look. It is this frightful realisation that to a high degree forms the backbone of Lahiri's narrative. Shoba regards with terror the prospect of her passive, inert body becoming the object of Shukumar's gaze as her final humiliation; the horror of her body becoming a mere thing, an object to be studied "professionally" by the other. The ultimate realization of being reduced to an object and so to be totally vanquished.

For Shoba, the doctors, and Shukumar, as revealed to by the doctors, the death, more than likely, comes as a threatening calamity which befalls her from within. The female body is displayed as a mortal flesh that destroys itself from within; as if the calamity of death is inherent in the female body of Shoba—a pattern that is repeated in Lahiri's other stories[4]. This is most vividly exemplified in the hospital scene when the doctor explains the weakening of Shoba's placenta as "these things happen … [with a smile] in the kindest way it was possible to smile at people known only professionally" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 4). Her body thus becomes a typical Sartrean female body of holes and slime: her passive body has become disgusting; as it is revealed later in the story that her stomach was "immense, to the point where Shukumar no longer wanted to touch her" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 20), now her body contains evil and death. And it is the horror and embarrassment of revelation of this secret

that explains Shoba's initially traumatized behavior when she comes home from the hospital and her later tendency to seclusion. Shukumar tells us,

> When they returned from the hospital the first thing she did when she walked into the house was pick out objects of theirs and toss them into a pile in the hallway: books from the shelves, plants from the windowsills, paintings from walls, photos from tables, pots and pans that hung from the hooks over the stove. Shukumar had stepped out of her way, watching as she moved methodically from room to room. When she was satisfied, she stood there staring at the pile she'd made, her lips drawn back in such distaste that Shukumar had thought she would spit. Then she'd started to cry. (Lahiri, 2000, p. 17)

It is Shoba's body, most importantly her womb, the locus of all the holes and slime of Sartrean femininity that is shown in the story as the source of death—"her placenta had weakened"—rather than the surgeon's knife in the "caesarean" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 4). We have not far to travel from Shoba's disgusting body to Marcelle's repulsive pregnant belly—in Sartre's *The Age of Reason* (1964)[5]—the direct sight of which evokes in her the embarrassing, horrific status of animality, an object-status that reinforces the prospect of abortion. Sartre's narration of Marcelle's unwanted pregnancy locates feminine body in the discourse of being-in-itself, a manifestation of a holey and slimy feminine sexuality. The unclean beast, proliferating in the fatness of Marcelle's body, as she contemplates while looking at her own *naked body* reflected in the mirror, can only be removed by a surgeon's potentially lethal knife. Her body, in a parallel manner to Shoba's, is horrifyingly disgusting. One day as Marcelle is awakened with a queasy stomach, she gets up abruptly and runs to the basin. There she vomits "a foamy, turbid liquid, which looked rather like the slightly beaten white of an egg" (Sartre, 1964, p. 66). She feels revolted and while "ready to be disgusted with herself", she watches "the dabs of mucus sliding slowly towards the drain-hole, leaving glossy, viscous tracks behind them, like slugs" (Sartre, 1964, pp. 67-8). What is still more horrifying to Marcelle, and perhaps the source of her shame, is the thought of Mathieu's negative impression of her, that "if he knew, "he is so austere that" he would hate her. The feeling that her flesh has changed and the belief that it is her fault disgusts her, in a way that like during previous winter "when she was suffering from diarrhea, she would not let Mathieu touch her, [because] she was sure she smelt unpleasantly" (Sartre, 1964, p. 68), she ponders on her avoidance of Mathieu's company.

In a similar way the revelation of Shoba's pregnancy, for which Shukumar "hadn't been prepared then" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 23), is the moment after which Shoba's body turns into a disgusting object in its femininity, a pregnant woman with an immense stomach that took away from her husband even the desire of touching it: "Each day, Shukumar noticed, her beauty, which had once overwhelmed him, seemed to fade. The cosmetics that had seemed superfluous were necessary now, not to improve her but to define her somehow" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 15). While Shukumar is disgusted by her body's proliferation (she doesn't multiply, her body just grows bigger – i.e., more body, not more bodies), Shoba, like Marcelle[6], seem to be delighted with the approach of life, as we see her one day standing to wave good-bye "in her robe, with one arm resting on the mound of her belly as if it were a perfectly natural part of her body" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 3), and the preparations she had made for the coming of their baby. Last summer, together with Shukumar, she decorated the walls of the baby's room with "a border of marching ducks and rabbits playing trumpets and drums" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 9), and by the end of August, she set up a "cherry crib under the window, a white changing table with mint-green knobs, and a rocking chair with checkered cushions" (Lahiri, 2000, p.

9). But both birth and death, in Sartrean discourse, amount to the same thing, to a state of being-in-itself, "death is a pure fact as is birth ... At bottom it is in no way distinguished from birth, and it is the identity of birth and death that we call facticity" (Sartre, 1992, p. 545). In this manner, Shoba is thus reduced not by her female body, but *to* her female body as object-status, as the passive side of the pole of subjectivity.

Shoba is also reluctant to look at Shukumar's eyes and she has become totally embarrassed by his attentive gaze, as if she has accepted "her role as a victimized wife" (Maarof et al., 2012, p. 400). After the baby dies, she becomes "the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 1), and is always gone by the time Shukumar wakes up (4) and contemplates on "how he and Shoba had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 5). This happens after Shoba's horrific realization of her being reduced not just by her female body, but to her female body as being-in-itself, her being a manifestation of a holey and slimy feminine sexuality that ultimately leaves her feeling as the discomfited and embarrassed object of Shukumar's gaze. This type of feeling, according to Sartre, is "a symbolic specification of original shame; the body here symbolizes our defenseless state as objects" (Sartre, 1992, p. 289), a "display-like the flattening out of the full breasts of a woman who is lying on her back" (Sartre, 1992, p. 608). Shoba's inert body hence features as a symbolic specification of her object-status: being reduced to a mass of flesh that can be looked at.

SHUKUMAR'S OBJECT-STATUS: HETEROSEXUALITY'S MELTING MOMENTS

When a male subject loses the role of spectator in "A Temporary Matter," heterosexual encounters provoke disgust, because in being deprived of his self-command and his conventional position as the onlooker, the male subject becomes emasculated and the female subject, with respect to her conventional role of spectacle, turns into a potential threat, as she may take possession of the assertive gaze. The first encounter is when Shoba suggests a game of confessions in the darkness. The first night, Shukumar observes in Shoba "The wide tilting eyes, the full grape-toned lips, the fall at age two from her high chair still visible as a comma on her chin … her beauty, which had once overwhelmed him, seemed to fade. The cosmetics that had seemed superfluous were necessary now, not to improve her but to define her somehow" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 15). The most (in)famous of these encounters occurs when on the second day of the game, Shukumar reveals his secret fantasies of a woman in one of the fashion magazines Shoba used to subscribe to. The two women are described as follows:

> As for the picture of the woman, he didn't know why he'd ripped it out. She wasn't as pretty as Shoba. She wore a white sequined dress, and had a sullen face and lean, mannish legs. Her bare arms were raised, her fists around her head, as if she were about to punch herself in the ears. It was an advertisement for stockings. Shoba had been pregnant at the time, her stomach suddenly immense, to the point where Shukumar no longer wanted to touch her…. he allowed himself a glimpse each day. He felt an intense desire for the woman, but it was a desire that turned to disgust after a minute or two. (Lahiri, 2000, p. 20)

This passage epitomizes the Sartrean terror of the female body as identified by feminist scholars like Le Doeuff (2007). The image of the woman in Shukumar's description of the

fashion model is endowed with a nature that is menacing and obscene. Both Shoba and the woman become the personification of the being-in-itself.

It is worth remembering that even though the hospital scene denotes the triumph of Shukumar's masculine gaze over Shoba's exposed female body, to look without being looked at—i.e. to be absolute subject—is almost impossible, as men too have bodies which can be exposed and looked at. In this regard, Sartre's alignment of "Masculinity with the mind and femininity with the body…the entanglement of the sexes in heterosexual embrace—or to be more exact the revelation of the male as body in that embrace—threatens both the mind-body dichotomy and the masculine-feminine dichotomy with collapse" (Storr, 1994, p. 84). This thought horrifies the male protagonist, Shukumar. Having exercised a lethal voyeurism on Shoba's inert and passive body in the hospital scene, and on the "dead" body of the infant with "his bulbous lids shut tight to the world" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 24), Shukumar is horrified by his realization of the possibility of the for-itself ceasing to exist. A temporary collapse of the masculine-feminine, subject-object dichotomy is thus vividly illustrated in the following lines of the hospital scene, where it is revealed that:

> These days Shoba was always gone by the time Shukumar woke up. He would open his eyes and see the long black hairs she shed on her pillow and think of her, dressed, sipping her third cup of coffee already, in her office downtown…. Until September he had been diligent if not dedicated …. But now he would lie in their bed until he grew bored, gazing at his side of the closet which Shoba always left partly open. (Lahiri, 2000, p. 4)

Shukumar's frightened consciousness of Shoba's active gaze while he is still in bed, asleep, passive and in-itself is the ultimate realization of death and defeat. The awareness highlights the final humiliation from which Shukumar strives to escape when he insists on turning off the lights—not to see each other while they converse—at the end of the story. The moment is of great importance: a reversal of roles is imminent, whereby the implicit gendering of the gaze in Lahiri's narrative becomes more explicit. In assuming the role of the object, Shukumar is immobilized, is relegated to a "feminine" position, that because he is a man, redefines his body in terms of holey and slime—features that in Sartrean discourse are supposed to "characterize the reviled and object-like bodies of women" (Storr, 1994, p. 85). What goes wrong with Shukumar's body is that he starts spitting "some blood into the basin" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 6), a disgusting slime that his body, as we are told in the next few lines, has contained since his childhood—as an early childhood "amoebic dysentery" that put him nearly to death. His body becomes no more than a mass of flesh, a being-in-itself which persistently threatens the being-for-itself of the consciousness. This incident thus seems to support the patriarchal sexual politics of looking, that femininity and the hole and slime are an inescapable aspect of objectivity. Shukumar's fear of the possibility of his own object-status deprives him of his self-command and practically paralyzes him. On the second night, a similar anxiety over the status of his becoming being-in-itself is produced when he, "surprised to see that Shoba was stacking her plate on top of his, and then carrying them over to the sink" stands up to take the dishes from her, and as "they stood side by side at the sink, their reflections fitting together in the frame of the window[,] [i]t made him shy, the way he felt the first time they stood together in a mirror" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 16). Though the incident suggests the hierarchical dichotomies of active-passive, subject-object, mind-body as well as masculine-feminine are established on a shaky ground, and hence can be easily destabilized, it also intimates a patriarchal structure where the gaze, as Western culture has constructed it, is a privilege of a masculine subject.

From the hospital scene until the final revelation of the dead child's gender as a male, the narrative is replete with repeated collapses of masculine into feminine, subject into object. If the female figure in the story is stricken by guilt and Sartrean shame—due to a "revelation" of an aspect of herself, which she would "like to hide" (Sealey, 2010, p. 274)— the male character is also horrified by the realization of the possibility of being-in-itself and ceasing to exert the power of the gaze. The anxiety of becoming the object of a triumphant gaze of the other then drives Shukumar to shield himself from the gaze of others. This has been explicitly displayed firstly by his selection of a study room from which Shoba keeps away, and secondly by his avoidance of venturing outside the home which would subsequently turn himself into a paradigmatic object of display:

> After the baby died it was too late to withdraw from his teaching duties. But his adviser had arranged things so that he had the spring semester to himself. Shukumar was in his sixth year of graduate school. "That and the summer should give you a good push,' his adviser had said…. But nothing was pushing Shukumar. Instead he thought of how he and Shoba had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible. …. It was often nearly lunchtime when Shukumar would finally pull himself out of bed and head downstairs to the coffeepot, …. Nearly three feet [of snow] had fallen in the last storm, so that for a week people had to walk single file, in narrow trenches. For a week that was Shukumar's excuse for not leaving the house. (Lahiri, 2000, pp. 5-6)

Yet another incident that illuminates the collapse of the constructed paradigm of privileged masculinity occurs during Shukumar's amorous advances. A man in love, in Sartrean philosophy, forgets himself and his sexual identity blurs into confusion in moments of heterosexual desire (Storr, 1994, p. 92). Such confusion is recognizable, for instance, on the first night when the lights are out. Shukumar remembers the first meal he had with Shoba and how "they were so thrilled to be married, to be living together…to make love" (Lahiri, 2000, pp. 10-11). He recollects setting the table, decorating the room, cooking dinner, lighting a few birthday candles and filling the wine glasses. It is only in this scene that Shoba is portrayed as a desirable lady, her stomach being flat again, and "her waist narrow before the flare of her hips" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 11). Shoba suddenly becomes conscious of the sexual potential of their situation and with a voluptuous gesture runs her finger "along the stem of her wineglass". Shukumar is ready to act, and the immediate phallic imagery of the bottle that he is holding between his legs—and his worry about it spilling—is overtly masculine and heterosexual. But now, the terms of reference have reversed, and Shoba's cold attitude destabilizes his identity and causes Shukumar so much irritation that he could not get back to his room, "Now he had to struggle to say something that interested her, something that made her look up from her plate, or from her proofreading files. Eventually he gave up trying to amuse her. He learned not to mind the silences" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 13). It is directly after this scene that the disgusting moment of his slimy and holey experience of "amoebic dysentery" is revealed. This reversal of Shukumar's active masculinity to passive femininity appears as a consequence of the disappointment that his amorous advances are not being reciprocated; his heterosexual desire seems to have lost its power. Shukumar, nonetheless, pulls himself together but later that night realizes that though, he was once overwhelmed by Shoba's beauty, he is no longer attracted to her physical features, and "the cosmetics that had seemed superfluous were necessary now, not to improve her but to define her somehow" (Lahiri, 2000, p. 15).

CONCLUSION

The active-passive dichotomy that forms the backbone of Western metaphysics and thus the core of the very nature of "being" in Sartrean philosophy, is essentially established and perpetuated by the relations of visuality. The dyad of seeing and being seen, taken as the two fundamental modes of being in relation to the concept of the Other falls into what Storr describes as a "classic heterosexual division of labor between masculine and feminine cast along the lines of the mind-body split by Sartre's characterization of being-in-itself as essentially feminine" (p. 100). In Sartrean ontology, the woman becomes the object, the body, whereas the masculine is granted the power of asserting his nihilating look at the feminine being-in-itself as a passive object. This close reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter" has suggested that the same binary system of privileging masculinity over femininity is at work at the heart of the story. The narrative is replete with stereotypical images of Shoba in which she is reduced to a typically disgusting Sartrean female body of holes and slime. Shoba is depicted as the personification of the in-itself, and her counterpart, Shukumar, as that of the for-itself. Shukumar, nevertheless, does not seem to be the absolute subject, because in the ebb and flow of his heterosexual encounters with Shoba, his masculinity, at times, collapses into femininity—creating a situation that promises to confirm that quality for which some critics have applauded Lahiri, namely, her avoidance of stereotypical or clichéd characters.

Yet again, despite Shukumar's infrequent emasculated images, in the battle of looks between masculinity and femininity, it is femininity that has rarely emerged a victorious warrior, and it is eventually in the final scene of revelation of their dead baby's sex that the masculine mastery over the female body is accentuated. At this point, Shoba is presented as the "pure subject" of Shukumar's gaze. She is passive, an object of the gaze, sitting motionless; and directing her look at nowhere, seeks refuge in mystery and turns off the lights. Shukumar, however, victoriously stands up and in a symbolic gesture stacks his plate on top of hers and continues to assert his empowered look out of the window, a gesture of a Benthamian "utopia"[7] by which the neighbors across the courtyard become the "pure subject" of his surveying gaze. The final scene of the story thus conceives a discourse that refuels masculine power rather than defuses it. It is ultimately Shukumar's masculinity that, in the battle of looks, nihilates the Other to the status of being-in-itself and both literally and metaphorically exercises its supremacy over the feminine. This essay thus concludes that in a similar way to Sartre's Western-philosophical privileging of masculinity, Lahiri in this story equates activity and consciousness with looking and thereby constructs the gaze as a privilege of a male subject and relegates femininity to the status of passive object of the gaze.

Within the framework of transatlantic feminist studies, this conclusion and the employed analytic strategy can unravel the political implications of the substantiated gender and racial politics in literature of diaspora that has primarily sought for decentralizing those pre-established hierarchies of power. The most simple goal of this analysis—which might also be its limitation—was to be attentive to the micropolitics of subjectivity, and definitely, a more comprehensive work demands, on the one hand, similar examination of Lahiri's oeuvre within the framework of Western metaphysics, and on the other, relating the findings to the macropolitics of socio-economic and political structures of contemporary American society, wherein Lahiri's fiction is mostly situated, produced and publicly well-received. Situating the findings within the prevailing ideologies of capitalism would unpack the way the functioning capital exacerbates the patriarchal and heterosexist relations of power, and thereby elucidate the reason Lahiri's fiction, as we attempted to expose, perpetuates the

dichotomies of a male subject and a female object pre-established in the traditional hierarchies of gender in the West.

End Notes

[1] Contemporary feminists have attempted to distinguish sharply between gender and sexual difference. Gender allows the subject to surpass the terms of its construction established within the logic of sexual difference as merely either male or non-male (female). Unlike sexual difference, gender does not obscure women's differences from each other, differences like race and class (De Lauretis, 1987, pp. 1-2; Storr, 1994, p. 26).

[2] In her rhetorical reading of Lahiri's fiction, Shea (2008) proposed that a text is produced by the author in defense of certain cultural values. She explicated the way Lahiri utilizes her cultural underpinnings to subconsciously construct a range of characters that react "quite differently to their family, friends, and enemies, comprising an unbiased illustration of how varied Indian immigrants' personalities are despite their common ethnic background" (p. 2).

[3] See Lye, C. (2009). *America's Asia: Racial form and American literature, 1893-1945*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press; Puar, J. K. (2007). *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

[4] Take for example Kaushik's mother in part two of *Unaccustomed Earth (2008)* who dies of a cancer in her breast; Or Bibi Haldar in *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000) that suffers from an unknown ailment that baffles everyone.

[5] "The Age of Reason", is the first part of Sartre's trilogy, *The Road to Freedom* (1964). The novel narrates the life of a philosophy professor, Mathieu Delarue, who is trying to procure a sum of money to pay for an abortion for his mistress, Marcelle.

[6] While Marcelle is looking at herself with disgust, she is also delighted by the signs of the approach of life. Though the little animal in her belly is "soon to be scraped out of existence by a knife. There are others, at this very hour, who are looking at their bellies and also thinking: 'It's there.' But they, on the other hand, are glad.' She shrugged her shoulders; yes, that foolish, burgeoning body was indeed created for maternity" (Sartre, 1964, p. 69).

[7] In the early nineteenth century, Jeremy Bentham proposed a sketch of a utopian prison named Panopticon. Michele Foucault extended the term metaphorically to describe that condition of internalized surveillance to be found at the heart of modern Western culture. See Foucault (1995), especially pp. 195-201, for an insightful explication of this sketch.

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