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## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LINGUISTIC CONCEPTUAL “METAPHOR OF VISION” IN TERMS OF TRANSCULTURE

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**Abstract.** The article deals with the significance of linguistic conceptual “metaphor of vision” in terms of transculture, in particular in Jhumpa Lahiri’s writing. The *aim* of the article is an attempt to explore conceptual “metaphor of vision” in Lahiri’s fiction and in terms of transculture, and how the metaphor is extended by variations on core metaphors. It is indicated that “metaphor of vision” is an important aspect of Lahiri’s poetics; metaphor is directly related to gender issues and interpreted as conceptual (individual). In many Lahiri’s stories, we notice that women are often objectified. They become the object, the body in the sight of men (who appear as passive objects), and very often only physical appearance/ beauty is important to them.

**Key words:** conceptual metaphor, “metaphor of vision”, transculture, identity, immigrant, Indian culture.

**Introduction.** Being a multifaceted phenomenon that involves different approaches to its development, metaphor attracted linguists’ attention since long time. For most people it is a poetic and rhetorical means of expression that occurs more in unusual language than in the sphere of everyday communication. Moreover, metaphor is usually considered exclusively as one of the manifestations of natural language – something that belongs to the words realm, but not to the thought realm. That is why most people still believe they can do without metaphors in life. But it can be argued that metaphor permeates our entire life and is reflected both in our speech and in thinking. Our everyday conceptual system, we think and act within, is metaphorical in its very essence.

**Analysis of recent research and publications.** Despite the presence of scientific works of foreign critics (T. Bhalla (2012), K. Chatterjee (2016), S. Dasgupta (2011), N. Friedman (2008), R. Heinze (2007), F. Kral (2007), S. Lutzoni (2017), A. Rizzo (2012) and others), Lahiri’s writing is not fully investigated, which determines further theoretical studies both in the context of transculture and in metaphor exploring.

**Main text.** There is a difference between everyday speech and fiction language. The *aim* of the article is an attempt to explore conceptual “metaphor of vision” in Lahiri’s fiction and in terms of transculture, and how the metaphor is extended by variations on core metaphors.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories (an American writer of Bengali origin) combine an Eastern and Western cultural traditions, which enables to have a “double audience”. “Metaphor of vision” is an important aspect of Lahiri’s poetics; metaphor is directly related to gender issues and interpreted as conceptual (individual). In many Lahiri’s stories, we notice that women are often objectified. They become the object, the body in the sight of men (who appear as passive objects), and very often only physical appearance/ beauty is important to them.



Compared to the symbolic “poverty” of male characters (they usually act as secondary characters, and often the reader is provided with a few sentences about them and never many physical descriptions), Lahiri gives a detailed description of female ones. We notice completely another tendency within women. Nearly every story had a wide description of the woman’s appearance. This can be found in “Hell-Heaven” (“Unaccustomed Earth” collection, 2008).

Being a narrator, we see how Usha perceives her mother and has a condescending tone towards her. From the narrative’s very beginning, we find a nice description of Usha’s mother. Aparna was a typical Bengali woman, and sometimes it was difficult to confuse her nationality. The daughter and her husband see Aparna as a woman who has “a common Tangail sari ... a thick stem of vermilion<sup>1</sup> powder in the center parting of her hair ... and the full round face and large dark eyes that are so typical of Bengali women” [8, p. 61].

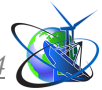
Within this wide description, Lahiri chooses the word “typical” which identifies Aparna and many other women who usually are in their husbands’ “shadow”; a typical Indian woman who is little respected for her abilities except cooking and housekeeping. But later Usha changes her mother’s description as well as her attitude towards her mother. It is not a typical passive Bengali mother and a submissive wife anymore, but an individual who has a “love of music, film, leftist politics, poetry” [8, p. 64]. Her mother is a person who can do something else beyond her daily home routine, for example go for “drives through Boston and Cambridge, and soon outside the city, flying down the highway”, etc. Now her mother’s excursions are not limited to house ware shops in Boston.

We have to speak about significant historical events here. Lahiri mentions Indian immigrant women during the late 1970s, just a few decades after India had gained independence from the British (not like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when immigration is a common thing for both genders). Regarding Deborah from the same story, we notice the opposite: Usha’s father treated this American woman neutrally: “My father thought neither ill nor well of Deborah, never commenting or criticizing as my mother did” [8, p. 53]. Unlike other female characters, Deborah does not become an object.

“Metaphor of vision” is also found in “Interpreter of Maladies” (1999). Due to the lack of communication with “hers”, Mrs. Das has forgotten the Bengali language and therefore does not pay attention to a romantic song sung to her in Hindi by a naked to-the-waist vendor near the teahouse. For the man, as for the rest of the Hindus, Mrs. Das is dressed too openly. While Mrs. Das buys fried pepper rice, which is wrapped in a newspaper, her half-naked figure is carefully examined by the sellers, as they are not used to seeing such looseness in Indian women. The main

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, we have to mention about crucial role of vermilion as a brilliant red color in Indian culture. It is also known as “Sindoor”, and it’s often used in religious rituals and cultural ceremonies. The vibrant red color symbolizes power, passion and purity. Vermillion is associated with Goddess Parvati who represents love and devotion in marriage. It is a symbol of good luck (“saubhagya”). Since ancient times, vermilion was regarded as the color of blood and, thus the color of life. It was used to paint temples and the carriages of the emperor, and as the printing paste for personal seals.



character, Mr. Kapasi is also confused as he has never seen his wife naked.

Again Lahiri appeals to the woman's detailed description: Mrs. Das was bare-legged, she was wearing a red and white knee-length skirt, square wooden heels, a body-hugging blouse with an attractive strawberry pattern, and pink nail polish in the tone of her lipstick. Her hair was short and she wore brown glasses.

It should be mentioned, that in Lahiri's stories, both men and boys contemplate women. A clear example of it we found in "Mrs. Sen's" when the boy looks at a Bengali woman from his age perspective. Eliot compares Mrs. Sen with his American always-busy mother.

"Sexy" is no exception of woman's objectification, as the main character Miranda also becomes an object of contemplation for her lover: "In less serious moments Dev said he liked that her legs were longer than her torso, something he'd observed the first time she walked across a room naked" [7, p. 50].

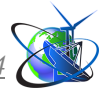
Of course, we may speak about gender role changes here, as Miranda symbolically "crossed" the line of what is allowed (unlike Bengali women, she is not ashamed of her body). We notice that Dev (he was the first to tell her that) gives his somewhat frank description of Miranda: "You're the first," he told her, admiring her from the bed. "The first woman I've known with legs this long" [7, p. 50].

Rohin, who has been left with Miranda for a while, has his own appreciation of his temporary nanny: "You're sexy," he declared. ... He cupped his hands around his mouth, and then he whispered, "It means loving someone you don't know" [7, p. 59]. Even in Rohin's eyes, Miranda is seen as "sexy". Not realizing the meaning of the word ("loving someone you don't know"), the child understands how Miranda, dressed in a rather revealing dress and high-heeled shoes, differs from his "gray" and submissive Bengali mother.

A similar motif of gender role changes is seen in "Hell-Heaven". We notice Aparna's gender role transformations with Pranab's arrival: being a docile immigrant woman who is unable to cope with a new culture, her identity and motherhood, Aparna takes the dominant role later. Pranab's visits literally inspire her and that is why she behaves selfishly, and sometimes exceeds the symbolic allowed "border" [11, p. 161]. We also have to mention the role of "invisible existence", which is related to the gender component of Lahiri's poetics. Often Lahiri's female characters associate with maids who can cook dinner and wash socks only. Unlike men, the assimilation process is much more difficult for women.

"Metaphor of vision" is found in "A Temporary Matter" where Shoba is being looked at by her husband Shukumar (and only her physical appearance is important to him): "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" [8, p. 14]. To some extent, a reader finds a negative woman's interpretation which is defined by cosmetics only.

Being married, Shoba feels alone; she is in despair because her husband seeks some sort of attraction and one day he admits that he cut out a picture of a woman from an advertisement whom he had found strangely attractive. Shoba is being humiliated; at that time she was pregnant and had grown so large that her husband "no longer wanted to touch her" [8, p. 19].



Shoba realizes that she is not attractive to her husband anymore; Shukumar cannot relate to her on an emotional level, and this (but not the mourning over the death of their stillborn baby when Shoba decides to move out to her apartment) makes their marriage fall apart. Even fourth night of darkness which gave them enough time to talk with each other did not help in this way. We have to mention about NIGHT symbol here which is directly related to the silence concept “Chimmoku” in Lahiri’s poetics. In “A Temporary Matter” (like in other Lahiri’s stories) we find a direct contrast to the fact that Lahiri often shows strong and independent women who resist cultural norms.

In “Nobody’s Business” Sang (short for Sangeeta), an Indian American immigrant, is also described physically by Paul (her roommate, who hopes to have relations with her). One day Paul sees Sang in a towel after her shower. “For weeks, he had longed to catch a glimpse of her this way, and still he felt wholly unprepared for the vision of her bare legs and arms, her damp face and shoulders” [8, p. 190].

At first, we may say that Sang is a happy independent woman who does not feel inner disappointment. She seems to have successfully adapted to the new culture and no longer wishes to root herself in Indian culture. Sang does not speak Bengali, at the age of thirty she does not think of being married (that is something that can wait). No doubt, she is a woman of a new type and she is related to Paul not as an individual but as an object.

The objectification motif is found in “The Namesake” (2003), where the main character Ashima is valued as a commodity. Even her acquaintance with her future husband takes place silently (as in China). Again silence concept “Chimmoku” plays an important role<sup>2</sup>. It is worth noting that marriage is a symbolic “elevation” in rank for the woman because woman’s true power is revealed only after marriage. It is believed that it is a woman who gives magical protection to man (for example success in business), as she has “her” energy, which a man cannot exist without. When looking at a woman, her traditional outfit – a sari – also plays significant role, it says much about her character and taste, as well as about her position in the family. You even need to know how to wear a sari. The traditional image of an Indian woman is also successfully complemented with jewelry.

In Lahiri’s stories, we often see completely different migration experiences with women. Often they leave their home country just to accompany their husbands, following the practice of traditional arranged marriage. They are always literary “brought” to America, as Mrs. Sen from “Mrs. Sen’s”. “[h]ere, in this place, Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence” [7, p. 115]. In this way, women like Mrs. Sen appeared both an object to admire and thing necessary to be taken to America.

We have to note, that almost every Lahiri’s story contains a lengthy description of a woman, which is related to gender issues. But in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” (from “Interpreter of Maladies”, 1999) woman is described just with two lines: “To

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<sup>2</sup> Culturally significant SILENCE concept is one of the key elements in Lahiri’s poetics. SILENCE combines two distinct components: women invisibility / visibility (when a woman is being objectified). Another important subtext is also seen in Lahiri’s stories, when perceived non-communication moves from individual into a qualitatively different paradigm, a transcultural one, connected with cultural characteristics.



get her to quiet down, Haldar placed a one-line advertisement in the town newspaper, in order to solicit a groom: “GIRL, UNSTABLE, HEIGHT 152 CENTIMETRES, SEEKSHUSBAND.” The identity of the prospective bride was no secret to the parents of our young men, and no family was willing to shoulder so blatant a risk [7, p. 86].

**Summary and conclusions.** Woman’s objectification in Lahiri’s poetics has a considerable and even crucial role. Often, it is the woman who becomes the object of contemplation. Lahiri shows the material dependence of women on men, that is why the problem of gender relations is associated with the decline of family values, where marriage itself becomes a temporary matter.

We have to highlight that almost in every Lahiri’s story women are being objectified (and often it has a negative impact as well). We mean contemplating physical and only then inner beauty. 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. When speaking about Lahiri’s transcultural writing the following metaphors can be used: “melting pot”, “bright rainbow”, and “salad bowl” (all of them characterize hybrid Asian-American literature in general); and “metaphor of vision” can be surely added to this list, which is no less important aspect of gender component of Lahiri’s poetics.

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