



A STUDY ON SELECTED THEMES OF JHUMPA LAHIRI NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri's modern approach is evident in her themes as well as narrative style. In the present article, an attempt is made to show how the themes of identity, alienation, isolation and diaspora have been a focal point of the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri. Indian writers have been contributing significantly to the world literature since independence and Indian fiction continues to flourish in the global market. The immigrant experience, the question of identity and the expatriate experiences continue to furnish abundant material for fiction writers as can be seen in the works of various women writers. For instance, Kiran Desai's, *'The Inheritance of Loss,'* reveals the pain of exile and the ambiguities of post-colonialism. Lahiri's literary works are concerned with the diasporic postcolonial situation of the Indians and Indian-Americans, who are caught between two identities and two cultures – the Indian traditions that they have left behind and a totally different western world that they have to live in. Concerned mostly with the disappointments, the failures and the occasional successes of Indian immigrants in America, Lahiri's works abound in characters who, on being displaced, struggle to survive in the unfamiliar surroundings they are forced to live in. What sets Jhumpa Lahiri apart as a writer is the combination of her absorbing concern for the moral and psychological truths related to the immigrant's discontent and the outstanding literary qualities which make her writing unique. Her works reveal her commendable grasp of bi-culturalism and authoritative grace.

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri Vourvoulis (born Nilanjana Sudeshna) was born in London, in July 1967, and brought up in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. Although she was brought up in America, she became very close to her Bengali heritage from an early age. Lahiri has traveled extensively in India and

has experienced the effects of colonialism there in addition to the issues of the diaspora as they exist. She feels strong ties to her parents' homeland as well as the United States and England. Growing up with ties to all three countries created in Lahiri a sense of homelessness and an inability to feel accepted.

'The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children.' -Jhumpa Lahiri

"Though endowed with a distinct universal speech, her stories do bring out fairly successfully the predicament of the Indians who trapeze between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind, and the other, encountered but not necessarily assimilated"-remarks Aruti Nayar.

Lahiri explains this as an inheritance of her parents' ties to India, "It's hard to have parents who consider another place 'home.' Even after living abroad for 30 years, India is home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here. There's nobody in this whole country that we're related to. India was different — our extended family — offered real connections." Yet, her familial ties to India were not enough to make India her "home". "I didn't grow up there; I wasn't a part of things. We visited the place often but we didn't have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never fully with us". Lahiri described this absence of belonging, "No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country I travel to, that's why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile". This idea of exile runs consistently throughout Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize winning book *Interpreter of Maladies*. It is a complex portrayal of family life of Indian immigrants trying to saddle two cultures — their Indian heritage and the American dream. It won critical acclaim for "its grace, acuity, and compassion in detailing lives, transported from India to America."

The Pulitzer Prize winning volume of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) by Jhumpa Lahiri, despite the clear insignia of Indianness is universally relevant. The loneliness, a deep sense of remorse and emotional isolation that some of her fictional characters go through, are common enough the world over. The individuals of different countries and cultures who for various reasons are forced to live away from their own country go through trying phases. With a remarkable insight, she gets deep into the psychological depths of her characters and reveals their inner world by a fascinating yet

deceptively simple style. We come across more reality than fancy in her fiction.

ANALYSIS

The first story 'A Temporary Matter' shows that for the young married couple Shukumar and Shoba, marriage appears to have fallen apart. It reached a stage where it became a temporary matter. Trouble started when Shoba delivered a stillborn baby, and blew over casting a long shadow on a normally happy marriage. When they finally lost touch with one another despite sharing a single roof, the temporary cut in power supply seems to have salvaged their failing relationship. Lahiri excels as a storyteller when she combines her Indian reminiscences and the larger problem of marital discord and the apparently catastrophic end of the couple's marriage in a single frame. When the reader anticipates a happy reunion after the closeness that Shukumar and Shoba shared by exchanging untold experiences, it feels like a douse of freezing cold water, when Shoba announces her decision to move into a new apartment. Shoba's problem is her inability to deal with her anger and frustration of losing the baby for whose arrival she plans elaborately. In her state of disappointment and self pity, she did not care if her marriage fell apart. She hardly realizes that she is punishing herself unduly. It is only when Shukumar confesses his knowledge of the baby's sex that she finally relents the hold she kept on her emotions and sees the truth that the loss of the baby has affected Shukumar as deeply as her. Each one has to bear his or her share of pain in life. But he was able to bear with it perhaps because he did what the doctor said: holding the baby might help you with the process of grieving. He held his son before he was cremated.

Letting out the pent up feelings certainly acts like a catalyst in some ways. The marital discord is thus skillfully shown to be a temporary matter just as the interruption in electric power supply has been. Isolation and alienation are common themes portrayed extensively throughout all of Lahiri's short stories. Through tales such as 'A Real Durwan' and 'The Treatment of Bibi Haldar', Lahiri exposes the extreme isolation and alienation experienced by the main characters, presenting them as outsiders who are perceived by others as being, diseased. The characters encounter severe alienation due to a lack

of personal possession, value and success. The bare and blatant truth of the Indian caste system as well as the power of materialism is strongly shown in these two stories as a main motive of isolation/loneliness. To a lesser extent, in the stories 'Mrs. Sen's' and 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine', loneliness of a different kind is what emotionally isolates the main characters. The theme of displacement significantly portrays Lahiri's prose toward interpreting Indian-American customs and traditions, such as food, clothing, language and history. Whilst it unites the characters in a different world (America), it serves as a reminder to what is lost and has been left behind, and therefore, creates loneliness. From an observer narration, whether it be from the eyes of a ten year old girl, Lilia, or a third-person view of durwan, Boori Ma, Lahiri does not easily reveal the thoughts and feelings of the excluded characters, but rather, compares their day-to-day experiences and circumstances to the ordinary lives of others. This engages the reader to "interpret" what Lahiri's stories are attempting to illustrate, making us aware of the loneliness people experience as they go about their ordinary lives. 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' is a significant story regarding the displacement of culture, family, lifestyle, customs and traditions. Mr Pirzada's displacement, through the eyes of 10 year old girl, Lilia, is very mysterious and hard for the reader to interpret, as his thoughts and feelings are kept private. It is evident that Lilia perceives Mr Pirzada as feeling emotionally separated from his past life, "Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow...a lagging ghost of where Mr Pirzada really belonged." Lahiri makes use of this sense of belonging to convey to readers that even though Mr Pirzada seems grateful for his opportunity to study botany and work in America, he is "lost" and alienated from his origins. Lilia slowly recognises Mr Pirzada's loneliness and, in turn, becomes accustomed to her own "lost" culture. Furthermore, Lilia suddenly learns of her own sense of loss and displacement, due to her American upbringing and education, "We learned American history...That year, and, every year...". She becomes inquisitive about Mr Pirzada and toward the issue of partition between India and East Pakistan, secretly searching the school library for information. Lilia realises what it means to miss

someone so close when Mr Pirzada returns to Dacca. She understands the agony of loneliness he felt toward his lost family. Lahiri's use of a young narrator is significantly important in portraying the relationship between the characters, as well as looking at Indian culture from the perspective of a child, seen in 'Mrs Sen's'. "Boori Ma, sweeper of the stairwell". The lifestyle of Boori Ma, in 'A Real Durwan', is of very poor condition. Lahiri conveys most of Boori Ma's hardships in the first few paragraphs, such as her inability to sleep, her appearance, her age (64 yrs-old), but mainly her past; her deportation to Calcutta. This conveys the impression of loss and how it can inevitably lead to loneliness.

The theme of loss is emphasized throughout the story, through the words "believe me, don't believe me", spoken by Boori Ma, reconciling her supposed-past lifestyle's luxuries to others. Lahiri uses the other characters to reiterate the perception toward someone such as Boori Ma. Moreover, whilst the characters think that Boori Ma tells lies, "Boori Ma's mouth is full of ashes, but she is a victim of changing times". Boori Ma's lack of wealth and stature is a strong reason as to why she is secretly condescended by others, as social standing is of such significance in India. It is evident that most residents of the apartment feel this, but by Boori Ma's daily duties of sweeping and standing "guard between them and the outside world", she gains the title "real durwan", which she seems very appreciative of. Lahiri's use of "others" and their viewpoint is significant in creating a sense of isolation. Furthermore, this is true as to why Boori Ma was thrown out. Her only real relationship with the Dalal couple was momentarily non-existent; she was alone. Additionally, the strong culture of materialism in poor Indian communities (slums, such as Mr Chaterjee's apartment) also led to Boori Ma's rejection, as the swift increase in possessions during the Dalals holiday, meant that suddenly Boori Ma's duties as a Real Durwan were of significant importance.

The impact of others' actions toward the isolation and loneliness of the main characters is also evident in the story 'The Treatment of Bibi Haldar'. Lahiri's compilation of short stories, '*Interpreter of Maladies*', makes readers aware of

the importance of culture, customs and traditions to Indian people. The characters experience a loss of identity in their lives, leading to a sense of loneliness, displacement and isolation. Lahiri's own knowledge of Indian history and nature is of great significance in regard to the stories. Lahiri strongly and effectively conveys the loneliness Indian people encounter in their ordinary lives.

The Namesake (2003) is Jhumpa Lahiri's second work in which she deals again with the theme of isolation and the problem of assimilation and adaptation in another country. The novel is an autobiographical in portraying repercussions of what the children of immigrants have to experience when they are destined to born in a country which does not belong to their parents. Jhumpa Lahiri who herself is a child of an immigrant couple had admitted it in an interview. "I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations, I also wanted to meet the expectations I placed on myself to fit into American society. It is a classic case of divided identity....., I felt that I led two separate lives". (HMC)

The novel is a story of two generations - Ashoke and Ashima on the one hand and their children Gogol and Sonia on the other, and their life period of thirty years. They face different problems as the meaning of culture differs for both the generation – the first being directly related to his or her homeland and the second generation forming an image of culture based on the information transmitted by the first generation. The present chapter proposes to deal with these generational differences in diasporic culture with reference to the novel *The Namesake*.

The novel opens in a nostalgic mood, Ashima, the wife of Ashoke, the protagonist, in her advanced stage of pregnancy, is eating puffed rice with lots of spices and lemon, an Indian concoction sold in Calcutta's sidewalk for pennies, the taste being not the same brings her the memories of her home land. Ashoke, an MIT engineer, has migrated to Boston to obliterate the memories of a trained accident he met with, thus it is a self-imposed migration. In spite of his well-settled life there, his return to India to marry a Bengali girl asserts his desire to retain his separate identity and solidarity to homeland. Ashima, for all her efforts to settle in a

new way of life, felt home sick in that alien country. She felt uprooted and lived in a world of nostalgia. She spent hours in the apartment napping and sulking, rereading her parents' letters and the same five Bengali novels again and again. For Ashima, "Being a foreigner is a sort of life-long pregnancy." The dichotomy between public and private life is almost tormenting to these women immigrants who have to suffer double dependence. They have to reconstruct their gender identity and locate themselves in the host culture.

Ashima gave birth to a child in a country where she is related to no one. The boy was named Gogol, after the name of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol who is associated with the memories of the train accident. Throughout the novel, Gogol fails to establish his identity either as American or Indian. As Gogol grew, Ashoke and Ashima's circle of Bengali acquaintances also increased. The very fact that all belong to one country is reason for them to relate and form their own ethnic group and community. This diasporic community preserves their separate identity by observing their tradition. These immigrants try to construct a sense of community, culture and nationality in a country where they see themselves as different. Ashoke and Ashima celebrated all the Bengali festivals and observed all religious rituals and rites with the ethnic community. The first generation diaspora's adjustments and changes are expedient. They accommodate and adjust to create space and identity in a foreign country.

But for the second generation Diaspora, Gogol and Sonia, identity and problem are rather different, for they have a sense of pride and affinity to India, but it is America that is perceived as 'home'. In America they are born and educated. In America they want to be accepted on their own terms. It is here that they face a sense of alienation in the sense of 'insider' and 'outsider'. On one of the fieldtrips in the school, Gogol and his classmates are assigns a project-to rub the surfaces of the gravestones and find out the name of the dead person-the feeling of alienation and aloofness was doubly intensified because Gogol was old enough to know that there is no Ganguly there. 'He was old enough to know that he himself would be burned, not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of

earth, that no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life'.

The first generation Diaspora wants to retain their homeland culture and transfer it to the second generation, it is through the eyes of the older generation that the younger generation perceives and learns about the homeland culture. Ashoke and Ashima sent Gogol to Bengali classes and culture classes every Saturday, held in the home of one of their Bengali friends. Though they do face some conflict with their children in this endeavor but the older generation makes certain compromises to maintain inter-generational relation. Ashoke and Ashima learnt to celebrate some of the main festivals of the dominant culture. Ashoke and Ashima gave in many ways but it was only to peripheral values, i.e. food, dress which were negotiable but not the core values such as cultural and religious traditions. Gogol's friendship with a young girl Ruth, is disapproved by Ashoke and Ashima. They tell him 'you are too young to get involved this way'.

Cultural displacement involves the loss of language, family ties and support. Salman Rushdie, in his novel, *'Imaginary Homeland'* talks about the turbulence and turmoil, a migrant goes through when he says, "A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption. He loses his place, he enters into alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behavior and codes are unlike and even offensive to his own."

Identity for the youngsters is much more complicated, for at the two levels, of private and public, there is dichotomy- Indian values and culture defined identity at home, while outside, they are Americans but different. The parents expect them to behave in an ideal manner, to perform well academically and professionally. Ashoke and Ashima wanted Gogol to pursue engineering and Moushumi's parents wanted her to be a chemist. Contrary to this, the second – generation youngsters wanted to choose and adopt a career and a profession of their own liking. Gogol becomes an architect; Moushumi pursued a double major in French. Sonia becomes a Para lawyer. They feel attracted and have an appreciation for the host culture.

At the end of the novel, Ashima's decision to live six months in India and six months in America with Gogol and Sonia makes her realize that she belongs nowhere and at the same time everywhere. "True to the meaning of her name, she is without border, without home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere, and so with Gogol who is an alien both in India and America."

Unaccustomed Earth (2008) is Jhumpa Lahiri's second collection of short stories. The unusual title of this book is borrowed from Nathaniel Hawthorne's story, *"The Custom House,"* to suggest a shift in fortune when immigrants "strike their roots into unaccustomed earth." Set almost entirely in the United States (the unaccustomed earth), eight separate stories are connected most obviously by cultural dissonances affecting characters who are Indian or have Indian parents. Three of the stories, however, are linked by a strong narrative connection that is unexpected, profound, and unforgettable.

For Indian readers, the narratives describe complexities about migration patterns, cultural issues, alienation, and generational differences. The stories deal with well-educated children of immigrants who become offspring their parents barely recognize. For other readers, the stories reveal situations about families and customs that are strangely familiar, especially those stories dealing with relationships between parents and children. The forces of globalization have created and accelerated shifts that can seem staggering to all parents' intent on preserving cultural patterns and traditions. Whether Indian or not, most parents experience a sense of alienation while watching their children flourish in a world that increasingly appears unfamiliar and foreign.

Not surprisingly, the stories concern strains and challenges affecting mixed relationships and/or mixed marriages and stresses on disapproving and disappointed parents, while others focus on children succumbing to drugs and alcohol. All deal with some kind of emotional loss, but provide connections to feelings experienced by children and their parents in life's quiet and more kinetic negotiations.

The first story is about Ruma, a well-educated woman who lives in Seattle with her work-alcoholic American husband, and child, Akash.

Generational and cultural contrasts are revealed in overt and more subtle ways when her recently widowed father arrives for a short visit. Even though Ruma's complete assimilation into her non-Indian home as well as her on-going worries about her father's loneliness are major considerations, another story thread is spun, one that quietly reveals the father's thoughts about himself and a new relationship made recently during a vacation in Europe. Ruma's assumptions about her father, his loneliness, his possible dependency on her, and the Seattle vacation as a possible signal for relocating to her household turn out to be entirely wrong.

The last three stories follow a boy, Kaushik, and girl, Hema, into adulthood. In the first story, "Once in a Lifetime," Hema recalls her first memory of Kaushik when he was nine and she was six. The occasion was a farewell party for Kaushik's parents who were returning from the United States to live in Calcutta. The mothers, who grew up in Calcutta, but met in Cambridge, Massachusetts had become very close and were saddened by this separation. Seven years pass before Kaushik's parents return to the Boston area and stay with Hema's family. Hema found the now 16-year old young man appealing, but brooding and totally uninterested in her. Even though Hema expected Kaushik to be Indian-like in behavior, he was more Americanized than she was. That the family had flown first-class shocked Hema's conservative family as did their new smoking and moderate drinking habits.

After a long search, and to the relief of Hema's parents, Kaushik's family found a modern house on the North Shore. Before they moved to their new home, Kaushik surprised Hema with confidential information-- his family had left India to seek treatment in Boston for his mother's breast cancer. All medical efforts had been unsuccessful and his mother had only a short time to live. Hema promised to keep this disclosure secret and grieved for the woman she had come to admire and love.

The second story in the link, "Year's End," is narrated by Kaushik. With the opening line, "I did not attend my father's wedding," readers know that Kaushik's mother has died. His father, in Calcutta for a visit, had married Chitra, a woman with two young daughters, and all would be returning to the North Shore house to live. Most of the chapter

recounts the ordeal of the mother's dying, Kaushik's tremendous sense of loss, and the loneliness experienced by him at Swarthmore College. No mention is made of Hema by the desolate narrator except to remember he had hated every day spent under her parents' roof, but later had come to think of that time with nostalgia.

"Going Ashore" brings Hema and Kaushik together in Rome where she has a study grant and a visiting lectureship and he is on vacation from his work as an award-winning photo journalist. Hema's parents have arranged for her to marry Navin in Calcutta. Navin has accepted a teaching position at MIT. Until her unexpected reunion with Kaushik and the intense love affair that follows, neither had experienced any real connection with another person. The story about them in Rome seems to represent an independence from the cultural forces that have shaped their lives, but this independence is short lived. Ultimately, she is unable to set aside the expectations imposed by her parents. The consequences of their final separation are more than any reader might imagine.

The last three overlapping tales tell a single story about a Bengali-American girl and a Bengali-American boy, whose crisscrossing lives make up a poignant ballad of love and loss and death. They embark on a passionate affair that concludes not with a fairy-tale happy ending but with a denouement that speaks of missed opportunities and avoidable grief.

CONCLUSION

Jumpha Lahiri herself born in a family of immigrants and having experienced the emotional conflicts in her life, sketches her characters in a very realistic manner. Lahiri's stories outline the tensions of adhering to one's cultural background in a foreign environment, and the conflicts of assimilation. Summing up her own immigrant experience, Lahiri voices this very theme in her second short story collection, 'The Unaccustomed Earth': "I think being an immigrant must teach you so much about the world and about human beings, things you can't understand if you are born and raised and live your whole life in one place. It must be an amazing experience in many ways, but it has a price." The spirit of exile and alienation enables the diasporic

writers to seek refuge in their writings and establish a permanent place in the minds of their readers. Lahiri does exactly the same. Her handling of the complexities of immigrant experience shows her simple yet a very mature approach, expected of such a fiction writer.

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