

Identity Crisis and Diasporic Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Story Collections

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The complexities and diversities of the present 'human reality' have compelled contemporary thinking to interrogate and deconstruct given concepts like 'home', 'abroad', 'nation', 'culture' and others in both worldly and textual contexts. This article aims at reading Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories collections *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* as a representation of the diasporic predicament of Indians abroad- to be more specific, finding identity crisis and search for home in Indian Hindu Bengalis living in the USA.

'Diaspora' as a topic has been a favourite with a lot of books and authors in recent times. These books deal with 'Diaspora' in a number of ways-from the historicity of the 'original' Jewish diaspora to abstract, general, and theorization of diaspora as a contemporary reality. Since the purpose of present article is to find out Diasporic sensibility in the short stories of Lahiri and as her characters are the immigrant living in USA and England, diaspora itself comes in concern with the theme of this paper. The approach adopted by John Leod in defining 'Diaspora' is rich in clarity and catholicity; and will be followed here as a guideline:

What is a 'diaspora'? In his excellent book, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, Robin Cohen tentatively describes diaspora as communities of people living together in one country who 'acknowledge that "the old country" - a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore-always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions'. The emphasis on collectivity and community here is very important, as is the sense of living in one country but looking across time and space to another. Cohen continues that 'a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background. (McLeod 207)

Immigration and diaspora are not new observable fact in India. As the literature produced by expatriate Indian English writers, explores the multi-dimensional anxieties and upheavals of 'emigré' life. Lately, there have been more modifications in perceptions and perspectives of these writers' notions of human being, and their national and cultural identities. Several sort of identities jostle with each other. It creates a crisis of identity in the works of reputed expatriate writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Bharati Mukharjee, Arundhati Roy and others.

The interaction and commingling of various cultures certainly open new roots and modes of thinking about the individual and group identities of people (Diasporas), and help them to outgrow the stereotyped experiences of uprootedness, displacement and marginalization as said by Subhendu Mund, "For various reasons, the present diaspora tends to alienate the immigrants from their roots in spite of themselves, compelling them to live between two worlds: the imaginary and the real, the past and the present, and the virtual and the material." (Mund 1-2)

In recent times the aging immigrant generation of Indian origin in the west has been giving way to its children, the second generation, born and raised entirely away from India. The hyphenated ethnicity of the second generation writers naturally incorporated its own self – reflexive, interrogative critical, discourse forcing their evaluation on their own terms.

The Canadian avant-grade author Robert Kroetsch has argued that a “willed namelessness” (Kroetsch 51) is a norm he values since it holds out at least a hope of plural identities- an obvious social good in society made up of several races, languages, ethnic groups. It was probably in this sense that most of the second generation writers of Indian origin in the US, Canada and UK seems to celebrate their cultural hybridity and resist expropriation by the post colonial nationalist project. the second generation appears to re configure its hybridity in terms of what Homi Bhabha has called the “third space of enunciation” (*Narrating the Nation* 37), state in which all hybridized do not belong clearly to the world of either of the two cultures; they are rendered the ‘other’. Hari Kunzru has quoted saying:

I am very careful never to describe myself as an Indian writer. [...] I am a British-born, British-resident author, I have connections to India and I feel they inform what I do to some extent, but more than this I cannot claim. What I and Zadie are doing is British writing about British hybridity. It is a completely separate story to that strand of writing which is about Indian- born writers going somewhere else. People should not confuse the two. (Dalrymple 2005. net)

Kunzru sets the pattern for his generation of writers. Most often the second generation diasporic Indian writers’ law, in their multivalent narratives, agonized over question of transcultural and transnational identity.

Historically the emergence of the second-generation writers like Shauna Singh Baldwin, Mira Kamdar, Atima Srivastava, Hari Kunzru, Amulya Malladi, Meera Syal Bidisha, Bondopadhyay and Jhumpa Lahiri has debatably marked the beginning of a new phase of Indian writing in English. They have reshaped and redefined Indian writing with a marked shift in focus and concerns. These writers have begun to answer the question of heritage and history differently from their parents, their perception of ethnicity is uniquely their own; their acceptance of their cultural givens is aggressively total as opposed to cultural dislocation and resistance of the immigrant generation; and their writing generally reflects the processes of the new paradigm of bicultural readjustment they have reached; their quest for a new cultural equilibrium of heterogeneity and hybridity within the host culture is different; hence their manifest defiance at being bracketed with the expatriate writers in critical discourse.

The interstitial positioning, cultural hybridity and the Indian coloration of their work on the whole would call for a separate category like Transnational Desi Writers. Often their connection to India might be slight or even non-existent, but their cross-border situation and distinct ethnic concern would permit a separate space for itself. They build a new transnational identity that integrates their ethnic difference into the new multicultural cosmos of the west. But the path of this transcultural equilibrium is not speckled with roses and most of the second generation writers of Indian origin do not tire of confronting the issues involved in the process. The problems of bicultural

situation are real especially for the second generation Indians raised by the immigrant first generation Indian parents. This has made a sensitive examination of the problems associated with immigration and how these affect identity formation and impact the intrapsychic and adaptive functioning of the young Indian Americans growing up in America. Jhumpa Lahiri thus explores these problems of growing up in America in her fiction *The Namesake*. The novel confronts the basic questions about identity in the second generation society and culture.

Lahiri's short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* and her novel *The Namesake* recount the lives of Bengali immigrants and their American reared children (like the author herself) presented in an understated plain style, Lahiri weaves together numerous narrative threads in all these works. Her ambitions crowd out the delicacy, structural particularities and thematic reverberation that brought her collections so much praise.

The ordinariness of immigrant tales, which project cultural sacrifices, material gain, makes her short stories fresh, admirable and worth contribution to literature. Lahiri present her readers with a complex look into the immigrant experiences. The binarism of west and east, white and non-white, first world countries and third world countries and self and other are the key words in postcolonialism. Since the degree of acculturation is higher among the second-generation immigrants than that of the first generation, sometimes the discovery of the history, geography, custom, rites and rituals of their parental homeland causes a kind of bewilderment, amazement and wonder among the later generations.

Being an Indian by descent, British by origin and American by immigration, Lahiri is much concerned with the large section of new generation Indian Americans, their cultural traditions, value system and relationships, their sensitivity for home and of homelessness. In the narration of their social customs during birth, death, marriage and divorce, she endeavours to iron out the cultural creases of the Bengali immigrants in America.

Lahiri has projected the Indian immigrants of Bengali origins as economic refugees and transnational hybrids who structure a new generation of Indian Americans in a codified homogenous American national culture. As a separate ethnic identity and culture like America's other they feel their native culture is dynamic, multidimensional and has its onward movement. On the one hand, while the first generation immigrants are trapped in a cultural dividing line due to the contamination with multicultural belief and over-valorisation of home culture, the second generation, the children of first generation immigrants, are American Born Confused Desis who are psychologically dislocated from their mainstream culture and roots due to their hyphenated existence between 'desh' and 'pardesh'.

The first generation immigrants (Bengalis) have a cultural disturbance and a double consciousness but the second generation is a more conflicted group and has a cultural eruption in false consciousness. In both cases the ideological bonding and 'fixity of identity' provide the essentials for their existence. "Lahiri negotiates the dilemma of the cultural spaces lying across the continent with a master's touch. ...endowed with

a distinct universal appeal...between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind, and the other encountered but not necessarily assimilated" (Nayar 2000: 3.net).

Lahiri valorises the Bengali identity for its association and syncretization with the pan-American materialist and pragmatic culture. Her characters and their survival strategies are torn between their affiliation and filiation to the two cultures. They negotiate with the cultural availability of America which provides a portrayal of trans-national hybridity as a progressively more unavoidable condition for emotional and intellectual life. For them identity is an invention "which is never complete, always in process, and always continued within..." (Hall 222).

Dealing with the Bengali customs, idealism, culture and liberal attitude to foreign influence in her works, Lahiri makes the manuscript, a cultural hyper-text. She realistically portrays the trauma and pain of cultural dislocation, homelessness and displacement both in the native and the acquired selves of her characters.

Jhumpa Lahiri has dealt with the plight of the Indian immigrants in Europe and America. Lahiri, "an interpreter of exile" (Nayar 1.net) reiterates her Indianness through an ethical commitment to the indigenous culture of her Indian characters and tries to relocate their cultural space and identity in their 'otherness'. Her short stories collections *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* are examples of social document reflecting a perplexing bicultural universe that analyses the values and norms of both the new world and the old with a kind of "double consciousness" (Gilroy 1).

In America's multicultural matrix her Indian-American characters are the victims of the contamination of inter-civilisation, associations and multiculturalism. They make their occasional visits to India to rejuvenate their cultural identity; and in America's bicultural universe they endeavour to maintain a fine balance, a process of syncretization. These characters, mostly the Indians of Bengali origin, desperately endeavour for emancipation from their dislocation, displacement and disorientation.

Lahiri fundamentalises culture and its importance in immigrant experience with a humanist attitude. She consciously foregrounds the virtues of native culture and the mysteries of acquired culture in the process of her own self-acculturation while narrating the immigrant experience in America. During her brief transports between Boston and Calcutta she enjoyed her cultural past as fresh gusts of wind. In Lahiri's narratology the Indian immigrants deal with an identity crisis in their love-hate relationships for Indian and American cultures. It is evident that in Lahiri's imagination 'home' as "a mystic place of desire" (Brah 192) always associates roots in a culture, community and family, remaking it in the demography of internationalism.

Lahiri's immigrant characters venture a double vision which is an amalgamation of distance and intimacy and affirm their identity in a bicultural universe. The 'home' culture is not only a shaping force for them; they take it as an essential force for their biological and spiritual development. One is reminded of these cultural beliefs and reservations of American Indians through a comprehensive reading of Lahiri's short stories collections.

Through cross-cultural orientations in both of her short story collections *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, Jhumpa Lahiri explains about the cultural space

accessible to the non-resident Indians in America. By evaluating the sense of ideology, belief, language, and displacement of her characters in these short stories, she has raised the essential issues of their immigrant sensibility.

The first generation immigrants feel proud of their cultural past; the second generation communicates deviations and divergence from their root culture. In this process of self-realisation the former do not like to disobey the cultural dignity of their past. And the latter neither demands it nor demonstrates it. They live as they should do in the American plentitude of cultural availability.

The Bengalis as a marginal community in America's metropolitan environments enjoy their cultural activities with fervour. They are a scattered community, found in different professions and doing their best to enjoy life in America's materialist society. Re-orienting their life in a new socio-political environment they exude a cultural resilience and keep acquaintance with one another on family get-togethers, regardless of each other's qualifications-professional engagements and economic status.

The immigrants Bengalis thus have their sentimental journey to their homeland through cultural process. But their Americanized children in unromantic comprehension experience a psychic separation from it. The older immigrants are reminded of the words of their family elders when they left India. Married women do not utter their husbands' names, for according to Indian custom. They rather refer it cleverly in an indirect and oblique manner. They use vermilion in the center parting of their hair as a cultural symbol of the living status of their husbands. They use to wear their traditional dress sari and put a circle of vermilion on their forehead.

Lahiri has represented almost all her Indian-Bengali woman characters in this traditional way in her both short story collections but particularly in her Pulitzer Prize winning book *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) reflects the pain and trauma of the first generation immigrants. Mrs. Sen in the story Mrs. Sen's is a good example of that. Therefore craving for the homeland, trauma of dislocation, and incapability of making adjustment within a completely different society are the main problem concerned with those immigrant Indians.

On the other hand her second collection of short story *Unaccustomed Earth* represents a different point of view. Here she has dealt with the children of first generation immigrants who born and brought up in American culture. These second generation immigrants think of America as their homeland and they have inherited all the pros and cons of their new native land. In *Unaccustomed Earth* Usha, Rahul, Hema, Kaushik, Sudha, Sangita are examples of this. These second generation Asian Americans continuously tries to negotiate and keep a balancing between the demands of the binary cultures. And in this process they imbibe western standard of living and American lifestyle. The second generation Bengalis do not obey their cultural dictates which codify their Indian past as a myth.

They are conflicted in America's hybrid culture, and do not feel the necessity of their inherited cultural past. Instead of loving India's culture they criticize Hindu fundamentalism, poverty of people etc. with Americanized viewpoint. They like to celebrate Christmas, invite American children on their birthdays and family occasions

and prefer continental food like other Americans. In friendship and love affairs they are accustomed to the American way of life.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's stories, society depicted is neither good nor bad. The characters are shown entangled into a struggle over which they have no control. There is no escape for mystery, intrigue, plots, and counterplots in her stories. When observed closely, her stories are deceptively simple. Essentially a writer of human emotions, she abstains from delving deep into social or political issues. Her stories are of common problems that a person of any religion and stature may relate to in any corner of the world irrespective of being a male or a female. The author has brought to the fore the difference between males and females as human beings. Both of them look at life from their respective outlooks and both have different ways of leading the life and both have different roles to play.

Jhumpa Lahiri seems to be carrying forward the theme of the suffering of the individual because of the fanciful and fond wishes of one's family and the working and doings of the society at large. Equally, Lahiri raises the question of the identity of the individual as it is constructed in the society through the interplay of forces beyond his/her control. This seemingly irresponsible exercise of the authority of society heaps unintended problems and pitfalls on the individual and leaves one tainted and wounded. She also underlines that identity of the individual, consistently affected by society, is something which one has to accept through a process of reflections and negotiations.

The narrative craft of Lahiri not merely points to certain ironic reversal in the streams of the experiences of her characters. Through them she evokes a more comprehensive and complex view of men and things, registers her deeper perceptions and explorations into human situation, and makes room for varied and multiple significations of human experience. In doing all this Lahiri at once stays ardent yet self-disciplined as an artist; and if such kind of writing reflects any passion, it is only the passion for moderation laced with abiding human concern.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's world, pain and suffering of life are impeccably merged with the pleasure and joy of life. Diasporic experiences unremarkably interchange with the life lived in the homeland and its memories. Cultural presentation and representation of human existence are permeating with the tones and dissonances of human experience. Language used by her is inflexible and impressive, with occasional use of Indian words to index the character's location and background. Narrative technique is direct, appropriately infused with delicate connotations. It is specifically a Jhumpa Lahiri's world, crafted and skilled with imagination and thoughts that are intensely engaging.

Her stories speak not only of travel but also of the gradual process of laying roots in the new country. This trend of settling down in the new space necessarily presupposes network of relationships in the form of community at the larger level and of family at the smaller. These are dynamics interactionist spaces where relationships between individuals may develop and change at the time axis. Time and space are relational the narrator in Lahiri's story does not mention his community on which an immigrant usually falls back in time of personal or cultural crisis. His is an individual space

which is in a dialogue with other individual spaces in the happy Indian American family he forms.

Jhumpa Lahiri's characters, located in the diasporic space, indeed, belong to different stages of acculturation. Cultural specificities and cultural differences in Lahiri's stories are however, important so far as they place the characters in the proper perspectives. But Lahiri is not interested in merely speaking about the cultural experience of her characters. She herself makes the point clear when she asserts in an interview, 'I don't approach my stories as being about a specific cultural group or experience, I try to write about human beings and difficulties of existence, and would hope that there is a universality of that' (*The Journal of Indian Writing in English* 19).

She is more interested in exploring the mindscape of her characters and dealing with the human predicaments. She thus moves beyond the facade of the cultural experiences of her characters, with which most of the diasporic characters are obsessed, and talk about the intricate workings of the mind. The characters are not reduced to a 'token' of the ethnic group they belong to. They grow up as distinctly individualized human characters. Most of them are presented as intensively emotional, highly sensitive and complicated but usually self-controlled individuals.

For Lahiri language is a sharper, trickier weapon, to be used with care. It can cut too far and functions as the only tool for the formation of the story's hard core, the depth where its essence lies. Putting it another way, language forms a prominent threshold in Lahiri's writing. From the threshold the interior naturally seems far and out of reach at first throw. This disjunction between language and the reality sort to be portrayed by the author seems a frequent feature of NRI fiction about India.

Jhumpa Lahiri's stories, whatever they are, can never be staged. She never dramatizes, never sentimentalizes. Her realism takes no liberty with sentiments, temperament or instinct. She employs realism of method in the homely conversations, in the matter of fact and way of stating things. Lahiri makes no finely honed statements. In her simple and direct language she often expresses her deepest views. She owes this to her intuitive power.

Lahiri's power of perception is keen, fresh and grasps individual traits. The personality behind her works retains all its charms and peeps in through the young eyes of child characters. We look at the familiar and unfamiliar things through the curious eyes of a child who was born in London and grew up in Rhode Island. Each Indian thing is describe with the novelty of a child's perception as the postal stamp of Gandhi strikes Eliot as 'bald man at a spinning wheel' she lights up vividly the most familiar aspects of daily life.

As Lisa Lowe observes about Lahiri's work, that the formation of such an Asian American culture "includes practices that are partially inherited, partially modified, as well as partially invented." (Lowe 65)

While nostalgia and memory form an important part of the early (first generation) writing, later (and mainly second generation) writing concentrated on the cultural and psychological experiences of those who were now ready to lay roots in the new soil. Among the early writers mention may be made of Bharti Mukherjee, Meena

Alexander, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and one can add the names of Jhumpa Lahiri, Ameena Meer, Vijay Lakshmi and Amitava Kumar among the later writers.

Jhumpa Lahiri as a second generation Indian American writer speaks of the aesthetics of identity formation, the gradual process of negotiating two cultures. She, in an interview, speaks of her own predicament to the following affect:

When I was growing up in Rhodes Island in the 1970s I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrants offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyalty the old world and fluent to the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was generally the case but my perception as a young girl was that I feel short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another. (Lahiri 2006 .net)

So she perceives a 'lack' in the ambience in which she was growing up, and this lack is further reinforced by the generation gap. Generation gap or communication breakdown between generations is an old-age crisis assuming serious dimensions in the modern period. The diasporic space is not at all free from this dilemma. Culture, whether ancestral or acquired, becomes the main point of contention. Literary works of the first generation writers are concerned with the enigma of arrival in an overtly 'foreign' land; the specific trauma of dislocation, the painful process of acculturation.

Lahiri remains a detached observer of the daily events in the lives of her fictional characters. She is a dispassionate chronicler of the lives in a global society, and delineates the mental void and ruptures in human relationships. She believes in existentialism and gives prime importance to the actual being of the individual, and not to 'essence'. Lahiri is good at capturing the world, as if her narrative is a documentary of little lives, displaced and alienated, floating in an anonymous island, far away from home, and her empathy is as transparent as her words, writes India Today. It is her deft narrative technique that helps her to reach at the inner weave of characters with unexpected twist in plot and human situations. Her all the three works are an excellent example of this.

Lahiri unlike Arundhati Roy, Bharti Mukherjee and Manju Kapoor is not preoccupied with gender discrimination; on the other hand, as a South Asian Diaspora female writer, she writes about 'human predicament' and the crises of identity in the alienated land of America though she has made it her homeland. Marginality, alienation and nostalgia are the three chief features in her writings. In spite of this she shares significant resemblances with the native literature enriched by historical connections, spiritual affinities and racial reminiscences. She writes with a sensibility about her family's ethnic heritage and the lives of south Asian immigrants in the United States. Her cross-cultural experiences have lent a refreshing diversity to her artistic creations negotiating the problems of evolving new tools of critical perspectives.

Focal point is not her feminine sensibility but the dilemma of choice and commitment to the cultural moorings in family matters. Her work hits many familiar themes; the uneasy status of the immigrant, the tension between India and the United States and between family tradition and individual freedom, a coming-of-age novel.

Jhumpa sticks to the fineries of a short story to heighten the effect to the summit like Edgar Allan Poe. She attempts to achieve total effect through the process of brevity, self-expression and actuality of experience. There is no exaggeration in Amy Tan's praise inscribed at the back cover of the text, "Jhumpa Lahiri is the kind of writer who makes you want to grab the next person you see and say, Read this! She's a dazzling story teller with a distinctive voice, an eye for nuance, an ear for irony. She is one of the finest short story writers I've read" (Tan).

Jhumpa has not only received honour from a restricted number of critics but she has also pricked the imagination of a great number of critics. Undoubtedly, Charles Taylor, another of critics, has praised her for her achievements, "Lahiri doesn't write jeremiads about the loss of cultural identity; her characters are both relieved when they adjust to their new world and regretful at the separation from their original culture." (Taylor 1999. net)

Jhumpa Lahiri does not want to represent a set of viewpoint that is completely personal. Instead she just scrutinizes things and tries to assimilate it from different perspectives so that she can keep herself in the background and let her characters speak for themselves. She is different from many other contemporary Indian writers writing in English. Most of Indian fiction writers writing in English are born and brought up in India, even though the writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Vikram Seth, R.P.Jhabvala, Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie are living either in England or America. Lahiri was born in London of Bengali parents and grew up in Rhode Island, USA. Her connection with India might be through her parents and her grandparents. Therefore, her acquaintance to India is bound to be restricted to the stories from her parents, grandparents, books and news papers only. Apart from this Lahiri's self-understanding while coming to India played a significant role in making her an eminently brilliant writer. India always remained homeland for her parents, while she being born and brought up in America was uncomfortable with the circumstances and ambiance. As she brought up being restrained between two cultures, two tradition and two completely dissimilar worlds with entirely varying values, her perception towards life has changed. She became capable to see and understand the pain and craving her parents and other immigrants were feeling in their group. These conditions became helpful in her transformation and upsurge as such a prolific writer. She is competent enough of writing the sentiments of the first-generation and the second- generation immigrants. Her stories are remarkable exploration and examination of the human conditions. It shapes and is shaped by the changeable textuality of the human persona and offers authentication to her interest in creating a natural evolvement of both the 'form' and 'content'.

Jhumpa Lahiri does not hold responsible the males for the upheavals in the lives of others. In most of her stories there is no distinction between males and females as per the traditional norms of superiority and inferiority are concerned. Jhumpa seems to communicate that man and woman are complementary to each other but when this balance gets distorted, ample of place gets reserved for unhealthy issues. Indeed, Jhumpa displays an admirable disconnection from her characters and allows them to do things according to their tastes. The traditional male-female scuffle is missing in the work of Lahiri. The cross-cultural nervousness is given proper place in her stories

because she places her characters in an alien setting with nostalgic memories swarming inside them. What she probably means to explore through her work is the fact that the dissimilarity between human beings is man-made. Her stories are tinged with universal appeal thus at once falls in the class of specifically general nature and temperament.

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