Narrating the Life of a Bengali : A Reading of the Select Works of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Displacement, whether forced or self-imposed, is in many ways a calamity. Yet, a peculiar but a potent point to note is that writers in their displaced existence generally tend to excel in their work, as if the changed atmosphere acts as a stimulant for them. The word 'diaspora' itself, coming, as it does, from Greek 'dia' ('through') and 'speirein' ('to scatter'), etymologically means 'dispersal,' and involves, at least two countries, two cultures, which are embedded in the mind of the migrant, side-by-side. Although the past is invoked now and then, the focus is persistently on the 'moment.' The past is invoked to indicate a certain contrast, which must be incorporated, and controlled in the present life in order to negotiate the network of social relations in the immediate world. The past, thus, becomes a part of the present consciousness of the diasporic subject. Literary works, written particularly by second generation diasporic writers, concentrate more on synchronic dimension than on diachronic one. It is quite natural that they approach the narratives from comparative perspectives, both from the points of view of cultures and generations. These immigrant writers reflect, on the one hand, their attachment to the motherland and on the other, their feeling of alienation and rootlessness.

Amit Shankar Saha says:

> The non-resident Indian writers have explored their sense of displacement – a perennial theme in all exile literature. They have given more poignancy to the exploration by dealing not only with a geographical dislocation but also a socio-cultural sense of displacement. Their concerns are global concerns as today's world is afflicted with the problems of immigrants, refugees, and all other exiles. These exilic states give sense of displacement and rootlessness. ("Exile Literature and the Diasporic birth to the Indian Writer." *Rupkatha Journal* Vol. 1 No 2, 2009: 191)

Readers of contemporary post-colonial fictions are now thoroughly conversant with the themes of migration, homelessness, exile, loss of identity and rootlessness, which form the staple diet of much Third World, post-colonial and common-wealth writing. Amid the wider phenomenon that encompasses the extraordinary success of diasporic fiction writers of Indian descent in the last two decades of the twentieth century – there has emerged a discernible sub-set within this movement, that of writing in English from the Indian state of Bengal, the country of Bangladesh, and by Probashi Bangalis (diasporic Bengalis) outside the two Bengals. This group, to name only some obvious relatively recent names in fiction, would include – Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Sunetra Gupta, Nalinaksha Bhattacharya, Joydeep Roy Bhattacharya, Bidisha Bandopadhyay, Adib Khan, Amit Chaudhuri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and three more debutantes, Amal Chatterjee, Ruchira Mukherjee, and Jhumpa Lahiri. While reading some of these writers one cannot escape the pleasures of acute Bengaliness in their writings, and in fact, some of them are writing back with a vengeance so to say. As Sudeep Sen (2001) justifiably argues:

> Apart from using their Bengaliness as a tool to exoticise the East in its new avatar, some of these writers employ language, themes, moods, which are very culture-specific. This of course includes many Bengali obsessions: indigenous food ("luchi, tarkari, ilish, parotas, narus, phuchkas", or jilepi and shingara), politics, sports, endless "adda"(discussions) that meanderingly embrace reminiscing, human warmth, paro-ninda paro-charcha (genial back-biting) with all its over-inquisitiveness – as well as, impassioned debates on philosophy, music, cinema, literature, and the passion of writing itself. ("Oh Calcutta! The New Bengal Movement in Diasporic Indian English Fiction." *Indian Diaspora – 21st Century – Migration, Change and Adaptation*, 2007:20)

Like Ray's globe-trotter Manmohan Mitra (in "*Agontuk*" or "*The Stranger*"), the Bengali has never been a "KupoMonduk". The Bengali migration has not just been across the barbed wires separating the two Bengals, but has often carried him across the oceans, to new continents and cultures. Jhumpa Lahiri is a product of that "Wanderlust". More than any other writer of her time, Jhumpa has emerged as a spokesperson of her generation, one that has been born and brought up outside Bengal, spent lives far away from the sights and sounds of this land. It is a life lived in a myriad of fragmented cultural identities. The sense of Bengaliness pervades the writings of Jhumpa Lahiri. Though she lives in the United States, her work is imbued with Indian, and particularly Bengali culture and sensibilities. Wherever they are set, she explores "Bengaliness" in some of her stories, while others deal with immigrants at different stages on the road to assimilation. Her confession that it is still very hard to think of herself as an American makes her predicament unique as well as typical too.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a class apart in the sense that her second-generation diasporic status does not connect her to Calcutta by birth. Born in London, raised in Rhode Island, Connecticut, and presently living in New York, Jhumpa, interestingly enough set some of the stories of *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) in Calcutta because of a necessary combination of distance and intimacy. Growing up in America under the supervision of a mother who wanted to raise her children to be Indian, it is no surprise that Jhumpa Lahiri puts so large an emphasis on the stories of Indians in what for them is a strange land. Publishing her first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, in 1999, Lahiri has become a quick international success and an award-winning author. The influence of frequent childhood visits to India and parents who are still a part of the Indian world despite their immigration to America thirty years ago shaped her books.

Lahiri's stories – dealing with the trials and tribulations of displaced people struggling to make sense in an unfamiliar world – initially seem to tread on a well traversed terrain. A closer look however reveals that even when she is immersed in the petty details of the disappointments and disenchantments of immigrant lives, the Bengali strain remains all but clear. All the nine stories in *Interpreter of Maladies*, set in America and India, are united by the motifs of exclusion; loneliness and the search for fulfillment. They do not restrict themselves only to the experiences of migrant and displaced individuals. Communicating the fact that exile and exclusion are not the privilege of any one group in society alone, Lahiri portrays the specific situations of individuals as symptomatic of the ubiquity of loneliness and alienation. Though she talks about universal appeal, most of Lahiri's Indian characters are Bengalis and her

prose is scattered with details of traditional Bengali names, food, cooking, and wardrobe, giving character and flavour to her stories. Also, as a Bengali, the idea of marriage loomed large in her life. She initially drew heavily on her experiences in Calcutta because it gave her a perspective of her heritage. Clearly admitting that her relationship to India changed as she grew older, "As I grew older, going to India was frustrating, because growing up in America is different…in Calcutta, we had to respect the family's concerns." ("The Maladies of Belonging." *Newsweek International*. September 20, 1999: 80). In an interview she emphasized the role that Calcutta plays in her imagination:

> I spent much time in Calcutta as a child – idle but rich time – often at home with my grandmother. It enabled me to experience solitude – ironically, because there were so many people, I could seal myself off psychologically. It was a place where I began to think imaginatively. Calcutta nourished my interest in seeing things from different points of view. There's a tradition that we just don't have here. The ink hasn't dried yet on our lives here…Though Calcutta – "the city that she know[s] quite well" "is the place where (my) parents are from, a place I visited frequently for extended time and formed relationships with people and with (my) relatives and felt a tie over time," "it was also a sort of parenthesis in my life to be there."("The Maladies of Belonging." *Newsweek International* Sept. 20, 1999: 80)

During her six years at Boston University, Lahiri worked on short stories, nine of which were collected in her debut book, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). The stories address sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants, with themes such as marital difficulties, miscarriages, and the disconnection between first and second generation United States immigrants. Lahiri later wrote that when she first started writing she was not conscious that her subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew her to her craft was the desire to force the two worlds she occupied to mingle on the page as she was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life.

The Namesake (2003) is the second book by the author Jhumpa Lahiri. It was originally a novella published in *The New Yorker* and was later expanded to a full length novel. It explores many of the same emotional and cultural themes as her Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. *The Namesake* prolongs to expand and advance the themes of cultural alienation and loss of identity depicted in the *Interpreter of Maladies*. Moving between events in Calcutta, Boston, and New York City, the novel examines the nuances involved with being caught between two conflicting cultures with their highly distinct religious, social, and ideological differences. According to Nandini Sahu:

> It is however, more practical to compare Lahiri and Bharti Mukherjee as representatives of the East Indian voice in American fiction. Daughters of Calcutta, the two authors segregate the Indian Americans' link with their motherhood, as well as their response to migration and absorption. (*Two Disposed Habitats: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies and the Namesake*)

Like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Bharati Mukherjee, who make repeated references to the cultural tradition of Calcutta and their cherished moments of nostalgia or moments of bewilderment in encounters with the real Calcutta, Jhumpa also tries to

relocate her cultural space and identity mediated by significant cross-cultural influences. She confessed to Radhika S. Shankar:

> When I began writing fiction seriously, my first attempts, for some reason, were always set in Calcutta which is a city I know quite well from repeated visits with my family, sometimes for several months at a time. ("Lahiri's First Book Gets Raves."*http://www.rediff.com/news/may22/1999*)

In several other interviews she states her inability to define 'where she is from' and mentions that the problem for the children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin, is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. That has been her experience in any case. As a second-generation immigrant in the United a state, which is "home" to her, she still feels "a bit of an outsider too." In her visit to Calcutta, the city tried to claim her as its own but Jhumpa insisted that she belonged to no one place in particular and that she inhabits a perplexing bicultural universe. In the online essay, "To Heaven without Dying," she categorically states:

> I have always lived under the pressure to be bilingual, bicultural, at ease on either side of the Lahiri family map. The first words I learned to utter and understand were in my Parents' native tongue, Bengali…my ability to speak the language made me feel less foreign during visits to Calcutta every few years. It also made me feel less foreign in the expatriate Bengali community my parents socialize with in the United States and, on a more quotidian level, in my own home. While English was not technically my first language, it has become so…When it came to my own writing, English was, from the beginning, my only language. ("To Heaven without Dying." *The Feed Books Issue* July 24, 2000)

Jhumpa admits that there is less of a divide between American culture and Indian because of the greater access and communication channels, but she has observed a sense of emotional exile in her parents and in their friends that she feels can never go away. On the other hand, the problem for children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin, is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. She says:

> I've inherited my parents' preoccupations. It's hard to have parents who consider another place "home" – even after living abroad for thirty 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. To see my parents as children, as siblings, was rare. ("Lahiri's First Book Gets Raves." *http: //www.rediff. com/news/may22/1999*)

In spite of such strong emotional nourishment, Lahiri at the same time also does not fail to mention the typical immigrant phenomenon of belonging nowhere and that even in India; she did not feel at home. She also stresses the dichotomy of growing up in two cultures – how it bothered her when she grew up that there was no single place to which she fully belonged. But we have to admit that the most startling about Lahiri's characters was the fact that to all appearances, her Dases and Sens are the happy contented Bengalis one meets at social functions. They are instantly recognizable, even likeable – the friendly polite people who have long leisurely meals and dip biscuits in their teas. 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.* Her other works are *The Namesake* (2003) and *Indian Holy Song* (2000) ("Jhumpa Lahiri: Of Many Facets." *The Viewspaper: The Voice of the Youth* May 11, 2008)

In her novel *The Namesake* (2003) also, Jhumpa takes recourse to a lot of Bengaliness. Ashima Ganguli, the mother of the protagonist is not only a Bengali by birth, her Calcutta lineage constantly haunts her and makes her a sojourner in America. Her home is an American home from the outside but typically Bengali from the inside. Diasporic communities do not split their association with their homeland, but erect different relations. Devotion to cultural roots is a characteristic of the diasporic experience. This is evident right at the beginning of the novel when she mixes Rice Krispies and Planters' Peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl to make "a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks…spilling from newspaper cones."(1) Dressed up in the "cavalcade of matrimonial bracelets on both arms: iron, gold, coral, conch," (4) she remains the typical Bengali lady in spite of her physical location in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for so many years. At the beginning of the novel, when she is in labour and her water breaks, Ashima calls out to Ashoke, her husband. However, she does not use his name because this would not be proper. According to her, "It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do…a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken…cleverly patched over."(2) *And so, instead of saying Ashoke's name, she utters the interrogative that has come to replace it, which translates roughly as "Are you listening to me?"* From this statement we are shown how important privacy is to Bengali families.

The middle class Bengali values of home, the All-American values at school and the big wide world, the Indian identity at Diwali, all combine, collide, embrace and sometimes repel each other in this strange whirlwind of immigrant existence. We have met this generation, often looked at them with the curiosity of a stranger, but have never quite been able to fathom the complexities and confusions that surround their lives.

The gulf that separates expatriate Bengali parents from their American-raised children – and that separates the children from India – remains Lahiri's subject for this follow-up to *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake.* Jhumpa drew inspiration for her writing from her frequent visits to Calcutta in the formative years of her childhood and also from the observations that she made about her immigrant Bengali parents' Indian friends in the U.S. Her varied experiences in Calcutta enabled Lahiri to form closer ties with India and the country's rich cultural heritage while simultaneously coping with the pressures of everyday American life. Perhaps this exposure to both the cultures, Indian and American is what assisted Lahiri to tread through cross-cultural currents with amazing ease in her book *Interpreter of Maladies.*

The Namesake is a narrative of how Gogol Ganguli attains his identity and self-realization through his negotiation with different spaces. As he realizes, his own family space is very constricted – it in effect stifles his voice and destroys his freedom and agency. His anguish and antipathy grows out of this because it prevents his close and intimate interaction with the mainstream culture and tries to limit his cultural

activities largely to Indian American community. As he understands, this is a sanctified space and his parents enforce its 'sacred' norms which relate them to the absent 'home' country and not to the present social space. And therefore these norms, for Gogol and his generation are largely irrelevant. So long as the parents, Ashima and Ashoke, were the two members in the family the purity of the norms could be somehow preserved to a certain extent. The birth of Gogol, however, brings in the first portent of danger for the Ganguli family. The hospital space becomes the first evident site of resistance to the family and community practice followed by the Bengalis. Ashima and Ashoke wait for a letter from her grandmother that will carry the name of the new-born baby, thus attesting to the name the sanction of the family.

In this connection, Lahiri deals elaborately with the Bengali custom of giving two names to a child – *bhalonam* (literally, 'good name;' or formal name) and *daknam* (meaning 'pet name'). The former is to be used in the public space: "Every pet name is paired with a good name, a *bhalonam*, for identification in the outside world. Consequently good names appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories, and in all other public places." (26) The latter is used in the family space and in the association of close friends and associates. "Pet names are persistent remnants of childhood…these are the names by which they are known in their respective families, the names by which they are adored and scolded and missed and loved." (26) In one of the interviews she said:

> I can't speak for all Bengalis. But all the Bengalis I know personally, especially those living in India, have two names, one public, and one private. It's always fascinated me. My parents are called by different names depending on what country they happen to be in; in India they're known by their pet names, but in America they're known by their good names. My sister, who was born and raised in America, has two names. I'm like Gogol in that my pet name inadvertently became my good name. I have two other names on my passport and my birth certificate (my mother couldn't settle on just one). But when I was enrolled in school the teachers decided that Jhumpa was the easiest of my names to pronounce and that was that. To this day many of my relatives think that it's both odd and inappropriate that I'm known as Jhumpa in an official, public context. ("Jhumpa Lahiri on her Debut Novel: An Interview with the author." *http:/ /hinduism.about.com/library/weekly/extra/b l-jhumpainterview.htm*)

Although Jhumpa Lahiri has never lived anywhere but America, India; especially Calcutta continues to form part of her fictional landscape. As most of the characters have an Indian background. Calcutta keeps cropping up as a setting, sometimes more figuratively, the memory of the characters. Her novel *Namesake* remains attached to Calcutta. The characters suffer from the feeling of alienation.

To a greater extent, it is true that diasporic writing is autobiographical, individual, communal and cultural. It is a fact that most of the writers who codify diasporic experiences are themselves diasporic in their real life. Primarily diasporic writings deal with experiences of exile and homeland. Nayar observes these polarities as:

> All diasporic literature is an attempt to negotiate between these two polarities. The writings of exiled/ immigrant writers undertakes two moves, one temporal, and other spatial. It is, as Meena Alexander puts it, 'writing in search of homeland'.

("Hybridity, a major theme in postcolonial literature." Sunday Observer Jan. 8, 2012)

As *The Namesake* is, essentially, a story about life in the United States, so the American setting was always a given. The terrain is very much the terrain of Lahiri's own life – New England and New York, with Calcutta always hovering in the background. The power in all of Lahiri's work lies in the fact that she is able to create relatable characters and design plot lines that draw interest to her subject matter regardless of whether or not the reader has directly experienced the drudgery in the lives of Bengali immigrants and their children. The style and content of Lahiri's writing has been greatly influenced by the extent to which she herself has been able to adapt to her new country. Thus she has written about people and events, which are of India, the country of her origin, and is anxious to colour her work with Bengali culture. Lahiri's fiction is autobiographical and frequently draws upon her own experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. Lahiri has examined her characters' struggles, anxieties, and biases to chronicle the nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behaviour.

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