



## From Periphery to Centre: A Search for Identity in the diasporic fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri

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In the last century, Indian Diaspora was mainly a personal choice of individuals, particularly for academic pursuit or economic gains either towards the Middle East or to the Western countries, particularly to U.S.A. The native residents in each of these countries reacted differently to the waves of immigrants but in almost all the cases the expatriate did face a clash of opposing cultures, a feeling of alienation which was then followed by the attempts to adjust, to adopt, to accept and finally form a separate identity as a racial group to be acculturated and hence assimilated. All this is reflected in the writing, now generally placed under the umbrella term of Expatriate Writing or Diasporic Literature. These terms have now reached a stage of being used synonymously. This term cuts across various disciplines such as Sociology, Cultural Studies, and Political Science etc. On the background of globalization, the term 'Diaspora' raises the questions of acculturation, assimilation, the loss of identity and various shapes and shades of socio-cultural relationships in the society. In fact, relationships are socially and culturally constructed as these provide ample opportunities to understand how social and cultural factors influence human attitude towards, behaviours in and expectations about relationships. Cultural relation is reciprocal, non-coercive transnational interactions between two or more cultures, encompassing a range of activities that are conducted both by state and non-state actors within the space of cultural and civil society.



Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the recent and internationally recognized second generation expatriate writers who belong to this cultural spectrum. Jhumpa Lahiri is a brilliant author, who won the Pulitzer Prize in the year 2000 for her *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Born of Bengali Parents in 1967, she is an Indian American author. Her first novel *The Namesake* (2003) made her more popular and was adapted into the popular film of the same name. She was born Nilanjana Sudeshna, which she says are both "good names", but goes by her nickname Jhumpa. Her second short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) has again established her as one of the most excellent fictionists of the world.

Her latest novel *The Lowland* is shortlisted for Man Booker Prize, 2013. Lahiri has won DSC PRIZE for South Asian Literature in recently held Jaipur Litfest 2015. Through her



writings, Lahiri interprets the diasporic sensibility of the immigrants, who struggle hard to get assimilated after having been dislocated in their new environs. Apart from diasporic sensibility, Lahiri has also dealt with human relationship in socio-cultural form, victimization of helpless women through her writings. Lahiri has convincingly shown the need to go 'beyond' the manmade boundaries like culture, religion, race, nation and acknowledge the universal aspect of human effort to move from periphery to the centre-stage through her writings.

Jhumpa Lahiri faithfully depicted identity crisis of the first and second generation expatriates in her first novel *The Namesake*. This crisis is dealt through immigrant's families and their internal and socio-cultural interactions with the people of the foreign country. Much of the part of the novel revolves around the metaphor of the title which is the most fundamental part of an individual's identity. In fact, Gogol Ganguli's struggle for searching his identity is dual. The name that ultimately defines a person's individuality becomes a trouble for him. It does not give him an identity but puts him in a dilemma, about his original identity. Secondly, as a child of immigrants in America, he continuously has to struggle with conflicts arising due to his Indian roots. Gogol has had to negotiate two very different cultures throughout his life, as well as a third brought about by his name. Ashima also struggles with her alienation and displacement in her initial days only to find a new identity of transnational woman at the end of the novel. The novel filmitized by Mira Nair also traces out the struggles, strifes and interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships of Ashoke, Moushmi, Sonia as the readers find them in different stages of their diasporic problems.

Lahiri's latest novel *The Lowland* presents a blend of history and family life. It is shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2013. Sketched on a large canvas, the novel depicts multigenerational story revolving around the personal choices and destiny. The novel reflects the 21st century globalised, multicultural and transnational 'diasporic' culture. This 'diasporic' culture is, to some extent, different from the traditional practice of culture. This culture is hybrid, heterogeneous and a plural one. It deals with the theme of socio-cultural aspects of human relationships. The first generation diaspora like Subhash Mitra, Gauri Mitra and Narasimhan; the second generation diaspora like Gauri's daughter Bela; and others adapt the Unites States' cultural traits: liberal dress code, free and unconventional sex-orientation, lack of familial bonds, and other liberal, independent life styles. The novel also explores political history of Naxalite movement and its effects on Mitra family in the backdrop of diasporic predicament of characters striving to cope up with problems of familial



relationships and interconnectedness between people. The author focuses emotional tangles of the characters and establishes the need for better emotional connection between them to resolve conflicts and problems of mutual adjustment. Though *The Lowland* cannot be considered as a diasporic literature in its full and usual sense of the term, one can certainly trace out diasporic predicament with its concomitant strifes in which the characters are seen involved in multiple relationships negotiating their personal decisions and destiny.

Lahiri's second short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* departs from the earlier one as Lahiri's characters embark on new stages of development. These stories scrutinize the fate of the second and third generation immigrants. As succeeding generations become increasingly assimilated into American culture and are comfortable in constructing perspectives outside of their country of origin, Lahiri's fiction shifts to the central needs of the individual. Through the eight stories of this collection, Lahiri deftly scrutinizes the minute details of all types of relationship such as father-daughter, brother-sister, husband-wife. She convincingly explores several dimensions and multiple shades of every human relation in a cross-border situation. She studies the various conflicts and acquisitions, demands and dilemmas and the confusions and contradictions of every relation.

In all these works Jhumpa Lahiri has dealt with the themes of cultural identity and the problem of generations - of Indian parents and their children growing up in America while facing demands of their parents who are nostalgic about things and memories of Indian society and the pressures of American life and this society's ways, values and norms. These conflicting norms and values as regards life's important affairs like love and marriage find effective expression in her stories- both short and long. In the treatment of these themes she looks for cross- cultural marriages and even there she explores the possibility of accommodation and adjustment and thereby the happiness of home and family. Several writers of today generally deal with themes of broken families, women's emancipation related tales of oppression and sexual violence or of gender identities explained by many as Colonial / Postcolonial experiences, expectations and encounters and cultural conflicts due to East-West encounters. Jhumpa Lahiri seems instead not to bother for what is in currency, rather what sells today is what is her concern with a systematic purpose to tell her readers that life demands understanding, maturity and marital success leading to the creation of a powerful self and resonant identity. It may be this leading concern behind Lahiri's art that makes her stories immensely readable and she loads them with the virtue of a different kind.



Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize winning *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) with its nine stories give the readers the subtle way in which the fictionist probes into various maladies that disrupt relationship between protagonists and precipitate disoriented identity while living in Exile. As they cope up with life in the new world, their emotional turmoil continues to be the focus of Lahiri's attention. Being an immigrant herself, Lahiri makes her soul searching study very absorbing, interpreting maladies as the dynamics of culture and a quest for identity where diaspora continue to daunt her characters and their life.

The Diasporic situation presents hybridity, a dialogically interlinked plurality of social voices or 'heteroglossia'. Kathleen Kerr speaks of conjoining of "ethnic identity with that of the national culture (which) is not an attempt at assimilation within the dominant culture, but the preservation of an imagined homogeneous ethnicity attached ... to a distant homeland. Here is evolved a unique in- between sensibility created from the conjoining of the two cultures"( Kathleen Kerr 378). Diaspora protagonists are divided between the two cultures- their native culture and the acculturated one. The expressions in Jhumpa's works are replete with the images of loss and longing, the narratives are necessarily the narratives of pain.

In '*A Temporary Matter*' the relationship between the Indian couple Shobha and Shukumar begins to break up after Shobha delivered a stillborn child. Shukumar and Shobha, a second- generation couple of Bengali origin living in Boston are Physically and emotionally estranged. Their malady is failure in communication in emotional stress. Shukumar out of his deep love for shobha kept the secret of the child's sex from her, leading to break down in relationship. When the malady is treated with true revelation while playing the game of confessions in the dark, the battle is won by both as the story ends in mutual sharing of pain of loss. "She came back to the table and sat down, and after a moment Shukumar joined her. They wept together, for the things they now knew"<sup>3</sup>. It was indeed a small temporary matter that brought about the crisis and the resolution.

"*The interpreter of Maladies*" is centred on a second generation Indian American couple Mr. and Mrs. Das on a tour of India with their three children. Their marital life is on the rocks manifested in their shattered identities and even bickering on small matters. The tour guide Mr. Kaposi's faltering marriage comes in contrast to the couple in conflict. Mr. Kaposi realizes that this family is as foreign as his other clients "Mr. Das squeezed hands like an American so that Mr. Kaposi felt it in his elbow. Mrs. Das, for her part, had flexed one side of her mouth, smiling dutifully at Mr. Kaposi, without displaying any interest in him"<sup>4</sup>. Coming to know of his regular profession as an interpreter of Maladies of Patients to a doctor



as translator, she finds him quite romantic and intoxicating. As the story unfolds glimpses of uneasy detachment and disinterestedness displayed by both the husband and the wife, especially the latter, suggests that probably there are more stories hidden beneath the apparent cozy family picture that meets the eye. Every adult in the story has a malady of one's own. Occasionally, it seems that both the husband and the wife, though are bound to share a common Physical space, do not really share minimum mental space.

'The Third and Final continent' brings Lahiri's interpreting the Maladies of her protagonist to a fitting conclusion with its first person Indian narrator who undergoes the pangs of immigration to England and then to U.S.A. When he has adopted himself to his life in England, he has to come to work in the US as a librarian. Searching for a house for him and his newly wedded wife, he gets in contact with an eccentric 103 years old Mrs. Croft. When Mrs. croft meets Mala, the man's wife, she is full of praises for her after scrutinizing her carefully and saying, "She is a perfect lady!"<sup>5</sup> The old woman brought the couples together as the distance between them began to shrink. When she died, he mourned her death in admiration for a woman who taught him to live happily in between continents and cultures. Whenever his son was distraught, he reminded him how he survived on three continents proving no obstacles are inscrutable.

Jhumpa's works need not be read only as works of social documentation. Her works deal with human conditions interpreting maladies in the life of a dislocated individual with broken identity. They like genuine works of art have suffused covertly how to come to terms with life to live in peace. They are imbued with poetic sensibility where she has been successful in transmitting her experiences turning them into aesthetically pleasing works. In *The Namesake*, Lahiri makes her Protagonist Ashoke emerge out of Gogol's overcoat, a man in exile and diaspora, attempting to build a dream for his family. Lahiri portrays the tension between the family tradition and individual freedom. The central characters of the novel are woven to highlight the social and cultural polarities. The novel tells about the life of a young Bengali couple- ashoke Ganguli and his wife Ashima in American in late 1960. Ashoke's choice of America as a residential place is driven by his strong desire for a better career, to live an affluent life while that of Ashima is quite out of compulsion, not of choice.

Ashoke gives the name Gogol to his newly born son in honour of the great Russian short story writer Nikolai Gogol, reading of whose story " the overcoat" he believed he had saved himself from a horrible train accident. But in attaining adolescence Gogol begins to hate his name, thinks it ties him down to his parents' culture, to his family's past and blocks



his way to assimilate into American life and culture, thereby Gogol becomes a split personality. He feels a loner and suffers from a sense of alienation. He turns into a rebel due to clash between generations over their attitudes, approaches to the way of life and outlook of the host country. This creates a sordid conflict between him and his parents and aggravates, what Bhabha says, the 'tension of difference, the difference of the historical and geographical past and present.' Gogol changed his name as Nikhil.

Gogol's affairs with Ruth, a hippie girl and Maxine, the Manhattan girl, is not liked by his parents on moral grounds since in Indian context love and marriage are taken as a sacred bond. This is the reason why Gangulis prefer Gogol to marry Moushumi, an Indian girl, for her multicultural background. The happiness of marital life depends on mutual trust and any breach of this may invite a rift in conjugal happiness. Moushumi immolated her personal ethics in the fire of passion. Infidelity is the cardinal sin despised in every religion and belief. Gogol realizes that after his mother is gone, the name Gogol Ganguli will vanish from the lips of his loved ones and so, "cease to exist."<sup>7</sup> His loss is much more at the end; his wife has deserted him, his father is dead and his mother too leaves him to lead an independent existence. He is thus lonely, distressed and displaced- Indeed in an unenviable position. To Ashoke, the name Gogol meant- a new life. Quoting Dostoyevsky's comment " we all came out of Gogol's overcoat," Ashoke had told his son, "It will make sense to you one day."<sup>8</sup> The novel ends with Gogol reading Nikolai Gogol's ' The Overcoat' - the book offered to him by his father as a birthday gift - and this indicates a new beginning of his life.

Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* reveals a yawning gap between two generations in the eight stories through multiple relationships. If pain of alienation and an acute consciousness of it glorify and enrich human experience on this earth, then Lahiri's quotation from Hawthorne's ' The Custom-House' is an appropriate prologue - " Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn out soil."<sup>9</sup> There is a wish for children to strike their roots into unaccustomed earth, but the hope that their fortunes remain within the control of the parents is a for cry. The book climaxes with a trilogy of stories viz. 'once in a lifetime; 'year's end' and ' Going Ashore; ending in a tragic love story of two young Indian Americans. The book *Unaccustomed Earth* has the earth as its canvas. Bengal is certainly there, but what is always there is a more insistent and deeper awareness in the stories of this volume. Lahiri like Hawthorne says that the whole of the earth is available for the humanity to explore and cultivate for purposes of making it habitable. In 'Hell-Heaven,' the assimilated Bengali -





American narrator considers how little thought she once gave to her mother's sacrifices as she reconstructs the tormenting unrequited passion her young mother has for a graduate student during the narrator's childhood. In "only goodness," an older sister learns a sharp lesson about the limits of her responsibility to a self-destructive younger brother. The title story 'Unaccustomed Earth,' weaving the fabrics of a father-daughter relation, casts light on the extent of solitude the characters experience in the process of executing their relational duty. The story commences with the prospect of the visit of Ruma's father to her home at Seattle. It is the influence of modern Western family pattern that puts Ruma in dilemma despite her Indian origin. However, very soon she realizes that her father turns out to be a great help, rather than a burden.

Jhumpa Lahiri as the omniscient observer applies the predicament of her characters to interpret the maladies gnawing into their immigrant life. It is in the backdrop of diasporic problems that Lahiri examines the quest for identity and issues of familial relationships and inter connectedness between people. Lahiri in her unique artistic way shows to the world how best it could come to terms with itself- by accustoming itself to the culture and climate that smells with and spreads the fragrance of love.

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