

Alienation and assimilation in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction

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Abstract

This Research Article, *Alienation and Assimilation in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction* is a literary work that aims to analyse historical/temporal and cultural/spatial features in the works of Indian-American (Jhumpa Lahiri).

Diaspora studies, generally, discuss the nature of exile, nostalgia, memory, alienation, inbetweenness and identity crisis. It explores the two key terms Assimilation and Alienation that Diaspora writing has thrown up. The research talks about the juxtaposition of past and present.

Cultural perspectives are implied in traditions and the characters' attempts to survive culturally as revealed in the works mentioned, as well as the spaces of the home country and the settled country. This article explains the general features of Diaspora such as nostalgia, discrimination, survival, cultural change and identity and focuses on the Novel and Short Stories that follow the general characteristics of diaspora literature.

It also focuses on the Writer's efforts to consciously or unconsciously utilize time and space in order to deal with possibly fractured consciousness and split identities. It explains the significance of such a study as a possible area of focus in diaspora writing.

Keywords: diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri, alienation, assimilation, cultural change, identity, cultural perspective

Introduction

Nilanjana Sudeshna "Jhumpa" Lahiri is an American author. Lahiri has been selected as the winner of the 29th PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short story. Lahiri's debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) [3] won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003) [6], was adapted into the popular film of the same name. Lahiri is a member of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, appointed by U.S. President Barack Obama. Her book *The Lowland*, published in 2013, was a nominee for the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award for Fiction. Lahiri is currently a professor of creative writing at Princeton University.

Lahiri's works are representative of a combination of her absorbing concern for the moral and psychological truth related to the immigrant's discontentment with the outstanding literary qualities which makes her writings – supple, elegant, economical, ironic and compassionate, marvellously capturing the nuances and minutely observed details.

"Her stories bring out the predicament of Indians who trapeze between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind and the other, encountered but not necessarily assimilated"-remarks Aruti Nayar.

With its characters poised between the old world of India and the unnerving newness of America, Jhumpa Lahiri's prize winning collection of short stories, the *Interpreter of Maladies*, reveals her commendable grasp of biculturalism and authoritative grace.

"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.

Her works remain a subtle evocation of the warm and complex portrayal of family life and Indian immigrants trying to saddle two cultures – their Indian Heritage and The American Dream. Lahiri introduces us to people who left behind family and friends and the familiar heat and bustle of India to build a new life in America – a cold, bleak land of strangers and new customs. Lahiri's subject is the loneliness of dislocation, cultural displacement, sense of identity and belonging with one foot in two worlds, imbued with the fine details of both Indian and American cultures.

Lahiri's stories describe with universal compassion, the fragmentation of identities, the alienation and sense of loneliness experienced by all immigrants, giving voice to their anguish and probing into their complex psychoses. The sense

of loss and longing that permeates other Indians abroad and the details of displacement are brought out in her works.

Lahiri's major concern is the question of identity which is always a difficult one, but more so for those who are culturally displaced, like the immigrants are, of those who grow up simultaneously. The Interpreter of Maladies is a collection of nine stories, depicting the trauma and angst of the first generation and second generation Indian migrants to the United States. The themes range from emotional struggle of love to immigrants battling new worlds. Her stories are marked by a sense of alienation, longing, loss and hope which so often mark the immigrant experience, and which form a part of what she, her parents and friends too experienced as fellow immigrants. Though most of the stories in this collection have an American setting, India, especially Calcutta keeps rearing its head in the memory of its characters. Her earliest stories – A real Durvan, The treatment of Bibi Haldar and The Interpreter of Maladies, are set in India. The first two stories centre around women living on the fringes of the Society, and are exploited by their own people. India continues to form a part of the fictional landscape, as Lahiri draws heavily on the memories of her parents to depict an India, she did not know.

Her stories though set in America, are full of details of traditional Indian name, food, cooking and wardrobe giving character and an Indian flavour to her stories. A real Durvan tells of Boori Ma, a stairwell sweeper deported to Calcutta after partition. We see her bemoaning her fate in a voice "brittle with sorrows, as tart as curds, and shrill enough to grate meat from a coconut".

Lahiri brings out the pathos of her situation with gentle sympathy. In a mite infested quilt, broom and keys, tied along to reminiscence the earliest easier times. She would enumerate, the losses suffered since her deportation, narrating the fictional account of her days spent in a clover. "crouched instead in doorways and hallways and observing gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city," Boori Ma is thrown out by the residents, after a theft because now the building needed a "Real Durvan."

The title story, The Interpreter of Maladies is about a young affluent American couple tracing their Indian Heritage under the guidance of Mr. Kapasi, their English speaking Indian Guide. The focus keeps shifting between the guide's observation about this family of non-resident Indians and the visitor's impressions of this vast, unruly fascinating country. Essentially an interlude between Mina Das and Mr. Kapasi, the tourist Guide who doubles up as an interpreter of the maladies afflicting patients for a doctor since there are lots of Gujarati's, Mr. Kapasi acts as a channel between a Doctor and his patients. The polarity of vision is achieved by Lahiri with the help of her own impressions of India, when she used to come to India along with her parents as a child.

The treatment of Bibi Haldar presents again, a maltreated shop girl who dreams of winning a husband and surprises us with her unusual tenacity. The story has much to say about the idea of sexuality, and specifically one's own agency in establishing it. It is determined that Bibi, an older woman with seemingly incurable disease that causes fits of seizures, should marry in an attempt at a cure. The community sees her as a sexual object for the first time after doctors make this suggestion. They, "imagined the contours below her house coat, and attempted to appraise the pleasures she could offer a man".

Lahiri says that "for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world is more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, 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". *

Her next category of stories, When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine, Mrs. Sen and The Third and the Final Continent present the immigrant's struggle to survive in this world where they try to fight their homesickness, and also convey the nostalgia for their own country which they have left behind. These stories provocatively present Lahiri's concern for the fading of origins. The Third and Final continent has as its protagonist, an immigrant from India who exclaims about his survival in New World: "I know that my achievement is quite ordinary," he admits, "I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home and certainly I am not the first. Still there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. These lines express a universal experience – the experience of all immigrants who yearn for a home, who yearn to belong and who yearn to be rooted.

Based on the life of her own father, *The Third and Final Continent* tells of a young man who came to US, has an arranged marriage in India and writes about his new wife and their life together. Through the eyes of a young Indian, the narrator experiences the cultural difference between the young man and his aging landlady.

Mrs. Sen and When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine both have child observers – it is an American child Eliot, in Mrs. Sen and Lilia in *When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine*, who inevitably remind us of Lahiri's own experiences of growing up as an immigrant's child.

Mrs. Sen has reluctantly accompanied her Professor husband who has come to teach Mathematics at an American University shares her isolation with young Eliot. Mrs. Sen the baby sitter is seen through the eyes of Eliot, an eleven year old left in her charge. Back home in Calcutta, people think that she lives like a queen in a palace. Her refusal to learn driving which she needs to learn if she is to keep her job is a gesture of resistance she offers to a new life. Her loneliness is conveyed through the manner in which she waits for the letters and listens to Cassettes of Bengali speaking people and narrates accounts of Calcutta life to Eliot.

When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine is about an Indian American Lilia, who sees the similarity between her Bengali parents and Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani from Dacca. She is intrigued by the visitor whose watch is set to Dacca time. In search of compatriots, her parents used to trail their fingers at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world oblivious of the war between India and Pakistan; she is equally oblivious of the differences between a Bengali Muslim and a Hindu. Her world concerns just the American history and geography and so engrossed was she with the maps of the thirteen colonies that she couldn't have even imagined how the intrigues thousands of miles away could affect her parents.

A Temporary matter, Sexy and This Blessed House bear a great closeness to Lahiri's own personal experiences. *A Temporary Matter* is a story of a young couple, Shukumar and Shobha, who

have drifted apart after losing their child in a miscarriage. Neither of them have the capacity to provide emotional anchorage to the other. Both deliberately avoid each other. One day they find a small note in their mailbox, indicating that the electricity would remain disconnected for a few hours, everyday for a week. In the enforced darkness the couple finds a pretext for discovering their latent, subconscious fears and dark secrets, and also about their "little betrayals". By the time the week is over, the couple reaches a point of no return and Shobha, the breadwinner walks out on Shukumar who at thirty five hasn't progressed beyond being a student. There is a reversal of gender roles here with Shukumar doing all the cooking and cleaning, and being blamed for the miscarriage, whereas in India the mother would bear all the responsibility.

Sexy chronicles the extra marital love affair of an Indian with a Caucasian Woman, told from a Non-Indian perspective. Miranda, amid western woman has an affair with a married Bengali. Miranda's childhood memory of a reaction to a painting of Goddess Kali, evoking trepidation and horror does not deter her in anyway. She tries to learn all about Bengali culture and even makes an abortive bid to learn Bengali, though before her marriage she had ridiculed his family as the only Indian family in the neighbourhood.

This Blesses House presents Twinkle, a second generation immigrant, who along with her husband moves into a new house in US. Twinkle is too attached to the articles found in the house, connected to Christianity. Sanjeev, the husband, however, wants her to do away with all such objects though Twinkle does not want to part with them. She ironically calls herself a "good little Hindu" and places "a kiss on top of Christ's head and then placed the statue on the fire place." Lahiri captures the joie de vivre of Twinkle beautifully and realistically.

The Namesake illuminates Lahiri's signature themes: the immigrant experience, the clash of cultures and the tangled ties between generations. She deals with the theme of the uneasy status of the immigrant, rediscovery of his roots and finding an identity in a country that will treat you as an alien even if you are born there. She shows the limited spaces of Bengali immigrants in the Boston area, their peculiarly lonely lives with extended families made up of fellow expatriates.

Her novel *The Name sake* deals with the tribulations of the immigrants in an alien land, the yearnings of exile and the emotional bafflement of cross cultural dilemmas. The novel continues to develop further the themes of cultural alienation and loss of identity. She tries to incarcerate the experiences and cultural dilemmas of 30 year struggle for the Ganguli family, for their integration and assimilation into alien. Lahiri's protagonists are the continental immigrants but they endure cultural introspection. They have their conflict of consciousness between two selves- the native and the foreign. They have their journey towards home and identity, being recognized as unsettling race through alienation, cultural conflict and hybrid culture. By carefully delineating the selves of her tormented characters she has imparted universality to their themes. Thus her narratives are the real social documents on tormented souls not with the usual sound and fury but rather through imaginative reconstructions.

The Namesake chronicles the life of Gogul Ganguli from his birth in the 1960s to the present. The Novel begins by tracing the emotional struggles, of an Indian couple trying to make a

new life in America. Ashima Ganguli, the pregnant wife longs to be with the family during childbirth. When she goes to the hospital for her delivery, she feels the cravings for her country. Ashoke, Ashima's husband wants to provide a better life for his new son by earning a doctorate degree from a prestigious American University but Ashima's love of family makes her create a close knit web of immigrants who share a common language and practice common customs. Whereas, Ashima is reluctant to accept the American culture and resists all things American, Ashoke adapts himself less warily to the American Culture.

Ashoke impulsively settles for the name Gogol for his son, after the famous Russian Writer whose book of short stories helped save his life during that accident when his train got derailed, he was reading that book and rescuers spotted him only because they saw a page flutter from his hands in the dark. The children of Ashoke Gogol and Sonia resent their childhood trips to India and are more comfortable with their American Culture.

As Gogol grows older, his attempts to eradicate his heritage become more pronounced. Hence, when it comes to joining college, he accepts a position at Yale, not at his father's alma mater. Gogol hates his name which is neither American nor Indian and has some old depressing associations.

"He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian. At times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, manages nevertheless to distress him physically, like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear." (Pg.76)

Soon Gogol changes his name to Nikhil, yet he is not able to shake his past life off. Gogol grows up, moves out, and goes through life suffering personal tragedies that also shape his identity. After graduating and going through a number of relationships with American girls, his father's sudden death, forces Gogol to look back into his own culture that he dismissed.

The marriage with a fellow Bengali American Moushumi Majoomdar ends in a disaster. Gogol learns that his clumsy attempts to create a coherent identity for himself are what in the end define him.

"Things that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endures in the end." (Pg. 287)

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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