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Diasporic Elements in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland*, traces the fate of tender fraternal bonds torn asunder by violent politics. Lahiri's delineation of the narrative events purports to show how the absence of loved ones becomes covertly a portent haunting presence within the subconscious mind of the affected characters directing their overt actions to their own consequential ways of life through which they are goaded on. When their respective paths crisscross, Lahiri proves herself to be adept at depicting the unhappiness at the core of the intricate interpersonal relations that materializes. This write-up attempts to grasp the import of this novel by situating the author's unique presence both in the post millennium Indian English fiction as well as in the fabric of the narrative. Its analytical method moves from an elaborate study of the tortuous plot through a network of characterization, scrutiny of the multiplex narration leading to a medley of themes that have contemporary appeal.

Key Words: plot- characterization - narrative technique - thematic dimensions

Introduction: Indian novelists are muscling into the ranks of top English-language writers, making their way onto the best-seller lists and snapping up a disproportionate share of the literary awards. Names such as Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Chandra, Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga, and Salman Rushdie are just those who come to the minds of the readers without effort. Within this pantheon of literary achievers, the Indian-American writer Jhumpa Lahiri fits comfortably. Lahiri first made her name with the quiet, meticulously observed stories about Indian immigrants trying to adjust to new lives in the United States, stories that had the hushed intimacy of chamber music. Navigating between the Indian traditions they have inherited and the baffling new world, the characters in the first collection of short stories entitled *The Interpreter of Maladies*, (1999) which won

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the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, seek love beyond the barriers of culture and generations. In her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003) which was made into a popular film, Lahiri enriches the themes that made her first collection an international bestseller: the immigrant experience, the clash of cultures, the conflicts of assimilation, and, most poignantly, the tangled ties between generations. Here again Lahiri displays her deft touch for the perfect detail - the fleeting moment, the turn of phrase - that opens whole worlds of emotion. Then the eight stories which appeared in *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) take us from Cambridge and Seattle to India and Thailand, as they explore the secrets at the heart of family life. Here they enter the worlds of sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, friends and lovers. *The Lowland* is Lahiri's fourth book. It was shortlisted for the National Book Award in 2013, the Man Booker Prize 2013 and the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction 2014. She was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2012.

Jhumpa Lahiri's writing style seems to represent the perfect example of commitment to capturing the winding development of such a flexible construct whether her shorter or longer pieces are well-documented testimonies of transformation, consciousness and

trajectory under various aspects and over varying periods of time in the history of Indian immigrants as parts of a natural flow of events. Thus, the story of "**Once in a Lifetime**," in the *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), Hema writes to her childhood acquaintance and future lover, Kaushik,

...your parents were older – seasoned immigrants, as mine were not. They had left India in 1962, before the laws welcoming foreign students changed. While my father and the other men were still taking exams, your father already had a PhD, and he drove a car, a silver Saab with bucket seats, to his job at an engineering firm in Andover (224).

Along with this, when parents and children of the first and second or even third generations of Indian immigrants are closely observed, one can find, their adjustment in the new world, their reactions to its commonest features that occur in their very notion of home, and most importantly they often distinguish between cultural inclinations and social behavior.

Apart from this, in the world of Lahiri's characters, though they manage to gain solemnity and position, echoing situations that otherwise tend to be merely left unspoken or just briefly addressed. The mere knowledge of Indian culture and history to American-born immigrants is always an issue separating them from their

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parents. While nostalgia dominates the lives of those who have left India behind and continue to think of it as home, their children have a different sort of representation about a land to which they feel but slightly connected by kinship. Take for instance, Gogol, the Boston-born, college-educated protagonist of *The Namesake* (2003), gives Lahiri the opportunity to theorize upon the matter:

One day he attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English... 'Teleologically speaking, ABCDs are unable to answer the question 'Where are you from?' the sociologist on the panel declares. Gogol has never heard the term ABCD. He eventually gathers that it stands for 'American-born confused deshi'. (118).

Other side of the aspect is that, on a first reading, Jhumpa Lahiri's collection seems to offer an image of the complicated cultural relationships between India and the West. Further investigation one may find the troubled position of the displaced individual caught between two cultures which, in most cases, he/ she finds unfamiliar. On a second, more in-depth reading, most of the characters are on the verge of transgression in order to find their real self. In this respect, Michiko Kakutani observed that "many of Ms. Lahiri's people are Indian immigrants trying to adjust to a new life in the United States, and their cultural displacement is a kind of index of a

more existential sense of dislocation" (48). Honestly speaking, Lahiri's collection seems to resist the stereotypes of Indianness and the clichés associated with the inevitable clash between the East and the West, between past and present, between native and adoptive spaces. However, colourful India is fully clad in a mythical aura by the older members of the family, who miss its genuine charm and unmistakable customs. It is how community develops, as clearly shown on various occasions in *The Namesake* (2003):

As the baby grows, so, too, does their circle of Bengali acquaintances. Through the Nandis, now expecting a child of their own, Ashoke and Ashima meet the Mitras, and through the Mitras, the Banerjees. More than once, pushing Gogol in his stroller, Ashima has been approached on the streets of Cambridge by young Bengali bachelors, shyly enquiring after her origins. Like Ashoke, the bachelors fly back to Calcutta one by one, returning with wives. Every weekend, it seems, there is a new home to go to, a new couple or young family to meet. (38).

On the other hand, the encounter between the East and the West, the migration of individuals across national frontiers is nothing but a pretext for Lahiri to probe deep into the difficulties generated by the encounter between the self and the Other, into the condition of the troubled

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modern self and, more importantly, to investigate human nature. In short, Jhumpa Lahiri's writings develop along the lines of most contemporary fiction, equally interested in the essence of the individual consciousness and in the self as the converging point of various cultural forces, considering both the private and the public spheres and the way in which they interact and influence each other. Therefore, none of her stories exclusively focuses on the encounter between them, but rather on the tension generated by the fact that individuals perforce evolve in both. At this point, Eva Hoffman commented on Lahiri's characters that seem to confirm:

Dislocation is the norm rather than the aberration in our time, but even in the unlikely event that we spend an entire lifetime in one place, the fabulous diverseness with which we live reminds us constantly that we are no longer the norm and the centre (275).

Therefore, honestly to say, it is only the clash between national cultures that represents her main interest, although some of Lahiri's protagonists seem to conform to the typical image of the contemporary migrant. In this respect, according to Salman Rushdie, the individual "severed from his roots, often transplanted into a new language, always obliged to learn the ways of a new community [...] forced to

face the great questions of change and adaptation"

(415). So, it is the case of the protagonist of "*The Third and Final Continent*" in *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) who looks at himself from the very beginning as the typical migrant:

I left India in 1964, with a certificate in commerce and the equivalent, in those days, often dollars to my name... I lived in north London, in Finsbury Park, in a house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like myself...all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad (173).

Further, I would like to say that this particular pattern can be seen in most of Lahiri's stories. And the American environment she describes is not necessarily the one that might be expected from struggling immigrants. Even when money is scarce, there are certain intellectual standards that most of these families seem to meet. The struggle is rather one of a deeper, psychological nature, and it is often women who are portrayed as having a harder time adjusting to the new living conditions. Their fears and dilemmas are all the more distinct as their time is spent almost exclusively in the domestic space, which they rarely manage to appropriate as a real place. So, take for instance, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) in which one may witness the formation of unexpected, even unlikely associations for

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the mere sake of companionship and shared memories:

They became instant friends, spending their days together while our fathers were at work. They talked about the lives they had left behind in Calcutta; your mother's beautiful home in Jodhpur Park, with hibiscus and rosebushes blooming on the rooftop, and my mother's modest flat in Maniktyala, above a grimy Punjabi restaurant, where seven people existed in three small rooms. In Calcutta they would probably have had little occasion to meet. Your mother went to a convent school and was the daughter of one of Calcutta's most prominent lawyers, a pipe-smoking Anglophile and a member of the Saturday Club. (225).

A similar example one can find in the case of Mrs. Sen of "**Mrs. Sen's**" in **Interpreter of Maladies** (1999). When Eliot's mother came to pick him up, Mrs. Sen said to her:

She had grown up eating fish twice a day. She added that in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky. They ate the tail, the eggs, even the head. It was available in any market, at any hour, from dawn until midnight (123-124).

However, no matter how reassuring by means of retrieving and preserving homely

Indian atmosphere through traditional and social customs such as food, clothing, etc on the American soil by the first generation of Indian immigrants as to bridge the gaps what they have left behind, it is rarely fully appreciated by the second, not to mention by complete strangers to the community.

In addition, though the notion of an arranged marriage may sound incomprehensible or quasi-unconceivable to the Western world, it is voluntarily accepted by the Indian community. While parents are usually intent on preserving this custom in the new world, very few of the children are still as conservative as to accept it without questioning their feelings, their wishes, all the new values implanted into their being by the acquired acculturation to a world with changed rules. Even if they are not necessarily critical of the practice as such, they tend to oppose it out of reasons that have to do with growing up in a society which advocates freedom of choice above anything else. Meanwhile, their mothers fear exactly that independence might lead unaccustomed to. In **The Namesake** this trauma is reflected in the mind of Ashima after her arrival in America together with her academic husband:

She is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare (6).

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Interpreter of Maladies:

Mala no longer drapes the end of her sari over head, or weeps at night for her parents, but occasionally she weeps for our son. So we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die (197).

Such passages capture the torment of the immigrant, the paradoxical state of in-between-ness that seems to perpetuate itself through generations. From language to gestures, from the utmost details of everyday life to general perceptions and expectations, every little thing that Americans take for granted is problematic to the newcomers. A relevant example comes from *Unaccustomed Earth* when KD takes his little step-sisters for a treat at Dunkin' Donuts, an all-American favourite.

The language barrier cannot be overlooked in the case of the immigrant experience. In Lahiri's writing, it plays an important part because it is the kind of feature that can either help or prevent integration. Adaptation is seen as both a way of "giving in" to the new culture, and as one of "giving up" various remnants of the old one. A relevant example one can find in *The Namesake*:

Though Ashima continues to wear nothing but saris and sandals from Bata, Ashoke, accustomed to wearing tailor-made pants and shirts all his life, learns to buy ready-made. He trades in fountain-pens for ballpoints, Wilkinson blades and his board-bristled shaving brush for Bic-razors bought six to a pack. Though he is now a tenured full professor, he stops wearing jackets and ties to the university (65).

One may easily argue that Lahiri is writing manifestoes against consumerism and globalization. However, the tone and the attitude are hardly militant. The situations described are rather acknowledgements of change and its stages than mere means of criticism. Lahiri's novels are more about the co-operation of cultures than about confrontation: stereotypes are examined from a number of angles and deconstructed from both sides – Indian and American. Witnessing the preconceived ideas of both communities about each other is a fascinating spectacle. The ways to deal with individual and social clichés are personalized. Though the general tone is mildly melancholic, the solution is many and one of them is mutual understanding and compromise. The fine example comes from *Unaccustomed Earth*:

My mother and I had also made peace; she had accepted the fact that I was not only her daughter but a child of America as well. Slowly, she accepted that I dated one

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American man, and then another [...] She welcomed my boyfriends into our home and when things didn't work out she told me I would find someone better. After years of being idle, she decided, when she turned fifty, to get a degree in library science at a nearby university (81-82).

On the whole, the three volumes mentioned above signed by the Indian-American writer document about dislocation and adjustment to new surroundings both in physical and in psychological terms. And also about redefining homeland that becomes a matter of redefining identity. Thus, the resulting issues are a matter of humanity more than one of race and their meticulous study distinguishes Jhumpa Lahiri among the impressive wave of ethnic writers that has been gaining momentum in recent years. The fact of the matter is that Lahiri's holistic attempt is to see beyond the visible frontiers and to plunge deeper into the

springs of human action, perhaps a new space for a new generation.

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