

Changes and Challenges of Integration in the Select Works of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Jhumpa Lahiri occupies a significant space among the writers of Indian Diaspora like V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Bharathi Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, M. S. Vasanthi, Kiran Desai and others. Lahiri's short story collections *Interpreter of Maladies* won Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000. Then her first novel *The Namesake* (2003), her second volume of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), her second novel *The Lowland* (2013) and other fiction and non-fiction works including *The Long Way Home* and *Cooking Lessons* form part of Lahiri's literary corpus.

In 1999, Lahiri published her first short story collection entitled *Interpreter of Maladies*. It dealt with the issues of Indians or Indian immigrants, including their generation gaps in understanding and values. The protagonist in *The Third and Final Continent*, the last of the *Interpreter of Maladies*, is based on Jhumpa's father, librarian Amar Lahiri. While American critics praised the short story collection, Indian critics were hot and cold. Some of them felt that the collection represented Indians negatively. *Interpreter of Maladies* was awarded the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Lahiri published her first novel, *The Namesake*, originally a novella in *The New Yorker*. It is the story of the Ganguli family, comprised of parents who immigrated to the United States from Calcutta and of their children, Gogol and Sonia, raised in the USA. The story follows the family over the course of thirty years in Calcutta, Boston and New York. She

published another collection; Lahiri broke from her previous literary focus on first-generation Indian immigrants to the United States and their family problems.

The stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* focus instead on the second and third generations of immigrants and their assimilation into the cultures of the United States. Lahiri has published many short stories in *The New Yorker* including *Cooking Lessons: The Long way home* in 2004; *Improvisations: Rice* in 2009, and *Reflections: Notes from a literary Apprenticeship* in 2011. She has won many awards, including the Transatlantic Award from the Hen field Foundation (1993), the O. Henry Award for the short story “*Interpreter of Maladies*” (1999), the PEN/Hemingway Award for the Best Fiction Debut of the year for the *Interpreter of Maladies* collection, and most recently the Frank O’Connor international short story Award (2008) and the Asian American literary Award (2009), both for *Unaccustomed Earth*.

The two short story collections namely *The Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* and the novel *The Namesake* are mainly concerned with the diasporic post-colonial situation of the lives of Indians and Indian-Americans whose hyphenated Indian identity has led them to be caught between the Indian traditions that they have left behind and a totally different western world that they have to face culminating in a struggle to adjust between the two cultures. All the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri have a common motif of exclusion, loneliness and the search for fulfillment.

They depict the experience of the Indian female immigrants belonging to the first and second generations who are afflicted with scars and traumas to their national, ethnic cultural, and gender identities when they intersect with the alien culture setting in the United States. The first generation immigrants who are firmly grounded in the Indian ethos struggle desperately to negotiate their identity and cultural tradition in the context of an alien culture of the host country. The first generation immigrants, who share the same homeland culture, form communities so that they can hold on to their roots by creating the familiar sort of surroundings by way of dress, food, narrating stories etc. They try to extend the same sense of community among the second and third generation immigrants who are raised in alien culture. Some of the immigrants, through continuous process of assimilation, melt in to the main stream culture and gradually disappear as a distinct community. Till such stage is reached the immigrants have to pass through a painful process of adjustment encountering scars and traumas to their identities. Between the two polarities of native identity and alien identity there are hybrid and liminal identities in the Post-colonial social spaces. In the hybrid versions of identity the two opposite cultures are “commingled and inter woven into an indeterminable many-as-one”; it is being both one and the other through invasion of borderlines. There is also the liminal identity which is an in-between space where the self/other polarity is constantly threatened, the frontiers are transgressed. People are made to exist in a liminal space, a suspension between two cultures that creates “Un-

homelines”. To be unhomed is not to feel at home even when you are in your home because you are not at home in yourself. The characters that exist in this space have internalized the ethos of the culture they were raised in, yet they have to deal with the palimpsest of their culture of origin.

A close scrutiny of Jhumpa Lahiri’s works reveal the tenuous journey of the female subjects of the Indian Diaspora who strive to construct their identity, subjectivity and agency through various means like acculturation, resistance, assimilation, silence and other adaptation process. Till they melt into the main stream culture and gradually disappear as a distinct community the immigrants find themselves in various stages of transformation experiencing disjunction and alienation in their soul.

Mrs. Sen, the first generation immigrant (The interpreter of maladies) who is obsessed with her own cultural background and homeland values shows initial resistance to the culture of the host county and creates a sense of community by narrating her life in Calcutta, by cooking Bengal food, and by collecting colourful sarees from her homeland which not only provide escape from the present but also act as blocks in her way of transition and acceptance. But she opens up herself to the culture of the other in order to survive in her new environment -her initiative in learning car driving, her pronunciation of the word Beethoven all pointing to the process of acculturation which marks ‘acceptance and adaptation of basic elements of local cultures’, its language and life style. Mrs. Sen attains a new diasporic identity so that she can embrace her new life.

Sanjeev and Twinkle in ‘This Blessed House’ are husband and wife representing the first and second generation immigrants. They are in the different stages of their transformative identities. As a first generation immigrant like Mrs. Sen, Sanjeev is a manifestation of liminality where in the culture of the other is dreaded whereas Twinkle, a second generation immigrant who was raised in the United states represents a state of hybridity where in the culture of the other is assimilated. So she is able to positively negotiate her identity as an American of Indian descent unlike Sanjeev, a typical Hindu, and showing resentment in keeping the Christian artifacts in his house. She asserts ‘we are good little Hindus’ but also leaves ‘a kiss on top of Christ’s head. Twinkle is far superior to other immigrants in that she does not involve herself in the cycle of escape or in a total otherness. She has passed through the threshold of liminality into the hybrid space which encourages her to be at ease with the culture of the other transcending boundaries of threat and confusion which are the hall marks of cross culture conflict.

There are immigrants who are ambivalent with regard to the native and alien cultures. The character Kaushik in ‘Hema and Kaushik’ from Unaccustomed Earth is marked by two migrations: the first one where he is born in the United states migrates to India with his parents

and the second one where he returns with his parents to the united states leaving Kaushik an external wanderer who is most comfortable in his unhomeliness. But the irony is he is identified as an Indian first everywhere he went. The concept of post-colonial subject becomes suspect. In the story ‘Hell Heaven’ Pranab kaku marries Deborah much against his parent’s consent and he identifies himself with the American culture at the cost of the parents’ culture and the parents. The story of Miranda, a female American protagonist in the story ‘Sexy’ shows that it is not always the immigrant other who is victimized but also the native self can fall prey to the process of othering. She gets involved in an affair with a married Indian named Dev. Instead of confrontation which usually threatens the native self and the immigrants other there is an appeal and mutual attraction in between. Upon meeting Dev, Miranda gets fascinated towards Indian culture she goes to Indian grocery, Indian Restaurant to learn more about Indian culture. This interest makes the native self-open and receptive to the other so that an ideal relationship of self/other is negotiated with no trace of narcissism in the creation of the other. But the response of Dev (the other) is not open as the native self. He sees her as an exotic woman of high sexual appeal and nothing more. So there is no space for the other to exist. The story ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’ shows how Bibi Haldar an Indian woman who is a victim of both destitution and homelessness is doomed to otherness in her own homeland. She is unable to fit into the ethnic cultural codes.

The Indian notion of femininity which requires a female to be beautiful and healthy aspects of which Bibi is deprived of hybrid identity. She has become a mother without being a wife a half state of both this and that. Bibi the boundaries of the self/other and initiates an act of negotiation between both.

This research paper will draw on ideas, theories, and key concepts of two post-colonial theorists, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak whose concerns with post-colonial identity crisis and the predicament of female subaltern make them most relevant and beneficial to the present study. By allowing the female subaltern to be Voiced Lahiri’s stories create a space through which the subaltern can speak.

Finally this Research article gains significance in that the centrality of focusing on the male as a primary trope is displaced and elided in favour of female diasporic subjects. It offers a more nuanced interpretation and focused study directed at highlighting the identity crisis of those often unvoiced and elided diasporic female subjects as depicted in the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri.

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