

## Minority Voices in a Multicultural Context: Jhumpa Lahiri

M. Habib, Research Scholar

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Jhumpa Lahiri

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### Abstract

The Objectives of the study is to analyses the significance of minority writing in a multicultural context. Does it offer a corrective/ validation to mainstream representation of sub-cultural groups in America? How does Jhumpa Lahiri confront the issue of her own specific heritage and diasporic identity? How does Jhumpa Lahiri explore the cultural collision of Indian immigrants with America and how does she address the questions of cultural integration and exclusion in her stories.

**Key Words:** diasporic group, female writers, Indian immigrants, Jhumpa Lahiri, minority writing, multicultural society, and United States.

## **Introduction**

In today's world the marginalized groups and Minority voices are increasingly assuming the centre stage. They are gaining ascendancy in the literary sphere too, resulting in a questioning of present power equations and refashioning of present hierarchies. For example, the demographic and cultural fabric of a multicultural American society is being re-formed and re-defined by sub-cultural groups like Native Indians, Blacks and other immigrant and ethnic minorities. Significant creative writing from the United States in recent years has come from these sub-cultural groups unprecedented visibility who are gaining. Writing has been used by them as a solid medium to assert their presence, reclaim their racial history and cultural heritage and examine hegemonies prevailing. Present theoretical focus is also on the patterns and dynamics of cultural act of including or excluding. Relationships between historical, political, and cultural aspects of society are being rethought and re-analyzed while issues related to individual and communal identity are being debated.

## **Growing Population of South Asian Writers in the United States**

In America's diverse population a significant ethnic group comprises of South-Asians. Lured by American Dream, over the years millions of South Asians have migrated to the 'land of opportunity.' They too have altered the complexion and character of the United State, like other immigrants, and have been altered in turn.

From this diasporic group creative writers have tried to explore what Bill Ashcroft calls in another context "the relationship between self and place." These writers by concerning themselves largely with the relationship of South Asians with America have opted to chronicle the highly nuanced and complicated process of acculturation. Remarks' Ketu H Kartark that, "South-Asian American writers in English are among the newest voices in multi-ethnic Asian America".

## **South Asian Women Writers and Their Creative Fiction**

The novel and short story in general terms have been predominant though greater dramatists and poets are emerging. In particular, South Asian women writers in America have produced a greater impact than their male counterparts. Some of the South-Asian women writers

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who have gained international recognition are Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Meena Alexander, Uma Parmeshwaran, Bapsi Sidhwa, Chitra Banerjee and Tahira Naqvi.

The writings of these women writers come up from and charts those vibrant moments where “a diasporic aggregation of flows and convergences” occurs frequently. They engage with the adaptations, transformation and translations associated in their work with the immigrant experience and address the issue of representation in mainstream White American writing.

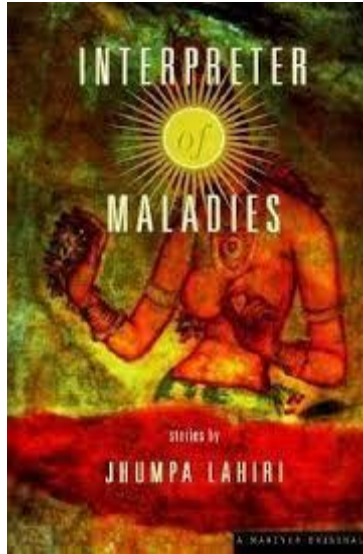
### **Jhumpa Lahiri’ Place**

As a South Asian American writer Jhumpa Lahiri has won acclaim who navigates a double identity at a personal and creative level. Straddling two cultures, Jhumpa Lahiri explores the experience immigrant, tries to deal with the problems of adjustment in the New World and voices the predicaments accompanying physical and cultural relocation and dislocation.

Jhumpa Lahiri, of Indian origin, grew up in America. Her short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and addresses the problems in the lives of Indian immigrants. Her first novel *The Namesake* (2003) moves on with an exploration of an Indian-American identity. *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) achieved the rare distinction of debuting at number one on *The New York Times* best seller list. Her latest novel *The Lowland* (2013) was a nominee for the Man Booker Prize and National Book Award for Fiction. Here again, she concerns herself with two worlds---America and India.

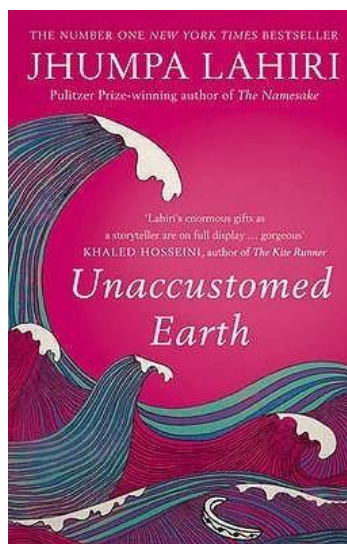
### **Importance of Minority Writing in USA**

The importance of minority writing in multicultural America cannot be overemphasized. It provides not only important cultural-specific information and perspectives but also reveals the present power relations in multiethnic, Pluralistic, and multiracial American society. The writing emerging from minority groups challenges the stereotypical representation of the ‘other’ by the majoritarian discourse, besides providing a deeper understanding of the immigrant experience and the ensuing cultural encounter.



### ***Interpreter of Maladies and Unaccustomed Earth***

The two short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* of Jhumpa Lahiri explore the complex process of identity formation in a host culture and expose the dilemmas of immigrant consciousness caught between cultures. Both these anthologies *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* depict characters who find themselves in a culturally mixed world in which they try to grapple with ‘dual’ identities- Indian and American. Remarks Lahiri about her fictional subject, “When I just started writing I was not conscious that my subject was Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page...”



Lahiri's stories, thus dramatize the encounter between two cultures when 'two worlds mingle'. She focuses mainly on first-generation Indian American immigrants, in *Interpreter of Maladies*, who struggle to raise a family in the new topography amidst alien traditions. *Unaccustomed Earth* continues to focus attention on second and third generation Indian Americans who have become largely assimilated into the American culture. she transcends her specific heritage with this collection and the problem related to immigrant experience and engages herself with larger questions of life, death, and the inevitability of loss and the demerits of human experience.

A detailed examination of these two anthologies could prove worthwhile for the insights it can provide regarding cultural identity in a multicultural context. The study can also help reader to gauge Lahiri's evolution as a writer. Not been taken up together, the two anthologies, from these perspectives as the following review makes clear.

### **Critical Attention**

A large readership Jhumpa Lahiri has earned and her fiction has been read from varied viewpoints. Literary Critics have paid attention to the issues of diaspora, family or marital relations, cross cultural – conflicts, identity crises and intergenerational relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri's works, is found in the form of articles in journals or in edited books. *Interpreter of Maladies* to have garnered the most critical attention, although *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth* are also being addressed.

In "American Spaces in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri" Judith Caesar discusses "The Third and the Final Continent" from *Interpreter of Maladies* and "Nobody's Business" from *Unaccustomed Earth* to reveal the development of personal and imaginary spaces in Lahiri's stories. Judith discusses the use of setting and shows how home can be both a safeguard against the outside world, and also a prison for those inside.

Laura Karttunen groups Lahiri with Salman Rhusdie and Arunditi Roy in her article titled, "A Sociostylistic Perspective on Negatives and the Disnarrated: Lahiri, Roy and

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Rhusdie”.Karttunen defines the disnarrated in a text as those events that do not happen, but are referred to in a negative or hypothetical mode. Negatives are related constructs that show characters breaking with norms and expectations.

Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero’s “Immigrant Motherhood and Transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction” focuses primarily on Ashima Ganguli, the central figure in *The Namesake*. Alfonso-Forero describes immigrant motherhood as a lifelong pregnancy, a state of continuously feeling out of sorts.

*Naming Jhumpa Lahri: Canons and Controversies* is a collection of essays edited by Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung which provides insights into Jhumpa Lahiri’s fiction. The essays foreground how Lahiri creates spaces where identities shift and coalesce in unexpected but surprisingly true ways.

Suman Bala’s *Jhumpa Lahri: The Master Storyteller* is a critical response to the *Interpreter of Maladies* and offers varied response to Lahiri’s art of storytelling.

In *Immigrant Experience in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies* Ashutosh Dubey says that,“ The immigrant experience is complicated as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transit station fraught with memories of the original home which are struggling with the realities of the new world”. Chitrleka Basu in her review of *Unaccustomed Earth* opines that Lahiri shows the mutability of human relationships in her stories and exhibits great skill in the detailing of human emotions.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of minority writing in multicultural America cannot be overemphasized. It provides not only important cultural-specific information and perspectives but also reveals the present power relations in multiethnic, Pluralistic, and multiracial American society. The writing emerging from minority groups challenges the stereotypical representation of the ‘other’ by the majoritarian discourse, besides providing a deeper understanding of the immigrant experience and the ensuing cultural encounter.

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Mudasir Habib  
Makhdoomsahib  
Srinagar -190003  
Jammu and Kashmir  
India

**Institute Affiliation:**

Research Scholar, Department of English, Kashmir University  
Srinagar 190006  
Jammu and Kashmir  
India  
[mudasirhabib28@gmail.com](mailto:mudasirhabib28@gmail.com).

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