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THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF JHUMPA LAHIRI: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is an effort to deal with the exhaustive analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's fictional writings from a cultural perspective that demonstrates that she has addressed herself to all the issues associated with expatriate experience. It also aims to explore the novels of the author that strike largely a common chord as regards the diasporic experience. Since she has lived abroad as a writer belonging to Indian roots, hence to a great extent, the themes in her works also bear issues related her native country. By choosing her protagonists from all parts of the world having divergent ethnic, religious and cultural preoccupations, the writer has attempted to explore the multiplicity of this theme which is centered in her struggles to outgrow inherited values. With her evolving creative vision the canvas of her thematic content enlarges and the complexity of cultural assimilation acquires a new dimension. The rising star on the Diaspora sky, Jhumpa Lahiri portrays the theme of cultural displacement at its best. Cultural displacement results in a sense of elsewhere that steadily reinforces migrant's need for survival and self-preservation. Therefore in Lahiri's writing survival becomes a central paradigm. Lahiri displays her dexterity in delineating the American theme of assimilation as a starting point for speaking to the larger culture, for depicting the breaks and heartaches of dislocated people in an increasingly irrational world. Although her stories are set primarily in the cities of the East Coast, they are filled with neatly folded saris, curry-recipes, and the cultural schisms of the Indian subcontinent.

Key Words: Culture, Identity Crisis, Expatriate, Rootlessness, Diaspora, immigrants, Nostalgia

Introduction

Cross- cultural confrontation has received a pronounced impetus since the emergence of the Modernist movement in the very opening of the twentieth century. The Post-colonial discourse has also, among other things, addressed itself to analyzing its intriguing ramifications. The globalization of world economy can be looked upon as a natural offshoot of multiculturalism and intercultural interaction. In ancient times, the western culture as

practically confined to a certain territory and likewise, the Eastern culture had also a limited area to flourish with hardly any possibility of mutual exchange between them. With the passage of time, many adventurous explores from the west started discovering new wonders and the Indian culture and civilization was one of their findings. With further advancement men started putting on wings and flying to the far-off regions. This coming together meant enhanced interaction and mutual co-

operation between nations in the field of industry, technology, information and education. Now many sporting events are being organized every year in one part of the world or the other partly to encourage inter-cultural and inter-racial awareness. Every culture has its own peculiarities and predilections which evoke a mixed response in one from a different cultural milieu. People quite often try their best to forge a workable synthesis between their native culture and that of the new set-up. This process is not a smooth one and it, more often than not, results in some psychological eccentricities alien to both the cultures.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a major contemporary Indian (Bengali)-American writer based in New York City. Born in London on July 11, 1967 of Indian parents, She was brought up in South Kingstown in Rhode Island, USA. She has so far published *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), which was converted into a popular film by Mira Nair in 2006; *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008); and *The Lowland* (2013), which was nominated for Man Booker Prize. Lahiri's debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. The rising star on the Diaspora sky, Jhumpa Lahiri portrays the theme of cultural displacement at its best. To authenticate the same, a few stories from the collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* and the novel *The Namesake* are discussed at length. Cultural displacement results in a sense of elsewhere that steadily reinforces migrant's need for survival and self-preservation. Therefore in Lahiri's writing survival becomes a central paradigm.

Cultural Perspective: An Overview

Jhumpa Lahiri's writings too are not an exception to this conflict of culture. Her maiden work, *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of nine short stories, which are all bound by a single thread of emotion is soaked in the experiences of Diaspora. This short-story collection of Lahiri published in the year 1999 highlights some facets of cultural displacement.

The first story of *Interpreter of Maladies* titled "A Temporary Matter" describes the conflict that a second-generation couple of Bengali origin suffers from. Both Shoba and Shukumar, though married to each other, are physically united but

spiritually distanced. Although pregnant, Shoba engages herself in her proofreading job and also prompts her husband to go and attend a conference in Baltimore. Things take a different turn when Shoba suffers a miscarriage and Shukumar holds the dead child to his chest despite getting to know that his wife had persuaded the doctor not to reveal the sex of the child. The mechanism of materialistic life has blinded them to the real issues of life. While Shukumar wanted life to move on, Shoba felt burdened by the secret she had locked in her heart. The five-day power cut gives them a chance to come close to each other and reminisce their past. It is of paramount importance that while Shoba had memories of past, Shukumar wished he too had one. The couple's revelation of their secrets demolishes the wall that had started surfacing between them. Moreover, Shoba's decision to look for a separate apartment can be viewed as the price she wanted to pay for her guilt. In addition, it may also help them re-locate their lost identities.

The story, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," talks mainly about how one nostalgic Asian becomes a brother to another. In this story, Lahiri describes in detail the terrors of Indo-Pak war in 1971, witnessed through the television by Bengalis living abroad. Pirzada is a Bangladeshi who befriends an Indian Bengali family. A bond slowly begins to develop between Pirzada and the daughter of the couple he befriends. The story deals with keen, cultural treasures that becomes closer by distance. The story underlines the trauma of Mr. Pirzada distanced from his homeland, yet preserving the ethos by charting out a bond with the Bengali couple who speaks the same language and becomes an equal sharer in his travails. In addition, Lahiri also shows that in an alien nation, caste differences matter less and cultural ties save a person from the feelings of dislocation and alienation. Conflict of culture that could arise in the case of Mr. Pirzada with the alien people is lessened because of the warmth of Lilia and her parents. Humans who have a will of their own often find an alternative to annex themselves with their kinsmen and their soil provided one has a heart that bubbles for their inmates. Geographical distances often thin away before the adhesive quality of heart. Mr. Pirzada connects himself to his family members

by reminiscing about the everyday chores performed by his wife and children. This becomes possible by his alternative of setting his pocket-watch with Indian timings.

The story, *Interpreter of Maladies*, reflects an Indian's fascination for the western world, and its inhabitants. But when the inner reality surfaces, the protagonist become disillusioned and soon distances himself from such ostentatious lifestyle. The story talks about immigrant Indians, their nostalgia, their lifestyle, and the fixation that Indians have with the Western world. It brings to light the secret that individuals live with simply to continue their married life intact. Moreover, it also reveals the sort of adjustment that a couple maintains in America where husband and wife divide their responsibilities and appear as rivals to each other. The lifestyles of Mr. and Mrs. Das hinge on the foundations of co-operation and not on cordiality. Life for such couples becomes a continuous "bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences" (53). Mr. Kapasi, the interpreter's description brings to light the various aspects of how American life had blunted the Indian way of the couple. It is, of course, a matter of pity for children who become the victim of such void that their parents maintain:

Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister not parents. It seemed that they were in-charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves. (IOM, 49)

Mr. Kapasi takes interest in the Das couple and even has a yearning for Mrs. Das. Her enticing physical features blind him so much that he starts longing for a rendezvous with her. He forgets about his own class and is drawn towards her; he wants to look for an opportunity to give her a compliment. But things take a different turn when Mrs. Das unveils the secret of one of her sons being born of a different father. Mr. Kapasi pities Mrs. Das for having buried this secret in her heart for eight years. Mrs. Das' continuous pestering too does not prompt Mr. Kapasi, the interpreter to offer any solution to the conflict that the lady underwent. Jhumpa Lahiri records the interpreter's predicament in the following lines:

He looked at her, in her red plaid skirt and strawberry

T-shirt, a woman not yet thirty who loved neither her husband nor her children, who had already fallen out of love with life. Her confession depressed him, depressed him all the more when he thought of Mr. Das at the top of the path, Tina clinging to his shoulders, taking pictures of ancient monastic cells cut into the hills to show his students in America, unsuspecting and unaware that one of his sons was not his own. (IOM, 65-66)

Mr. Kapasi's cultural roots allow him to sympathize with Mrs. Das sandwiched between pain and guilt. The only solace despite his mixed feelings and impressions about Mrs. Das offered by Mr. Kapasi is to drive away the monkeys who had attacked Bobby, Das' illegitimate son.

"Sexy" on the other hand is a story, which deals with how the emigrants from India fall a prey to the charms of lust and neglect their real relations. The protagonist Dev clandestinely associates himself with an American woman and calls her sexy, which she takes it a compliment. Matters become worse when Dev's seven-year old son also calls her with the same tag when she wears a very attractive dress. Miranda comes to know from Robin about his father and gets disillusioned. This new realization brings an end to this relationship and reminds her of how Indians often revere certain cultural and ritual rites and, thus, do not value the marital relationship. She had learnt a lot about India from Dev and she decides to stop this hide-and-seek relation. Robin had opened her eyes. Lahiri makes it clear that despite Miranda's longing for Dev, her determination to break up this relationship indicates an individual's esteem for other's culture. She records Miranda's mental moorings in the following lines:

She would see him one more Sunday, she decided, perhaps two. Then she would tell him the things she had known all along: that it wasn't fair to her, or to his wife, that they deserved better, that there was no point in it dragging on. (IOM, 110)

The conflict of culture also arises because of identity crisis. Like Boori Ma, Bibi Haldar and Mr. Pirzada,

Mrs. Sen is also on her quest for identity rooted in her deprivation of Indian taste and many other things associated with it. The story "Mrs. Sen's" depicts the conflicts of a lady who tosses between her past and present, and finds her life full of boredom and ennui. Though the wife of a mathematics professor she whiles away her time by accepting the job of a babysitter. The story brings to light Mrs. Sen's qualms of conscience and her wild craving for fish, which connects her to the typical Bengali lifestyle. If Boori Ma's existence is at stake because of space and time, Mrs. Sen's is intimidated because of the excess of the two. This is the reason she accepts to take care of Eliot and seems to lessen her ennui by making him participate in all her routine affairs. Mrs. Sen seemed to extract delight from whatever was related to her and her country.

Clash of cultures becomes more apparent in the story, "This Blessed House", where Sanjeev and Twinkle fail to effectuate a harmonious relationship because of their rigid religious faiths. Though newly married to an Indian girl, who is more American than Indian, Sanjeev smells of a spiritual and cultural spirit right from the beginning. Twinkle, an ardent lover of ostentatious life believes in decorating her house with various statues. What brings a feud between them is the statue of Christ and Mary. Matters become bad to worse in the dinner party when Twinkle feels triumphant over the praises showered on her because of her aesthetic sense. Sanjeev was relieved to get some private moments when all the guests went upstairs. Soon Sanjeev was taken aback to see Twinkle emerging from the attic with a huge silver bust of Christ. Realizing the gravity of the situation, though he did not react, but seemed to immerse in his earlier thoughts. Lahiri delineates Sanjeev's regret in the following lines:

He was getting nowhere with her, with this woman whom he had known for only four months, and whom he had married, this woman with whom he now shared his life. He thought with a flicker of regret of the snapshots his mother used to send him from Calcutta, of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without

consulting a cookbook. Sanjeev had considered these

women, had even ranked them in order of preference, but then he had met Twinkle. (IOL, 146)

It was too late for him to realize that despite one's origin, what matters most is the ambience in which one lives. Twinkle was every inch a product of the Americanized way of life full of freedom and equanimity. Twinkle really meant when she had said; "This is our house. We own it together. The statue is a part of our property" (149). But it is quite ironical that the word 'our' according to Twinkle meant much of her than that of Sanjeev's.

While there are flashes of cultural conflicts present in Lahiri's stories, it deepens in her novel where she is able to demonstrate these exhaustively in the lives of Gangulis in particular and other immigrants in general. Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*, depicts two generations of an Indian-born American family that explores generational, cultural, and class conflicts simultaneously. She explores the theme of multiple complexities in the life of immigrants created out of the conflicts of culture. Both *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake* contain the elements of conflict in relationship between couples, families, and friends. Through these relationships, Lahiri explores the ideas of isolation at personal, social, and cultural levels. Throughout *The Namesake*, Lahiri uses her characters' lifestyles that compromise food, dress, language and everyday habits to explore cultural conflicts. The celebration of ritual like, the *annaprasana* (the rice ceremony) is the second significant event welcoming the arrival of the new child. The function is celebrated in the most typical Bengali manner and the guests happen to be all Bengalis. Prior to this, Gogol's naming was also to be observed in the exemplary Indian fashion though circumstances did not make it accordingly. The naming of the child thus in this novel is a case of cultural compromise.

The Namesake delineates a cross-cultural, multi-generational story of a Hindu Bengali family's journey to self-acceptance in Boston. Lahiri underlines the subtleties of the immigrant experience full of alienation, the clash of lifestyles, cultural disorientation, and the problem of

assimilation. Shifting from India, the Gangulis find American culture different from that of India. It has been described in story that the name of the child was to be sent by Ashima's grandmother in her letter but the letter doesn't reach and to fulfill the hospital's formalities, Ashoke decides his son to be named Gogol. They were cognizant of the fact that according to their culture, it was customary for the child to have two names. Lahiri records this practice in the following lines:

...there are always pet names to tide over: a practice of Bengali nomenclature grants, to every single person, two names. In Bengali the word for pet name is *daknam*, meaning, literally the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments. Pet names are a permanent remnant of childhood, a reminder that life is always not so serious, so formal, so complicated. (TN, 16)

Though facilitated with two names, we find its complications looming large in the life of Gogol later. His name becomes a sort of continuous torment and he often thinks of the mystery behind his name. He finds himself in a very difficult situation when he comes to know about the predicaments of the Russian author, Nicholai Gogol as described by his English teacher. The torrent of cultural conflict involving the child's nomination is just the beginning of the crisis. Unaware of the fact that naming was the first simple official recognition of a child coming to a new country; the Gangulis have bigger challenges waiting for them. While it used to be a ceremony in Bengali communities, it was confined to only one name in America. The parents who waited for the name to come from Calcutta family name their child as 'Gogol' when the letter carrying the name does not arrive. It later becomes an albatross round the child's neck. Names assume special cultural significance in the novel and are invested with a culturally extra significance that consecrates their statue as identity markers. Apart from the protagonist's constant wavering between his pet name (Gogol) and his good name (Nikhil), with interesting turns of the hierarchy between the two as he grows apart or comes closer to his family,

there are other instances where naming—which, interestingly, enough, is not a punctual event, but a recurrent one—is invested with a variety of significations. It symbolizes Bengali traditions as opposed to the relaxed American manners: Ashima never utters her husband's name (Ashoke), as this is not considered either proper or polite in the Bengali customs, and is consequently shocked when Maxine, Gogol's American girlfriend, addresses her by her first name. Names as pronounced by different people are associated with different cultural outlook and their perception changes as characters grow. They sometimes—with Ashima, though not with Moushumi—change with marital status; depending on this, new questions are posed in relation to the degree of independence of characters. Ashima's embarrassment on being called by her first name reminds readers of how Ashima herself never called her husband by name. It is apt to quote Lahiri:

When she calls out to Ashoke, she doesn't say his name.

Ashima never thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is to utter his first. It is not the type of thing Bengali wives do. (TN, 2)

Names in Indian culture especially in case of women addressing their husbands are usually not uttered by wives. The husbands often call their wives by their names but the latter taking their names are not considered sacrosanct. Indian readers would often not approve of Moushumi calling herself Moushumi Majumdar instead of being addressed as Mrs. Ganguli. Names have a strange life of their own even after their bearers die (as it happens with Ashoke's name signed by Ashima on the Christmas cards she has been addressing minutes before she receives the phone-call announcing his death. Female presences in this novel are important socio-cultural marks for the protagonist, whose stages of growing up are mirrored by them. Gogol's American girlfriends, Ruth and Maxine, represent abstract projections of a dream of happiness and of American integration that Gogol cherishes for a while; yet they never gather any real cultural complexity, as there is very little connection that can be drawn between their presence in his life and the other, Bengali world, he belongs to. In contrast,

Ashima, his mother, whose loving care Gogol finds stifling for most of the novel—and Moushumi—who becomes his wife out of conviction, despite the initial resistance due to the fact that their first date is arranged by their culturally driven mothers—play a much more important part in his process self-definition. This happens to such an extent that their growth, which Gogol successively identifies with, determine his own evolution through a complex process of mirroring whose stages of socio-cultural complexity are minutely recorded in Lahiri's prose.

The Namesake unfolds the conflict of culture not only in the lives of Ashima and Ashoke but also in their children. Though the epicenter of the novel is Ashima's son, it is fitting that the tale begins in the kitchen: the losses and shifts in Lahiri's novel are as intense and ineffable as the aromas and flavors of food. Food is one of the chief planes upon which the young Gogol and his sister Sonia work to define themselves against their Bengali heritage. They insist on pizza and Coke. Gogol and Sonia, the second generation immigrant, face a cultural conflict which their mother, Ashima eases by discriminating the small of Indian edibles all through her house. The choice of food also creates a conflict in the house as the children insist on American dishes. Ashima finds satisfaction in preparing Indian dishes while at times she caters to their tastes through reluctantly. There are instances when the children fill their cart in supermarket with the items of their choice. There is no denying the fact that Ashoke and Ashima face cultural conflicts in the choices of their children's food habits.

Gogol appears to have come out of cultural conflicts when he befriends Maxine, a free spirit proud of her parents and their magnanimous house. Though free-willed, Maxine seems to be more stable as she introduces Gogol to her parents who too approve of their meetings. The Ratliff's house hypnotizes Gogol as much as Maxine and her parents. They seem to belong to an elevated class as compared to Ruth's and Gogol is bewitched by the beauty and charm of the house that reflects the tastes of the inhabitants as well.

Gogol resolves the cultural chaos and follows in the footsteps of his native culture after his father's demise. The sudden news of his father's

death devastates him though it generates in him a sense of responsibility. He moves to Cleveland to see the mortal remains of his father. He takes stock of his father's apartment at Cleveland and settles the accessories Ashoke had taken on lease. His willful exclusion of Maxine from the Calcutta trip reflects his maturity and dawning of reality though this leads to his stepping out of his beloved's life.

While for the first generation migrants like Ashoke and Ashima, displacement from home and their culture becomes very tormenting, the second-generation immigrants like Gogol and Sonia also feel uprooted in their parents' country. Since they have accommodated themselves in the country of their birth, they feel unconnected with India except for their parents. For them, according to Sarika Dubey: "Cultural identity is metaphoric, unstable and marked by multiple points of similarities as well as differences. They both reveal a deep awareness of the self as fluid rather than fixed on 'becoming' rather than 'being'" (50).

Unaccustomed Earth, the second collection of short stories by Lahiri, carries forward the same conflict of culture with much more maturity. The eight stories of the collection show the consequences of mingling with an alien culture that is not devoid of pain for the native ones. The stories talk of cross-cultural marriages, distancing and disappearance of ties though reluctantly, marital disharmony, problems of adjustment, sense of alienation and the sense of loss. Out of these conflicts, Lahiri presents gripping narratives to make readers glued to her works. The title story shows both Ruma and her father's helplessness to maintain their filial ties because of the several hindrances that living in a new culture offer. Ruma, married to Adam, tries her best to look after her aged and widowed father who also does not want to become an appendage on his daughter. Moreover, the feeling of isolation that grabs him after his wife's death has prompted him to go on a package tour and also to develop a new friendship with Mrs. Bagchi. Ruma's decision to marry Adam despite her mother's fears and advice is not without its serious implications. Years after marriage and having given birth to a son, Ruma often felt her husband not in compliance with what she thought of her

responsibility towards her father. Lahiri shows Ruma's parents accepting her choice after many years. Her mother had accepted Adam as her son-in-law and would do everything to keep him in good humour. The mother's death makes Ruma reminisce about her association. She feels the thick sheltering chord that parents provide to their children, has thinned and she gets a solace only in the memory.

The conflict of culture becomes transparent in Lahiri's story entitled "Hell-Heaven" of *Unaccustomed Earth*. While the first-generation immigrants, namely the narrator's parents and their guest, Pranav, seem to adhere to the traditional norms of native culture as regards their food and dress, the influence of alien culture at times makes them wonder. What makes situation worse is that Pranav abandons all his cultural ties once he is smitten with Deborah's love. Paying no heed to his native culture and also to his parents' warnings, he enters into an intercultural wedlock with an American girl, Deborah. It is quite ironical that Deborah learns Bengali language and also tries to imitate Bengali lifestyles. But Pranav ignores his parents' objection when all his attempts, through his host Bengali family in U.S., to win them for this match went unsuccessful. Pranav's parents had already taken a promise from him before leaving for U.S. that he would marry a Bengali bride after his return. The parents had also bought an adjoining house for Pranav and his bride near their house in Calcutta. Naturally, his parents felt deeply betrayed by Pranav's action. Lahiri in this story not only records the cultural conflict in the lives of two generations of immigrants but also shows some silver lining possible only amid Indian couples. Pranav had proved himself an elusive cloud that never rained at one place while Usha's parents despite certain gaps had been able to mend their fences.

"A Choice of Accommodations" also unveils the conflict of culture that Amit and Megan face. Notwithstanding the fact that Amit's parents were critical of India, they did not approve of their son's marriage with Megan, a doctor and five years older than Amit. Amit, as the first-generation immigrant, doesn't attach much importance to his parent's cultural identity, but later he thinks they were right.

The couple feels the initial fever of love receding after the birth of their second child. The worldly responsibilities distance them and they long for solitude. Amit's inadequacy makes him think of his relationship with Megan thinning away. Lahiri rightly records: "She lived in the apartment. Slept in his bed, her heart belonged to no one but him and the girls, and yet there were times when Amit felt as alone as he had first been at Langford. And there were times he hated Megan simply for this" (UE, 114). Though the novelist has made Amit and Megan her mouthpiece, the issues raised in this story have much greater significance. Apart from accommodating oneself in alien settings and diverse conditions, the thought of solitude is the one that individuals often long for.

Life in an alien culture cannot move on smoothly on certain old values that people of a particular culture maintain. The story, "Only Goodness," brings to light how an elderly attitude towards one's siblings cannot work in a developed country like America. The story also reflects that the materialistic progress may lead to cultural erosion. While the parents proudly celebrate their children's success on graduating from school, they are unaware of their graduating habits much in keeping with American lifestyles where taking alcohol and choosing and changing their partners by choice are customary and not cultural offences. In this respect when the elder sister, Sudha, wanted to groom her younger brother, Rahul, she had introduced her to drinking. She was of the hope that things would improve in time. But Rahul became a habitual drinker and would not change his ways. The American mode of life had gripped his mind so much that he would consider his sister's protective gesture as a sort of interference with his freedom. Rahul's parents had already been suffering from the stigma that the son had brought to them.

Indian culture believes in arranged marriages and abiding by the vows the couple makes on the altar till death. We find this practice in the story "Year's End" in which a widower, a father of an adult son, re-marries a thirty-five-year old widow. Though much travelled in America and having been exposed to the glitter and glamour of the Western world, Kaushik's father married an

Indian widow, who had two daughters. The reason his father gave for marriage was to be "tired of coming home to an empty house every night" (255). The marriage upsets the son but as he grows accustomed to living with two small sisters, who had met the same tragedy of having lost their father they way Kaushak had lost his mother, his anger mellows.

Conclusion :

Most of Lahiri's characters, whether in stories or in novels, have been presented with insight and precision. Lahiri as a postcolonial and diaporic writer makes it obvious that the real cause of their conflict of culture lies in their sense of loss and their distancing from their native culture whether it is in the first-generation or in the second-generation immigrants. Actually what is a host country for the first-generation immigrant becomes a native one for second generation immigrant. For the former, their blood-ties make them nostalgic since no home can be as soothing and comfortable than the home that one's parents' ambience provides. It has to be relied that the familial bonds are often stronger for the first-generation than the lure for gold.

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