



JHUMPA LAHIRI'S FICTION: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Man of today lives in a different world whose pace is accelerated by technology and travelling. The modern world is enthralled by computers, globalization and information technology. As a result of the latest technology, the vast world is shrinking rapidly. Crossing borders has become fashion, as a result of which number of immigrant people is rising in many countries. Immigration brings vital changes in the life of immigrants and they pass through various phases of adjustment. Creative writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, give voice to the experiences of these immigrants. The present paper attempts to highlight various experiences of immigrant community presented by the writer. The study also attempts to find out various thematic patterns which take place along with diasporic ideas. The research dwells on the point that fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri highlights the journey of migrant people which starts with alienation and ends with celebration. Gradually the migrant people assimilate and acculturate in the adopted land.

Keywords: Different World, Immigration, Vital Changes, Various Experiences, Thematic Pattern, Alienation, Celebration.

Since nineteenth century a large number of people have been settling in US for education, better employment and enhanced prospects of life. The inclusion of immigrants in itself has been a prominent characteristic of the America. This proves true when famous national myth 'melting pot' is taken into consideration. Melting pot is a metaphor which suggests amalgamation and mixing of different cultures of the immigrants. It simply means that all the migrants get assimilated into American society at their own pace. It encourages every migrants and each group of migrants to think themselves as an American. Gradually they need to leave their motherland local tradition until and unless they finally become a part of the bright new alloy in the accomplishment of the melting pot.

Melting pot promotes one united people, speaking the identical language, attached to the same principle of government in their behaviour and traditions. The Civil Rights and Counter cultural movements of the 1960s brought a change in social philosophy and signalled a change from the existing assimilative approach to the new one of integration or salad-bowl. In the bowl as Watson reports, "different constituents retain their distinctive flavours and forms but the dish as a whole is recognizable *sui generis*, having its own distinctive character as a result of its unique blending" (4). This shift from assimilation to integration or from melting pot to salad bowl endorses the concept of transculturalism. Thoreau Walden, "Things do no change, we change."

Literature can never be bound by geographical, political, social, cultural or others borders. It has never existed as an isolated system and cannot remain entirely unaffected by cultural, social and political issues or other cultures, but it should not to force to live within precincts of a single culture or within any single idea or ideology. Different historian, sociologist, thinkers and anthropologists did effort to define culture time and again. Tylor is quite apt when he asserts, "Culture...is complex whole, which indicates knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities and habit acquired by man as a member of society" (575). The new model of integration, assimilation, acculturation and cohesion in the present world, favoured a transcultural situation in which the immigrants irrespective of their ethnic, culture, racial and differences settled with new commitments and new vision. The effect of globalization and technology is observed by each man of the world. Modern nations are in state of transition due to increased contacts and cross cultural exchange among people of different origins. The global market, tourism, internet, overseas studies, sports events, conferences, different international festival, multinational companies accelerated the pace of transculturalism. This vital facet of contemporary times has evolved a new field of study in literature which focuses to investigate the new subjectivity and its result in a united globe i.e. transculturality which is by product of transnationality. Transculturalism gives respect to every culture, caste and nation.

Indian migrant writers who are living in New York City like Amitav Ghosh, Bharti Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumapa Lahiri and Kiran Desai write in the West but they do not pen down their anguish for the loss of India. They cherish their connection to both the East and West, giving voice to rootlessness, movement, mixing of different cultures, languages and races. As the migrants belong to minority group, they effort hard to mingle in the culture of adopted land. They take initiative to belong and mould their personalities to that of new country. Sometimes they succeed and at other times they fail. In this venture they carry traces of cultures, their mother land and their adopted land, hence

have mixed identity. In the fleet of immigrant writers, Jhumpa Lahiri acclaims high niche in annals of diasporic literature. Jhumpa Lahiri, 'a writer of immigrants,' 'writer of diaspora,' 'a writer of alienated people,' 'transcultural writer,' these tags are rightly befitted with her name. She is deeply involved in the writings of diaspora community: people who migrate to unknown land from native land in search of economic and social satisfaction or may be many other reasons. She successfully delineates the life of Bengali diaspora after migration. Her fiction is the result of the writer's "desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life" (Lahiri, *My Two Lives*). Lahiri case is different as she belongs to second generation diaspora and does not have firsthand experience of her mother land and she is emotionally united with India through her parents. She herself asserted, "The influence of frequent childhood visits to India and parents who are still a part of the Indian world despite their immigration to America thirty years ago shaped her book" (*People Weekly* 138).

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri has written nine stories with different types of shades, emotions, varied places, multiple moods but the same storyline in theme. The feelings of rootlessness and homelessness, the quench to get the identity of own with different subject matter. Some stories deal with first generation immigrants, something she would have seen through her parents' experience. Other stories deal with the next generation of these first generation immigrants, who are more rooted in their place of birth. All the stories revolve around individuals who are caught physically and mentally between two opposite directions. Most of the stories are written from woman point of view expect one "This blessed House." The theme deals with exile- in one form or the other. Forced to or choosing to live in a world away from the one in which they born, every character of this collection explores the world around him/her, tries to term with that alienated, and in the process changes and sometimes grows. Dr Nandini Sahu comments: "... [these] stories tell of the lives of Indian in exile, of people navigating between the strict traditions they have inherited and the baffling new world they must

encounter every day.” In her debut novel *The Namesake*, everyone can judge the bewilderment, homesickness, insomnia, alienation, and a reflection of cultural change in immigrants. The human psychology is actually disturbed with the selection of a new land. It authentically depicts the feeling of Lahiri as a diaspora with the help of varied characters in different situations. She provides the reader a picture gallery of description about life of a diasporic family. It is a story of Ganguli family’s migration to abroad and difficulties to adjust there. About this Indira Nityanandam says: “The novel portrays realistically the experience of this family, which is sometime affected with a feeling of cultural alienation: diaspora both literal and metaphorical referring both to the physical displacement as well as the shaping of a different sensibility” (73). Her second story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* follows a pattern set by your two earlier books. It deals with the diaspora, grapple with the challenges of immigration, questions of identity and acculturation with longing and loss. A lot of stories in this collection are about exile- about people living far from home or moving to a new home. We notice that in earlier work the focus was generally on Bengalis moving to America, but in *Unaccustomed Earth* it's often people moving to new places within America, or characters going to London, Italy, and all over the world.

Lahiri’s Indian heritage forms the basis for her short stories; in which she deals with questions of identity, alienation and the plight of those who are culturally displaced. She vividly shows the estrangement and isolation that often afflict first- and even second-generation immigrants. Although the immigrant experience is central to her work, it is not her exclusive concern. In the title story “Interpreter of Maladies” she suggests, through her characters that there are ‘maladies’ that trouble all of us. This contributes to our understanding of other people and our selves. She registers the character’s feelings and reveals how immigrants strive to adjust in the new cultural environment in which they find themselves while struggling to retain their self-identity, native traditions and values. The immigrant finds economic and monetary security but has to sell his identity in exchange. This heavy burden goes on

growing from heavy to heavier as they lug it around in the world of nostalgia and memory. The immigrant straddles two cultural, historical and geopolitical areas. The characters frequently encounter crises of identity, which are tied to their inability to reconcile their American identity with their Indian identity. Mr Pirzada, Mrs Sen, Ashima consider themselves isolated from surroundings and crave for home. Mrs Sen, Aprana, Ashima, Hema’s mother insist on wearing Indian attire with vermilion on their forehead. Mr Pirzada sets his watch according to Dacca time.

Lahiri, like many Americans and Australians, is a second-generation immigrant who feels just as much at home in her parents’ homeland as she does in her own – yet she felt she belonged nowhere when she was young. The psychological dislocation that immigrants often suffer can cause their children to feel a similar sense of alienation. Although Lahiri’s parents ultimately adjusted in America, they must have frequently longed for their mother country, giving Lahiri the opportunity to observe, at first hand, the often painful adjustment of immigrants to life in an adopted country. Her narratives weave together not only the stories of immigrants, but also those of their children, who feel that they belong neither in one place nor another. The writer uses her acute powers of observation, together with her personal experiences, to create stories that transport readers to an imaginary landscape, exploring and exposing the frailties common to all of humanity. In these stories the writer depicts different kind of dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants dealing with different themes as miscarriages, marital difficulties, extra marital relationship and generation gap etc. She illustrates not only dilemma and struggle of second immigrants in foreign land but it also depicts perpetual dilemma faced by first immigrants as they struggle to maintain their identities while trying to shake them off. According to Dubey, “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” (22). As in *The Namesake*, the Ganguli parents, especially Ashima, struggle with adapting to a different culture

than they are used to, their children struggle with trying to respect their roots while adapting to American society. It is about the series of distressing choices they are forced to make every day as they try hard to avoid being misfits in a foreign land.

Lahiri's diasporic characters like Bharti Mukherjee's have reached in alien land willingly giving up their own world. In her fiction we find that migration in other land is her character's personal choice. But Lahiri differs from Mukherjee in the way that while Mukherjee's mostly characters enter in alien land by illegal means, Jhumpa's characters have reached the new land by lawful means and routes. They mostly are researchers, professors and occupy a respectable place in adopted land. Ashoke in *The Namesake* chooses to go America despite their parents' opposition. We can find numerous other examples like Ashoke in her all works. Another fact which catches attention is that Jhumpa's characters hardly have relations with natives of the adopted land. If they do, these relations do not last long as we see in the case of Gogol's girl friends Ruth and Maxine, in the story "Sexy" friendship of Dev's and Miranda and many more examples are there in her fiction. First immigrants are never shown making friendships with locals rather their friends are only those Bengali who are also from the same land. We notice that the strong bond of nation binds the people even when they are many miles away from their home and living among culturally and linguistically different people.

Like Bharti Mukherjee and Nobel Laureate V.S Naipaul's novels, Lahiri does write about Indian customs and ceremonies. She describes the "rice ceremony," as she calls it – the mukhebbat or annaprasan – when a Bengali baby is fed rice for the first time. After the death of Ashoke in *The Namesake* the family performs the Hindu rites in the household. "... it was a Bengali son's duty to shave his head in the wake of a parent's death... His mother has shampooed the vermilion from her part...he and his mother and Sonia eats a mourner's diet, forgoing meat and fish. They eat only rice and daal and vegetables, plainly prepared" (NS 179-80). She describes the wedding of Gogol and Moushumi when one of their parents' friends acts as the priest in a traditional Hindu ceremony. She presents Indian

culture and Indian scenario in a deep and authentic way in her novel and short stories. Calcutta acquires dominant place in her writings. In this she again finds resemblances with the writer Bharti Mukherjee and Chitra Divakaruni who make repeated references to the cultural tradition of Calcutta and their cherished moments of nostalgia in encounters with real Calcutta. She also tries to relocate her cultural space and identity mediated by significant cross-cultural influences. Once she confesses to Radhika S. Shankar:

I went to Calcutta neither as a tourist nor a former resident- a valuable position, I think for writer. I learned to observe things as an outsider, and yet I also knew that as different Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way, in the ways I didn't seem to belong in the United States. The reason my first stories were set in Calcutta is due partly because of that perspective, that necessary combination of distance and intimacy with a place.

One distinctive factor about the writer is that she belongs to the second generation of diaspora women writers. Her gender portrayals, naturally, belong to second generation of Indian Diaspora. Most of these portrayals are the portraits of women protagonists fit in to the image of Indian New Woman. The second generation of diaspora also experiences some cultural displacement, feeling of in-between-ness and hybridity but the main features that mark their identity is cultural assimilation in the land of adoption or birth. Their ethnic identity is shaped by their childhood memories and the youthful identity is formed by their American experience. Thus they acquire a hybrid identity. They wish to be recognized as Asian Americans rather than diasporic Indians. The older women characters, like Ashima in *The Namesake*, Mrs Parul Choudhary of the story "Once in a Lifetime" who pass through the initial trauma of dislocation, soon adapt themselves to the American conditions and assimilate themselves into their new found identity as American Indians. The younger women characters like Shobha in the story "Temporary Matters" (*Interpreter of Maladies*), Moushumi in *The Namesake*, Ruma in the story "Unaccustomed

Earth," Sudha in "Only Goodness," and Usha in "Hell-Heaven," Hema in "Going Ashore" (*Unaccustomed Earth*) etc. are independent, educated women who know what they do and what they want. They have definite identities of their own and they represent the new woman of new generation. These gender portrayals are strong and show an inclination towards assimilation and acceptance of their existence in the alien land since many have not experienced migration directly as their forefathers have done. Their identity is in a flux and inclined towards the land of living.

Her fiction explores her desire for cultural fusion and unveils the complexity of living in a globalised world and woven around cross-cultural marriages and disappearance of martial ties through conjugal disharmony. The un-named narrator of "The Third and Final Continent" has adopted American culture and eager to assure his son, "Whenever he is discouraged, I tell him that if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer" (*IM* 197). Ruma's father gets easily assimilated in foreign culture as Ruma reports, "... He was wearing a baseball cap that said POMPEII, brown cotton pants and a sky-blue polo shirt, and a pair of white leather sneakers" (*UE* 11). It is also noticed that culture and geographical territories are no longer believed restricted or confined. In her works characters like Mr. Pirzada succeeds to eliminate international boundaries. The shared Bengali culture of Lila's parents and Mr.Pirzada unite them despite the religion, religious differences and bitterness between their motherland countries. Mrs Sen, Ashima, Lila, Usha's mother starting adapting ways of the adopted land. Second generation is quite happy with the foreign culture and they gradually negotiate with the parents also.

One feature that marks Lahiri from other diasporic writer is that she not only voices pangs of diasporic life in her writings but another themes related to human life also catches her attention equally. Modern dilemma, rootlessness, emotional sterility and even isolation are some other themes of her writing. Lahiri has shown different aspects in every short story along with diasporic concerns. The subject of marriage in modern society and its further

consequences form theme of stories like "A Temporary Matter", and "This Blessed house." The writer emphasizes that in modern generation the meaning of marriage is changing due to love for individuality and freedom. The world fantasy in "Interpreter of Maladies," politics in literature is beautifully handled by her in "Mr Pirzada Came to Dine" whereas in the stories "A Real Durwan" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" show bitter social realities and selfishness of the world. With the story of "Mrs Sen" Lahiri has depicted the problem of adjustment in a new cultural place for an outsider as well as men's indifference towards his nostalgic wife.

As far her narrative technique is concerned she employs very simple way of narration but humane, with a lot of attention to detail. The stories are delicate at the same time. The plots are linear which merely means for conveying the thematic concerns. Through her simple but effective language which is easily understandable to every literary and non literary she successfully portrays her theme of diaspora. About her technique she herself asserts:

I like to be plain. It appeals to me more... There's form and there's function and I have never been a fan of just form. I don't want to sit around and have my language just be beautiful. If you read Nabokov, who I love, the language is beautiful but it also makes the story and is an integral part of the story. Even now in my own work, I just want to get it *less*-get it plainer. When I rework things I try to get it as simple as I can. (Chontiner)

To sum up, her works are like documenting the emotional turmoil of immigrants, their balancing between what they grew up with and what they adopted, their constant longing for their environment, their living in neighbourhoods unlike the ones at home, their relationship with colleagues and their gradual acceptance of all new things. She takes us on the long travels of Bengal, Boston and beyond very effectively and makes us acquaint with the problems of identity and alienation, adaptation and exile in a very successful manner. To use term of Bruce Robbins, Lahiri's fiction presents "situatedness-in-displacement" (173) which suggests

highly flexible and surreal dimension. With increased mass migration, through her fiction she seems to emphasise the fact that immigration of masses results in social, economic, political, religious and cultural prosperity. It also changed the rigid notion of social, linguistic, economic, religious and cultural identities. It gives birth to a clash between indigenous identity and the hybrid, cultural heterogeneity and homogeneity. The indigenous identities started shrinking and giving birth to new global identities. Due to global multi-cultural assimilation and acculturation, it is need of time to adopt pluralism.

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