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Pattern of Imagery: A Thematic and Structural Study of Selected Works of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Jhumpa Lahiri is a second generation diasporic writer, observer and “ABCD i.e. another badly confused Desi” (Das 14). She experiences and represents the problems of alienation, frustration, marginalization, discrimination, rootlessness, displacement, fragmentation and discontinuity in the cultural discourse. However, excessive emphasis on the diasporic aspect of one’s writing may turn the readers’ attention away from the aesthetic and artistic qualities of a work of literature. Lahiri, therefore, prefers to steer clear of this neat but facile categorization, and maintains that she creates not mere ‘diasporic characters’ but ‘distinctively individualized characters’ and writes not about ‘a specific cultural experience’ but about “human beings and the difficulties of existence” (Das15). Her focus is the ‘mindscape of characters’ and ‘human predicament’ in its wider perspectives. All these aspects also find expression in her delineation of characters in her works i.e. *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008).

She got the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for *Interpreter of Maladies*, her debut story collection that explores the issues of love and identity among immigrants and cultural transplants. With a compelling, universal fluency, Lahiri portrays the practical and emotional adversities of her diverse characters in elegant and direct prose. Whether describing hardships of a lonely Indian wife adapting to the life in the United States or illuminating the secret pain of a young couple as they discuss their betrayals during a series of electrical blackouts, Lahiri's bitter-sweet stories avoid sentimentality without abandoning compassion.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* was published in the fall of 2003 to her great acclaim. *The Namesake* expands on the perplexities of the immigrant experience and the search for identity. The narrative follows the Gangulis, an Indian couple united in an arranged marriage, as they build their lives together in America. Unlike her husband, Mrs. Ganguli defies assimilation, while their son, Gogol, burdened with the seemingly absurd name of the long-dead Russian writer, awkwardly struggles to define himself. A film version of *The Namesake* (directed by Mira Nair) was released in 2007. Lahiri’s most recent book of short stories, entitled *Unaccustomed Earth*, received the 2008 Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award (the world’s largest prize for a short story collection) and was a finalist for the Story Prize.

Born in London, Lahiri moved to Rhode Island as a young child with her Bengali parents. Although they have lived in the United States for more than thirty years, Lahiri observes that her parents retain “a sense of emotional exile” and Lahiri herself grew up

with “conflicting expectations...to be Indian by Indians and American by Americans” (qtd. in Das) Lahiri's abilities to convey the oldest cultural conflicts in the most immediate fashion and to achieve the voices of many different characters are among the unique qualities that have captured the attention of a wide audience.

The present paper is an attempt to explore the pattern of imagery, used as a carrier in describing different and varied themes and as a tool of structural unity in Jhumpa Lahiri's “Interpreter of Maladies” and “Unaccustomed Earth”. Before exploring this topic, it would be appropriate to deliberate upon the term ‘imagery’, its various kinds and uses in literature.

The term ‘imagery’, has many connotations and meanings. This term is one of the most common terms in literature, and one of the most variable in meaning. Its applications range all the way from the ‘mental pictures’ to the totality of the components which make up a work of literature. In *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (Penguin Reference) the range of imagery is described as “imagery as a general term covers the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind and any sensory or extra-sensory experience”(413). C. Day Lewis, in his *Poetic Image* states that an image “is a picture made out of words,” and that “a poem may itself be an image composed from a multiplicity of images” (qtd. in Abrams & Harpham 134). In Penguin Reference book of *Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, three types of imagery are described as “the literal, the perceptual, and the conceptual” (413).

Literal imagery is used to signify only specific descriptions of visible objects and scenes, especially if the description is vivid and particularised. Perceptual imagery is used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a work of literature. Most of these kinds of images are conveyed by figurative language, as in metaphor, simile, synecdoche, onomatopoeia and metonymy. Imagery in these usage includes not only visual sense qualities, but also qualities that are auditory, tactile (touch), thermal (heat and cold), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste) and kinaesthetic (sense of movement and bodily effort). Conceptual imagery is used when one can hardly visualise it but one may have an idea of it e.g. “castle of God”, one cannot see it but can have a mental image or an idea of it.

Jhumpa Lahiri has made an elaborate use of imagery as initiated by T. E. Hulme, Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington and Hilda Doolittle. Her stories and the only novel *The Namesake* are replete with all kinds of imagery. She has generally drawn her images from varied sources such as from culture, geography, animal world, the world of nature, Hindu mythology, religion and human anatomy.

Cultural images include food imagery, dressing sense, ways of walking and talking, ritual ceremonies and customs, etc. In geographical imagery or map imagery, she has drawn the imagery from many different places in India, Europe as well as in America, to name a few Calcutta, Orissa (Puri) , New Jersey, New York City, Yale, Boston, Seattle, Pennsylvania, Europe (France, London, etc.), Cambridge, Massachusetts, etc. She has drawn imagery from animal world like the imagery of monkeys, goats, horses, and dinosaur. She has also drawn her imagery from the world of nature that includes the pictorial description of many rural and natural parks, garden, different kinds of flowers, river, etc. Lahiri also draws her imagery from Hindu mythology and religion that includes the mythological imagery of Hindu gods and goddesses, the Sun God, Lord Hanumana's description, etc. Christian religion is also the point of inspiration for drawing her imagery. She has drawn the images of Christian ritual ceremonies and customs etc. Lahiri is a writer of human predicament, so she has also drawn

her images from human anatomy. Thus, one can notice Lahiri's multinational identity or multicultural knowledge enriched her literary works a lot with her multidimensional literary character.

Interpreter of Maladies

In the title story, "Interpreter of Maladies" Mr Kapasi is a character who signifies the deep divide between the culture of American-born Indians and that of Indians living in India. As the Das family's tourist guide, he is constantly bemused by the fact that these people "looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors" (Interpreter 43-4). Here Lahiri uses a number of dress images to show the American way of dressing. Pictorial description of Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das depicts the cultural difference between India and America. Lahiri describes Mr. Kapasi:

Mr. Kapasi was forty – six years old, with receding hair that had gone completely silver, but his butterscotch complexion and his unlined brow, which he treated in spare moments to dabs of lotus- oil balm, made it easy to imagine what he must have looked like at an earlier age. He wore gray trouser and a matching jacket- style shirt, tapered at the waist, with short sleeves and a large pointed collar made of a thin but durable synthetic material. (Interpreter 45)

In contrast with Mr. Kapasi Lahiri describes Mrs. Das as, "She wore a red and white checkered skirt that stopped above her knees, slip on shoes with a square wooden heel, and a close- fitting blouse styled like a man's undershirt" (Interpreter 46). To Mr. Kapasi, they each seem completely self absorbed far more 'like siblings' (Interpreter 49) than parents and children. Then Lahiri presents an image of Indian and American style of greeting in these words:

When he'd introduced himself, Mr. Kapasi had pressed his palms together in greeting, but Mr. Das squeezed hands like an American so that Mr. Kapasi felt it in his elbow. Mrs. Das for her part, had flexed one side of her mouth smiling dutifully at Mr. Kapasi, without displaying any interest in him. (Interpreter 44)

The couple also appears to be emotionally unaffected by the reality of India, particularly the grim conditions under which many are forced to live. Mr Das stops to take a photo "of a barefoot man, his head wrapped in a dirty turban" (Interpreter 49) –treating him as if he is there merely to add local colour to his travels, rather than as a human being in his own right. Mrs Das is completely indifferent to the whole tourist experience, only becoming interested when Mr Kapasi begins to tell her about his other line of work.

Mr Kapasi's main occupation is as a language interpreter for a doctor. Mrs Das views the dependence of the patients on him as "romantic" (Interpreter 50) and is suddenly interested in Kapasi as a man, rather than just as a dispensable Indian guide. She unexpectedly provides Kapasi with a different view of himself as someone worthwhile, whereas he is only considered a lowly worker in his everyday life. Kapasi sees his occupation as "thankless", whereas Mr. and Mrs. Das see him as bearing a great "responsibility" (Interpreter 51). For him "the job was a sign of his failings" (Interpreter 52), as it underlined his lost dream of becoming an indispensable interpreter to diplomats. Kapasi's job is simply the means by which he sustains his family and, notably, has recently become a symbol of his wife's reproach for his inability to save his son from dying "she resented the other lives he helped ... to save" (Interpreter 53). He begins to see that human behaviour is the same in all cultures. Mr and Mrs Das are no more suited to each other than he and his wife are. He recognises the

signs of a dysfunctional marriage – “the bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences” (Interpreter 53) – and is flattered by Mrs Das’ attention. While in conversation with Mrs Das, Kapasi begins to see her as a sexual being on his own level, rather than simply a tourist; he is charmed when she includes him in their picnic. Her offer to send him some photographs encourages him to anticipate some extension of their relationship “she would write to him ... and he would respond eloquently” (Interpreter 55). For him, there was a sense of promise “that all of life’s mistakes made sense in the end” (Interpreter 56). His hopes are fuelled further when Mrs Das displays her interest in the sensuality of the carved figures at Konarak temple. A sensual image is depicted by Lahiri, of the pictures carved on the walls of Sun Temple in Konark as, “She (Mrs. Das) stopped every three or four paces, staring silently at the carved lovers, and the processions of elephants, and the topless female musicians beating on two- sided drums” (Interpreter 57).

Alas, Kapasi is merely fantasising that Mrs Das’s polite interest indicates something deeper. His attempt to prolong their tour only prompts an unwanted admission from Mrs Das that her son is not her husband’s. He is dismayed to find that she thinks of him “as a parent” rather than a potential partner, and that she has only felt comfortable in confessing to him because of his “talents” (Interpreter 65) as an interpreter. Each person has seen the other as a kind of saviour, only to be disappointed. Kapasi feels ‘insulted’ at being used by Mrs Das, while Mrs Das realises that he is merely an unimportant tour guide after all, irrelevant to her family. The character of Kapasi, then, demonstrates that human misunderstandings, and not merely cultural divides, can lead to misinterpretation. As the “slip of paper” (Interpreter 69) on which he has written his address floats away, he is reminded of the harsh truth that life is full of missed opportunities.

Thus Lahiri in this story relates the themes of marital discord, loss of communication, pathetic situation of man not only in India but in America or all over the world. Thus this story is an interpreter of human predicament and maladies. This story is replete with all kinds of imagery in this such as cultural images like dress habits, food habits, walking and talking style, etc. A vivid image of Mrs. Das’s walking style is described in these words, “She opened the car and began walking up the path, wobbling a little on her square wooden heels, reaching into the straw bag to eat handfuls of puffed rice. It fell through her fingers, leaving a zigzagging trail, causing a monkey to leap down from a tree and devour the little white grains” (Interpreter 66).

In the list of geographical imagery she has used the images of Sun Temple in Konark at Puri in Orissa, the Chandrabhaga River and also some mountain and hills. The pictorial description of Sun Temple is vivid:

The temple made of sandstone, was a massive pyramid-like structure in the shape of a chariot. It was dedicated to the great master of life, the sun which struck three sides of the edifice as it made its journey each day across the sky. Twenty- four giant wheels were carved on the north and south sides of the plinth. The whole thing was drawn by a team of seven horses, speeding as if through the heavens. (Interpreter 56)

Jhumpa lahiri makes use of animal imagery also. Imagery of monkeys in this story implies many things as monkeys are not found in America so children take more interest to watch monkeys, monkeys are also worshipped in India as Lord Hanuman, they also depicts the hunger in Orissa when Lahiri says, “They are more hungry than dangerous”(Interpreter 61). When monkeys attack Bobby this scene depicts all the animalistic qualities of monkeys such as passion etc. “Mr. Das, in his nervousness accidentally press the shutter of his camera; the whirring noise of the advancing excited the monkeys, and the one with stick began to beat Bobby more intently” (68). Thus this imagery is visual, auditory and also from animal world. Lahiri’s images diverge at many times.

Unaccustomed Earth

The title story, “Unaccustomed Earth” of Lahiri’s latest story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* is a story about the diasporic experiences of first, second and third generation of immigrants in India. It is a story not only about the various varied experiences of immigrants it is also about the human predicament in an alien land. It relates the story of a Bengali family that migrates to America. Ruma, the protagonist of this story is a second generation diasporic character. She suffers their identity crisis just like her mother. Though she is born and brought up in America yet she is unable to give up her mother’s influence on her psyche. She repeats her mother’s life style who is depicted in this story an image of a traditional mother as well as an Indian wife. The story is written in monologic and polyphonic narration. It is replete with all kinds of imagery, taken from diverge varied sources that make this story loaded with multiple meanings.

Through a reading of the incorporation of polyphonic voices in her short story “Unaccustomed Earth,” it becomes apparent that the shifts in third-person focus reveals the disjointedness of characters and their ability or disability to join the voices of their past with the voices of the present. “Unaccustomed Earth” was chosen for this analysis because it reveals that it is not only nostalgia in terms of cultural, geographical location that can hinder a character’s ability to cope with the voices of his or her past. In “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma is a young woman who proves to be more reticent toward change than her widower, old-world father. In the story, the use of monologic and polyphonic narration is often symbolic of the characters’ level of willingness to access and understand their own self in conjunction with others.

The story begins with a monologic narration of the family’s situation. The first sentence identifies the significance of the family’s situation, and leads the reader into identifying with the daughter: “After her mother’s death, Ruma’s father retired from the pharmaceutical company where he had worked for many decades and began travelling in Europe” (Unaccustomed 3). The emotionless distancing of the monologic narration reveals not only the ever-present and indirect voice of the mother, but also reveals the accustomed physical and emotional distancing between father and daughter. Ruma’s sections of the story continue to depict her mother in a monologic fashion, and her father in a self-conscious, polyphonic fashion. The style of description reveals Ruma’s unquestioning acceptance of her mother and her constant turmoil when thinking about and interacting with her father. Considering the associations Ruma has with her mother’s strong connections with India (Unaccustomed 6) and her father, who “resembled an American in his old age” (Unaccustomed 11), her constant connections with monologic narration emphasizes how much Lahiri thematically empowers the characters who are open to polyphony. While Ruma’s character is the only one who actively seeks “the perfect balance,” her inability to disengage the nostalgia of her mother with her traditional, old world ways, leaves her incapable of achieving such a state. The narrator takes over Ruma’s portions of the story in a way that reveals her inability to deal with trauma. The blunt description of her mother’s death declares that “she had died on the operating table, of heart failure; anaesthesia for routine gallstone surgery had triggered anaphylactic shock” (Unaccustomed 5). Readers learn only of the facts of the death, and the lack of emotional effect it has on Ruma reveals it is a moment in the past she is either not capable of handling or toward which she no longer has feeling. Also, since Ruma constantly identifies herself with her mother (and against her Americanized father), there is the subconscious problem of both women’s hearts: neither women seem capable of letting go of the past and therefore have trouble opening their hearts to the voices of the present, even in

small, everyday scenarios. This concentration on the past (India) reveals why Ruma is unable to connect not only her father, but her husband and son as well (America).

In the sections dedicated to describing the father, readers actually learn more about Ruma: emotional trappings that she is unaware of in her monologic view of the world. Ruma is too engaged in the loss of her mother, and the stable world of Indian tradition that she represents, to realize that the criticisms she subconsciously holds against her father are actually more reflective of her own flaws. This condemnation is first seen when her father arrives at her house:

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. She was struck by the degree to which her father resembled an American in his old age. With his gray hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere. It was her mother who would have stuck out in this wet Northern landscape, in her brightly colored saris, her dime-sized maroon bindi, her jewels. (Unaccustomed 11)

In reading this excerpt, it is helpful to apply Sunil Bhatia's ethnographic view of dialogue: "Dialogue provides the means by which a person's self is created or revealed: it is the ground on which the self is constructed" (qtd. in Kemper 20). With this application, it is apparent that Ruma's editorial commentary that seeps into her father's description reveals much about her own character. It is her eyes that notice the Americanized, tourist-like banality of her father's attire and contrasts it with the vivid, exotic description of her mother. Ruma's denigration of her father's vague sense of ethnicity reveals how important it is for her to be clearly identified as Indian. Even the father's hat, the common place tourist souvenir, reminds her of the trip he just took, which was originally planned for her and her mother to take. Instead of noticing the placid earth-and-sky outfit that represents his newfound sense of happiness and connection to earth (rather than just one culture), she notices that he resembles an American, and therefore, in her eyes, can never truly be one. Regardless of the fact that her father has lived and worked in America her entire life, it is she, not him, who decides he cannot fulfil what it takes to be an American. However, as the story ensues, it becomes apparent that she finds more difficulty in connecting to other Americans than her father does. Therefore, in one description of the father, readers are made aware of the conflicting voices within Ruma. She cannot mediate between the Indian traditions of her mother's nostalgia and the acceptance of traditionally Americanized customs in her father. With both parents representing the oppositions on Ruma's diasporic spectrum, she does not know where to fall in between.

When describing how her father teaches Bengali to his grandson, Ruma's compounded guilt and insecurities reveal themselves in the statement "Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult" (Unaccustomed 12); language imagery here is noteworthy. Her revelation of guilt toward not being (nor wanting to be) the strong and traditional mother her own mother was, and the guilt for not continuing the traditions her own mother held so dearly are more important to her than the spoken language. When Ruma first shows her house to her father when he comes to visit her, "she felt self-conscious of her successful life with Adam, and at the same time she felt a quiet slap of rejection, gathering, from his continued silence, that none of it impressed him" (Unaccustomed 15-16).

Readers have the benefit from knowing from the father's section that this thought had not crossed his mind, so the polyphonic nature of the comment reveals Ruma's own problems with her own perceived inadequacies, without her even recognizing the fact. In Ruma's portions of the story, she spends more time thinking about others, but in return revealing more about herself and her inability to join the two dominant voices (mother/tradition and father/change) in her life. Not traumatized by the death of his wife, he freely comments on her loss and the pleasure of solitude as "the responsibility of his family [was] absent"

(Unaccustomed 8). He even becomes involved with a random woman, Mrs. Bagchi, because he knows he does not have to commit due to the fact that “she was adamant about not marrying” (Unaccustomed 9).

However, the father’s polyphonic freedom is at the cost of ignoring his past. He cannot fully ignore it, though, considering the only reason he met his new love; is because they were the only two Bengalis on a tour group, so “naturally they’d struck up a conversation” (Unaccustomed 9). The term “naturally” comes from the father himself, revealing his inherent ties to his Bengali ethnicity. While strangers immediately label him via his cultural affinity, he also cannot escape the language and race he was born with. The fact that this character remains labelled only “her father” throughout the rest of the story also reveals that he cannot escape his inherent ties to his family and Bengali ethnicity.

While Ruma’s polyphonic sections revealed a reluctance to let go of the past, or rather, to accept new voice of the present, the father’s polyphonic sections reveal the ineffectuality of completely letting it go in favour of whatever voices are at present. Ruma’s utterances reveal the voice of a young woman struggling to mediate her personal life and the voice of her cultural past, while her father’s utterances do the opposite. The disjointedness between and within these related characters emphasizes the need for others to participate in the construction of self. Indian traditions are not portrayed as simple, stagnant, and outdated, and American traditions are not merely progressive, exciting, and innovative: rather, it is the correct combination of the two, along with the many other voices represented (emotional, familial, and personal symbols abound), that provides characters with empowerment. Human “coming to consciousness,” as Bakhtin says, “is a constant struggle between these two types of discourse: an attempt to assimilate more into one’s own system, and the simultaneous freeing of one’s own discourse from the authoritative word” (qtd. in Kemper 23). In the diaspora, as Ruma reveals, it is not only an assimilation into one’s own system, but to actually create one’s own as well. Characters who empower one voice over another, those who cling to voices of nostalgia, suffer.

Thus, Lahiri has depicted various themes with the help of imagery. Imagery has provided the stories a kind of structural unity and they has become rich as far as themes are concerned.

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