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An Analysis of Child Characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction

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Abstract:

In the present article an attempt has been made to analyze the portrayal of child characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction. Most of her child characters are either second or third generation immigrants caught between two worlds and those who belong to neither category somehow manage to get a taste of another culture. I will focus on their role and significance in the narratives along with tracing the answers for these questions—to what extent they influence and get influenced by the people around them? What sort of experience, environment and incidents shape them and their mind? How they react emotionally, socially and culturally? In some stories, a child character is either absent or its character not developed. Yet it affects the plot of the story in its absence or diminished way of presence because they work as the very foundation.

Keywords: Child characters, development, experience, environment.

Jhumpa Lahiri, the celebrated Indian American author has now become truly an international figure with her books widely published and praised. She began her literary career with a short story collection entitled *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) which not only raised her to fame and dignity but also brought her numerous awards including the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. Next she wrote a novel *The Namesake* (2003) which was equally praised and later adapted into a Hollywood movie of the same name. It was followed by another short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) which debuted at number one on the *New York Times* best seller list and also won Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. Thereafter, before fully immersing herself in Italian language and culture, she published her second novel *The Lowland* (2013) which was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize.

To begin with the very first collection of short stories by the author entitled *Interpreter of Maladies*, one comes across many child characters for instance, Lilia in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine". Lilia is a second generation Indian American girl with very scant knowledge about her ancestral home. She is an Americanized girl, who has been granted enough freedom by her parents for they do not force her to follow certain values nor do they stop her from following new traditions in fact they encourage her to become American. Because of them she was fully assimilated in the American culture and used to celebrate Halloween with a lot of cheerfulness by carving pumpkin to make a jack-o'-lantern and becoming a witch for trick-or-treating. Despite of this she was referred by many Americans as an 'Indian' witch.

At one point in the narrative she says that she has not been thought how to pray reflecting less religious attitude of her parents. Her parents don't consider it as their responsibility to instill the same cultural values in their child like other immigrant parents. She was born and raised in the multicultural American society and Mrs. Kenyon who represent the American school system limited her knowledge to the nation's history and geography by prohibiting her to cross the American territory when she wanted to learn about another nation with the result that she did not know much about other nations even her parents' native country India, a fact that perplexed only her father and not her mother who seemed genuinely proud of the fact that her daughter was born in America and will continue to live there.

She becomes very curious after knowing that Mr. Pirzada, a regular visitor at her home, is not an Indian but an East Pakistani. She wonders how Mr. Pirzada and her parents can belong to different nations when they have the same culture and mannerisms. She is quick to perceive that there is no difference between them in spite of their different nationality:

It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. (25)

Therefore, through the innocence of Lilia, Lahiri points out the meaninglessness of those divisions or borders which only disintegrate the society and its people when it can be really harmonised by peace and love beyond religion and region as represented by Lilia's parents and Mr. Pirzada in the present story.

Lilia is portrayed as a young girl having sentiments and emotions for Mr. Pirzada and his family in distress. She is full of compassion for Mr. Pirzada's daughters who live in a distant land and whom she has never met but a strange connection is established because of Mr. Pirzada who misses them a lot but finds himself unable to do anything for them. She is aware of his longings and desires as well as his incapability to do anything except for bringing a candy everyday for her because she reminds him of his seven daughters. So, Mr. Pirzada's presence in her house brought awareness to her that life is not always so happy and peaceful everywhere as hers was. She witnessed her parents and Mr. Pirzada following the war waged on East Pakistani soil. She did not experience the same anxiety that they felt and yet she was not untouched by it. She shared in her own silent way the pain felt by them during the war time and prayed for Mr. Pirzada's family's safety, one thing she was never taught to do by her parents. She says, ". . . I prayed that Mr. Pirzada's family was safe and sound. I had never prayed for anything before, had never been taught or told to, but I decided, given the circumstances, that it was something I should do. That night when I went to the bathroom I only pretended to brush my teeth, for I feared that I would somehow rinse the prayer out as well." (32) Once when Mr. Pirzada was back to his country she missed him

finally knowing “what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months.” (42)

In the fifth story “Sexy” a seven year old boy Rohin is instrumental in bringing self awareness in Miranda, an American girl, who is having an affair with a married Indian man Dev. A single afternoon was enough to bring Miranda back to her senses who had been involved in the wrong relationship. Rohin’s mind is sharper not only because he is a genius who already knows four languages but also because he has seen a lot at such a small age. He is well aware of his parents’ relationship that is breaking down as well as the reason behind it. In his words, “He [Rohin’s father] sat next to someone he didn’t know, someone sexy, and now he loves her instead of my mother.” (108) The strong impact of their collapsing relationship is visible in his mere appearance as Miranda noticed that he had dark circles under his eyes that “made him look haggard, as if he smoked a great deal and slept very little, in spite of the fact that he was only seven years old.” (100) He loves to do many activities but not for too long otherwise he will get bored. On many occasions he gives proof of his maturity for instance he asked Miranda to draw things in the living room so that he can memorize it. At this Miranda asked,

“Memorize what?”

“Our day together.” He reached for another rice cake.

“Why do you want to memorize it?”

“Because we’re never going to see each other, ever again.”

The precision of the phrase startled her. (104)

Not only by his words but also by his actions he hints at his maturity for instance in spite of being too young he demands for a cup of coffee. Both Rohin’s father and Dev were attracted to western girls below their age and without wasting a moment began their affairs knowing well that it is meaningless and without any sort of future.

Rohin’s description of his mother’s plight might have also made her realize her mistake that she was committing against the other woman. Again in the words of Rohin, “My mother has puffiness. She says it’s a cold, but really she cries, sometimes for hours. Sometimes straight through dinner. Sometimes she cries so hard her eyes puff up like bullfrogs.” (104) Rohin’s words more specifically his definition of the word ‘sexy’ caught Miranda off guard when she demanded to know the meaning or secret. “He cupped his hands around his mouth, and then he whispered, “It means loving someone you don’t know.”

Miranda felt Rohin’s words under her skin, the same way she’d felt Dev’s. But instead of going hot she felt numb.” (107-108) She decided to terminate her relationship with Dev, a relationship that was purely based on lust, was unfair and meaningless from the beginning. Therefore, Rohin’s appearance provides a vision to Miranda who begins to see things in a different light with a new perspective.

The sixth story entitled "Mrs. Sen's" is focused on two characters, Mrs. Sen and her American ward Eliot. Eliot comes to Mrs. Sen's house each afternoon after school to spend the rest of the day under her care and during that period he came to know and appreciate her in his own predictable way. Here we get to know an American child's perspective on an Indian woman since the whole story is narrated from his point of view.

Mrs. Sen is the protagonist in the story who is suffering because of her loneliness but Eliot is no less isolated who lives with his mother in a beach house. To reduce her loneliness she starts day caring for Eliot. Eliot observed Mrs. Sen and her activities very closely and also formed a unique relationship with her, a relationship built to fill the void in each one's life as well as to draw comfort from it. She got a companion in him with whom she went for shopping, for driving practice and shared all her feelings telling him about the difficulties of living in a new land with a husband who is always busy at work. It was a relationship that resembled the relation between a mother and a child. He received motherly love from her who made sure that he always get something to eat after coming back to home unlike his two previous babysitters one of whom "refused to prepare any food for Eliot containing meat" and another's "thermos contained more whiskey than coffee." (111) Even at the end of the story after the accident when they are back at home and Mrs. Sen is emotionally hurt she still "prepared a plate of crackers with peanut butter . . ." for him and also asked her husband to give him a Popsicle in case he is still hungry. (134)

There are few stories in this collection where a child character is either absent or its character not developed yet it affects the plot of the story in its absence or diminished way of presence because they are work as the very foundation.

In the first story of the collection, "A Temporary Matter" we witness an Indian-American couple, Shukumar and Shoba, preoccupied with the thought of their stillborn child. They both were planning elaborately for their first baby but fate had decided otherwise and they were forced to bear the loss and it was so immense that its impact was clearly visible in their relationship that was on the verge to die. They are seen trying to cope with it but even after many months they have not retreated to their normal life. Shukumar instead of working on the final chapters of his dissertation spends all of his time at home doing nothing particular except cooking. Even in their three bed-room apartment they managed to avoid each other as far as possible. Both were mourning for their baby separately, silently in their own way. The distance between the couple widens as the time passes and none of them is seen putting any effort to restore their past relationship. All they were trying was to escape the bitter reality of life. But towards the end of the story we witness the same child becoming the cause to reunite them again when Shukumar confessed that he had seen their baby and held him before he was cremated. He said, "Our baby was a boy" adding "[h]is skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighed almost five pounds. His fingers were curled shut, just like yours in the night." (22) Thus, after months of strange separation they were finally united that is symbolized by "the Bradfords [who] were walking arm in arm" and also made clear by the fact that "[t]hey wept together, for the things they now knew." (22)

In the title story of the collection “Interpreter of Maladies” both major characters Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi were facing crisis in their marital life which was marked by “the bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences.” (53) The root of such crisis was the presence or absence of a child. Mrs. Das suffered because of the presence of her second child Bobby who was born out of wedlock while Mr. Kapasi’s loss of a child became the cause of his strained relation with his wife that began and continued soon after the death of his first son. The presence of Bobby always reminded her of her guilt and made her feel terrible. She wanted to get rid of this unhealthy feeling by seeking remedy for it through Mr. Kapasi. At one point she speaks to Mr. Kapasi,

I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away. One day I had the urge to throw everything I own out the window, the television, the children, everything.

[. . .] I’m tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I’ve been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy. (65)

She was really young when she married Raj and then soon they had their first child. “[S]he was overwhelmed by it all, having a child so quickly, and nursing, and warming up bottles of milk and testing their temperature against her wrist while Raj was at work . . .” (63) “[S]he was left at home all day with the baby, surrounded by toys that made her trip when she walked or wince when she sat, always cross and tired.” (64) This is the reason that she didn’t protest when the friend approached her one afternoon.

Towards the end of the story Bobby landed into a terrible situation because of his mother’s fault who spilled the puffed rice along the path that attracted several monkeys and later Mr. Das “accidentally pressed the shutter on his camera; the whirring noise of the advancing film excited the monkeys, and the one with the stick began to beat Bobby more intently.” (68) Eventually, the boy was rescued by Mr. Kapasi who knew the secret of his parentage.

In Lahiri’s debut novel *The Namesake*, Moushumi Mazoomdar appears as a victim of cultural roots. She was the daughter of Gogol’s parents’ friends and makes her first appearance in chapter four during Gogol’s fourteenth birthday party wearing glasses and reading *Pride and Prejudice* while the other children watch television. As a young girl she was bookish, aloof and never associated with the other kids. She first lived in London before coming to Massachusetts, a move that she detests and so stubbornly clings to her British accent for as long as possible. Being the only child of her parents for many years until her brother Samrat was born she was the centre of her parents’ attention and care. They were fearful and suspicious of America and American culture and like other immigrant parents maintaining their native culture was their most important goal. In the early years of her childhood she was forced by her parents especially by her mother, who wanted her to be rooted in the Indian soil and at the same time prosper in the Western air, to behave in a certain manner and follow some traditions. During pujos that held twice a year she had to

wear a sari. Besides this, once at a Christmas party at her home her mother forced her, in spite of her reluctance, to play "Jingle Bells" on the piano. "For an instant she had glared at her mother, but then she'd played the song, again and again, as the numbers were called out and people claimed their gifts, sitting with her back to the room." (201) She did not know back then how to protest therefore suffered silently all that was in her fate while her parents, though unconsciously, continued to torture her by just being Indian and this caused her to go through cultural, emotional and psychological pain and affliction. Her relatives too played their part by asking questions pertaining to her marriage, at the tender age when such questions were irrelevant:

When she was only five years old, she was asked by her relatives if she planned to get married in a red sari or a white gown.

[. . .] She hated the way they would talk of the details of her wedding, the menu and the different colors of saris she would wear for the different ceremonies, as if it were a fixed certainty in her life. She hated when her grandmother would unlock her almari, showing her which jewels would be hers when the day came. (213)

That is why her hatred for her native culture and traditions emerged quite early during childhood and persisted throughout life.

In the short story entitled "Hell-Heaven", that appeared in Lahiri's second collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth*, the young child narrator Usha witnessed her parents' dull relationship as well as the new joyous one that was being formed between her mother and Pranab kaku. In a way, Usha's presence made it possible for them to see each other almost regularly. In Usha's words, "I was always there when he visited. It would have been inappropriate for my mother to receive him in the apartment alone" (64) She was always pressed by her mother not to become an American as Pranab kaku who married an American girl going against the wishes of his parents who finally disowned him. As a child having no other alternatives she followed her mother's commands but never hide her displeasure. If there was any sort of happiness in her life it was brought by Pranab's American girlfriend Deborah. In Usha's words, "We [Usha and Deborah] exchanged what I believed were secret smiles, and in those moments I felt that she understood me better than anyone else in the world." (70)

Hema and Kaushik constitute the second part of the short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* and appear at three different stages of age in three interlinked stories. In the story "Once in a Lifetime" they first meet as teenagers when Kaushik's family moved back to America after seven years for his mother's sake who was dying and feeling suffocated in Bombay by the attention of the people who surrounded her all the time and knew that she was dying.

Hema is attracted towards him for his handsome looks who, though belonged to the circle of her parents, is different from her cousins in India and also does not share the strong accent of their parents. Both families come from different backgrounds and the financial disparity is evident from the very beginning but the fact that they belong to the same region

unites them in a distant world. Both Hema and Kaushik were the only child of their parents and so they were showered with lots of love, attention and care. Like Lahiri's other child characters they too seem quite mature at their young age. Hema is portrayed as a dutiful, dedicated and emotional girl reminding us of Lilia from "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" but not thoroughly unrestricted in general matters. She serves as a mild link between the two families which is visible through her eyes. She also knows each character's secret but has kept it all to herself. And finally as an Indian-American girl she also harbours some fears such as being ridiculed by fellow classmates upon knowing that she shares her room with her parents. She says:

My mother considered the idea of a child sleeping alone a cruel American practice and therefore did not encourage it, even when we had the space. She told me that she had slept in the same bed as her parents until the day she was married and that this was perfectly normal. But I knew that it was not normal, not what my friends at school did, and that they would ridicule me if they knew. (229)

She was fearful of being perceived as the other, "I almost never revealed details of my home life to my American friends. As a child, I had always dreaded my birthdays, when a dozen girls would appear in the house, glimpsing the way we lived." (236-237) Shahnawaz Begum in her article, "Generations in Diaspora: Perspectives of Child Characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's Stories," remarks that Hema "suffers from a cultural schizophrenia and a sense of inferiority complex" which is commonly visible among second generation immigrants who inhabit a liminal space and constantly try to keep a balance between conflicting cultures. (112)

Kaushik preferred to be outside rather than staying at home because it helped him to escape the harsh reality surrounding his mother's illness. Apparently his mother's illness accounts for his aloofness. Both his personality and behaviour are a reflection of his emotions and a deep hidden secret of his mother's illness. The question that naturally rises in the reader's mind is what prompted Kaushik to disclose the long hidden secret of his mother's illness to young Hema? Did it help him feel better in anyway? Of course not, his mother was still dying but surely it hints at their future secret affair in Rome after decades that will just like this one will remain only between the two.

Kaushik's little step sisters namely Rupa and Piu appear in the short story entitled "Years' End". Their mother's remarriage brought them to America where they met Kaushik and developed with him a sister-brother bond while spending some cheerful moments but their frail bond ended very soon in bitterness when Kaushik caught them secretly going through his mother's pictures. Therefore, the innocent girls became the object of his frustration.

Rupa and Piu influenced Kaushik and in turn got influenced by him. They, unknowingly, helped each other in coming out from their protected zones. The little girls who were over protected by their mother and were never left alone were forced to come out from their over protected zones when after getting infuriated he left them alone all by themselves

during night. He himself assumed that they would come out to stop him from going away but it did not happen. "Rupa and Piu never came out of their room, never opened the door to see or question what I was doing, and when I started the car they did not rush out of the house to beg me to stay." (287) The little girls who were once so eager to share little things with their mother were now able to keep such terrible incident from her. They kept the secret of Kaushik's ill treatment of them to themselves, never revealing anything to anyone about the things that he "had said and done that night" and "in their silence they continued both to protect and to punish" him. (293) Thus, they were finally out of their protected zones.

Rupa and Piu's mother's curiosity led them to the discovery of a shoebox containing Kaushik's mother's pictures thus they also forced him to confront the reality of the past that he was evading for a long time. He was haunted by past memories that contained his dear mother. He did not want to share anything related to his mother with anyone. Eventually he was forced by the little girls to confront his past and later to move away from that. After expressing his anger and ranting at them he left the house taking his things and the shoebox containing his mother's photographs and drove for days. Then "[o]ne day close to the Canadian border . . . [he] found a spot that was particularly striking". The next day he went to the same spot with the shoebox containing his mother's pictures and after going through them briefly he "could no longer bear their sight." (292) He "put them back in the box and began to break the hardened ground. . . . [T]he hole was not impressive, but it was deep enough to conceal the box." (292) Therefore, though their frail bond ended very soon but it was not completely lacking purpose that was fulfilled with their parting.

In the second novel by Jhumpa Lahiri entitled *The Lowland*, Bela Mitra, daughter of Udayan and Gauri, appears perhaps as the most tortured young soul in Lahiri's all narratives who was separated from or rather relinquished by her mother at the tender age of twelve and went through psychological problems. Though she was never very close to her mother but still by then she was accustomed to her invisible mother's presence that was affecting her now in her real absence. During such crisis, only her foster father Subhash could help her though being unaware of the circumstances she blamed him for driving away her mother and not putting any effort to bring her back. But as the story develops she proves herself much stronger person than expected.

Another child character who appears in the novel is Bela's four years old daughter Meghna who likes to draw pictures and is shown curious about the old woman who is actually her maternal grandmother Gauri paying a visit to Subhash's home when he happened to be away. When Bela came to Subhash after being pregnant with Meghna, Subhash decided finally to tell the truth about her parentage and though he was fearful that she will leave him forever it did not happen if anything the revelation brought them closer than ever before. Therefore, the impact of an unborn child can be seen working in a positive way. Not only this but she also brought the light of hope in Gauri's life at the end of the novel when Bela informed her mother through a letter that if in future after knowing everything Meghna will be willing to have a relationship with her she will facilitate it.

To conclude, Lahiri's child characters seem more mature than their age and one of the reasons behind this is their position between two cultures which helps them to gain vast experience though such cultural experience sometimes makes them rebellious in nature. They have an ability to influence people in a positive way as we saw a stillborn baby reuniting its parents even in its death, a little girl silently consoling a visitor who was missing his family caught in a war zone, a little boy bringing an American woman back to her senses through his words and then an American boy reducing an Indian woman's isolation through his companionship. In some cases, they represent the past or guilt which is often associated with a moment when they did not exist. Despite this, they became the source of trauma and frustration for their mother by their mere existence. Next we saw a girl badly caught in the cultural mesh and after that we came across a young boy trying to escape the harsh reality and a young girl narrator serving as a mild link between two families. We also saw two sisters and their step brother, unconsciously, helping out each other in tough times. At last when we saw an unborn child uniting the father and daughter after years of strange separation and later turning into a ray of hope for a person living in isolation, once again, their power to influence and unite people was manifested. Thus many individual, emotional and cultural factors contribute to their development. Through them Lahiri has developed keen observers, silent sufferers and hybrid souls. Eventually, it can be said that they hold a place as significant as any adult character at least in Jhumpa Lahiri's fictional world.

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