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Jhumpa Lahiri: A Diasporic Writer with a Difference

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Abstract:

In the past five decades, numerous Indian-born writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh or Salman Rushdie have placed issues connected to diasporic identities at the center of their narratives but none delineates such experience more deeply than Jhumpa Lahiri. Migrants have traditionally been confronted with two alternatives: resist full assimilation and maintain a high degree of separatism, or pursue full absorption in the host society. But, Lahiri, as Thomas Faist says, has proposed a third model, namely “surviving in multiple transnationalized forms in conjunction with other equally translocal and hybridized cultures across many borders” (qtd. in Kennedy and Roudomet of 22). The present article, focusing on these aspects, seeks to show Jhumpa Lahiri’s difference from other diasporic writers.

Keywords: Diasporic, assimilation, transnational, hybrid.

In the past five decades, numerous Indian-born writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh or Salman Rushdie have placed issues connected to diasporic identities at the center of their narratives but none delineates such experience more deeply than Jhumpa Lahiri. Her oeuvre belongs to what Rosemary Marangoly George calls the “immigrant genre”, namely that type of “contemporary literary writing in which the politics and experience of location or rather of ‘dislocation’ are the central narratives” (George 278). She also suggests that “it is the search for a location where one can feel at home, in spite of the obvious foreignness of the space that propels the discourse engendered by the experience of immigration” (285). This ‘feeling at home’ may or may not require assimilation into mainstream culture, and often the process of making oneself at home stretches across several successive generations. Therefore, George proclaims that the marks of the immigrant genre are the easy movement between past, present, and future, as well as between countries.

Born in London in 1967 to Indian parents, and migrated with them to the United States two years later, Lahiri’s narratives are a mixture of fiction and autobiography filtered through a

dual lens, even though she confessed that while growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s, she felt neither Indian nor American:

“Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was generally the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another” (Lahiri “My Two Lives” 2006).

The hyphen both separates and joins, and from the interstices thus created Lahiri is able to investigate both sides.

As a twice-displaced individual, Jhumpa Lahiri challenges “theories of diaspora which fail to consider the ‘differential’ and uneven experiences of migration” (Mishra 158). Her first collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, captures the out-of-context lives of immigrants, expatriates and first-generation Americans of Indian descent, thus giving the collection a “decisive orientation towards anxieties of the diaspora in the place where they are at, not where they came from” (Mishra 191). Her limboic narrative is mainly about cultural translations, about first-generation Indian immigrants coming to terms with the loneliness of displacement and their struggle “to master a new landscape, to map and read it as ‘natives’ do” (Mishra 175).

Migrants have traditionally been confronted with two alternatives: resist full assimilation and maintain a high degree of separatism, or pursue full absorption in the host society. But, Lahiri, as Thomas Faist says, has proposed a third model, namely “surviving in multiple transnationalized forms in conjunction with other equally translocal and hybridized cultures across many borders” (qtd. in Kennedy and Roudomet of 22). This is particularly relevant for characters from Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* because they have more dynamic relations with the transnational spaces they inhabit. Kaushik, for instance, does not feel the need for a concrete homeland, but continuously negotiates his state of being in-between the place of origin and that of destination. Having lived in several countries, he does not need to imagine a community as tied to a particular location.

Women in Lahiri’s work are particularly powerfully affected by the multi-ethnic environment of the cities they migrate to, thus paralleling the global power structure as a whole. The majority of Lahiri’s first-generation female characters, no doubt, first go through processes of disorientation and loneliness in foreign cities. Ultimately, however, they are able to negotiate these transnational urban environments in their favor. Eventually, they develop a more flexible relationship with their home(s), have an occupation other than taking care of the house, and educate their children to choose the best elements from the two cultures in which they are raised.

There is a clear progression in Jhumpa Lahiri's works from first-generation women who struggle to reconcile home and alien culture (Mrs. Sen from *Interpreter of Maladies*), to fellow first-generation characters who become transnational migrants (Ashima from *The Namesake*), and finishing with second-generation representatives who have allegiances to multiple places and a much more dynamic relationship to the concept of 'home' (Moushumi from *The Namesake* and several female characters from *Unaccustomed Earth*). In *The Lowland* Gauri, the most feminist of Lahiri's characters, becomes Professor of philosophy at a Californian college.

Like other diasporic writers, the house, no doubt, becomes a powerful metaphor for security, permanence and belonging, an expression of immigrant identity in all of Lahiri's written productions. However, Lahiri's characters are not stuck to home in the traditional sense. In *Interpreter of Maladies* the author rounds up her first book with a story, "The Third and Final Continent", in which an anonymous narrator and his wife eventually buy their own house, become perfectly acculturated, and raise their only son in a harmonious space between Indian and American culture. Although they do travel to Calcutta from time to time, the place they now call 'home' is a house with a small garden on a quiet, boulevard street in a town about twenty miles from Boston. Consequently, immigration is a positive phenomenon, allowing limbo members to be anchored at once in the local and the global, to inhabit both imagined and encountered communities, and to feel at home even away from home.

In *The Namesake* the house initially appears as the axis where Ashima Ganguli, a first-generation immigrant and the main female character, aims to preserve her Indianness and recreate homeland traditions while rearing Indian-American children. However, it gradually becomes a transnational space. After her husband's demise she decides to abandon any permanent residence and travel back and forth between her homeland and her adoptive country. She spends six months in India and six in the United States, staying with kith and kin. The house, representing her desperate search for stability in the early years in the United States, becomes something she must let go of. Although it breaks her heart to be "picking the bones of the house clean" (*Namesake* 277), by severing the physical connection to the building she has come to love, she actually achieves greater freedom. In fact, Ashima no longer needs a single house to call 'home', but she feels at home wherever members of her family may be.

The Unaccustomed Earth, second collection of short stories, further explores the permeability of borders typical of emergent transnational spaces. For most Indian-Americans featured in Lahiri's third volume, *The Unaccustomed Earth*, the corporal house is not vital anymore and they do not cling to it in order to feel at home somewhere in the world. In general, first- and second-generation representatives look forward to extensive travels across the world and no longer desire to be tied down to a specific house or place. However, in the last three stories, grouped under the subtitle "Hema and Kaushik", the house has an altogether different significance for the two eponymous characters. While Kaushik opts for a rootless existence after

his mother dies and his father remarries, Hema is reluctant to renounce the security provided by a fixed home. He lives like a nomad, relocating from place to place for his job as a photojournalist, not feeling the necessity to establish a permanent residence. She, on the other hand, travels to Rome for her research on the Etruscan civilization before retreating to the United States to share a house with an Indian husband she does not love. Unlike Hema, two other Lahirian women from *The Unaccustomed Earth*, Sudha from 'Only Goodness' and Sang from 'Nobody's Business', renounce their American houses behind and move to London without looking back. In *The Lowland*, Lahiri's second novel, immigrants adapt relatively easily to a foreign country and culture. Therefore, the houses they dwell are not so important anymore.

Although Lahiri's fiction is still populated by a large diversity of characters, allowing her to capture the Indian/Bengali-American experience from several viewpoints and to put forth fresh patterns of national and transnational identities, Lahiri's 'Others' are not too spicy and not all that different from mainstream Americans. Readers are thus presented with a tinge of difference, but it is a comfortable, "palatable" otherness displayed in Lahiri's depoliticized fiction. Indeed, her narratives focus on the domestic space and on familial relations. Her characters are recognizably ethnic, but there is a "taming and domesticating of South Asianness" (Rajan 128). To the outside world these characters constitute a safe and desirable difference, one that conforms to the model of successful citizenship and that invites a human, universal connection. Srikanth calls them "ornamental Indians" (59), a harmless presence in the American ethnic landscape. Those who deviate from this inoffensive norm are excluded from both Indian and American communities.

Lahiri goes beyond traditional mainstream American fiction and hyphenated American fiction in the sense that in her world, "the past is not a revenge tragedy that will never play itself out" (Caesar, 91). Instead, her first- and second-generation characters come in contact with difference, and most of them are able to filter the best elements of both cultures. Thus, Mala skillfully navigates cultural boundaries and adjusts as much as necessary. Shoba also does that until she decides to reject (maybe only temporarily) her Indianness because she thinks she has failed at this end of her hyphen. Twinkle, too, seems at ease with her double identity, and is enthusiastic about the ideas and values of other people. The numerous children featured in the volume *Interpreter of Maladies* show openness and curiosity towards foreign cultures. Lilia, Eliot, or Rohin try to understand difference and embrace it with their unbiased minds and souls. Therefore, unlike many minority American writers, Lahiri "depicts being bicultural as a blessing – a mixed blessing, assuredly, but a blessing" (Caesar, 91).

Although some of the female characters from the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* are not willing (Mrs. Sen) or able (Mina Das) to fluently translate between the two different worlds, overall the book deepens the readers' understanding of the Indian culture. Most characters who immigrate and strive to transcend various boundaries actually manage to do so. Perhaps the most

important ‘lesson’ for readers is that cultural translations go both ways and all characters, from ages seven to one hundred- and-three, are capable of performing them and come out enriched.

Ashima, Moushumi, and Gogol in *The Namesake* evolve in different ways and, eventually, embody some very ‘American’ traits like striving for personal achievement, flexibility, and adaptability to change. These features shape their identities and ease their transition as transnational characters. Interestingly, the two female personages make very bold moves across borders (both physical and cultural), working towards the dissolution of these already permeable boundaries. Ashima’s transition is extremely relevant since she is first translated from postcolonial to immigrant, then to American and finally to transnational citizen, perfectly mixing old and new. In fact, she becomes a transmigrant, an individual who moves freely across national frontiers. Her transnationality is constructed in “borderlands”, to quote Anzaldúa’s phrase, showing how identity can become a matter of choice, not geography or inheritance even for a first generation Indian woman immigrant.

Although the process of negotiating a third space is not easy for Moushumi either, this second-generation representative chooses to join a ‘community of taste’. A global citizen who does not long for a homeland, she moves to a country to which she feels a strong cultural attachment. Her former husband, Gogol, develops in the course of the novel from hybrid to transnational traveler. Unlike Moushumi, however, he is drawn back to New York (his *terra firma*, the closest he has to roots and a home). Interestingly, for him this place so close to the region where he was born proves to be the place from where there is nowhere left to go. His journey is not so much a physical one, but more a metaphorical inner search for his self.

Representatives of the first generation have had a traditional arranged marriage, usually before coming to the United States, and they insist on their children marrying fellow Indian-Americans as a way of safeguarding and passing down their ethnic heritage. Although many second-generation characters give in to the insistence of their parents and get together with co-ethnics, this does not guarantee a good matrimony. Characters from *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) like Mina and Raj Das, Shoba and Shukumar, Twinkle and Sanjeev, or Moushumi and Gogol from *The Namesake* (2003), have unexpected struggles in their unions.

Written almost a decade after her debut volume, *Unaccustomed Earth* focuses on the children of immigrants, now in their adulthood, and surveys more mixed marriages than previous volumes. But Ruma and Adam, Pranab and Deborah, Amit and Megan, Sudha and Roger, Sudha’s brother Rahul and Elena, also have their difficulties, while Hema and Navin’s interracial relationship seems dead from the very beginning. Therefore, it cannot be argued that Lahiri prescribes one or the other as the key to a happy marriage. This happens because they have been raised in a Western society and their parents’ successful companionship is hard to replicate in a land where personal freedom and thriving careers are valued more.

Jhumpa Lahiri uses different tropes to reflect her characters' struggle as they undergo processes of acculturation and transplantation. The ways in which they negotiate spaces as they relocate from India to the United States, or from one American city to another, mirror their efforts of dealing with new cultural and social environments. Ruma and her father from *The Unaccustomed Earth* acknowledge their "inner emotional truths", and this helps them push forward in American and transnational spaces. They are able to re-imagine their place in the world, and, in a sense they are born again. But, while Ruma is successfully transplanted in unaccustomed earth, her father is freed of permanent roots. Other characters from *Unaccustomed Earth*, such as Kaushik or Sang, do not feel the need for a concrete homeland anymore, but continuously negotiate their state of being in-between the place of origin and that of destination. Having lived in several countries, they no longer need to imagine a community as tied to a particular location. The Sarkars from the same collection *The Unaccustomed Earth* are not among the Indians who immigrate in order to improve their economic condition, but itinerant characters, feeling at home on every continent, and not wanting to be pinned down anywhere. They are constantly on the move and embody the global transnational tendencies.

Thus, in the prose of Jhumpa Lahiri characters eventually exploit in their favor the 'vacuum space' and become hypermobile global citizens, comfortably negotiating several spaces while transcending traditional geographic, social, and political boundaries. They invite readers to forsake dichotomous notions of limboric identities who either long for a permanent return to a mythic homeland (the *desh* in Hindi), or struggle to assimilate in a foreign hostland (the *videsh*). The alternative that opens up is a transnational space that limboric identities, men and women, first- and second-generation alike, can explore freely. The inherent transitionality of limboric experience bears, in Lahiri's works, an empowering and productive potential similar to Homi Bhabha's 'third space'. In this way she establishes her literary originality and takes up her distinct place in the gallery of Indian- American writers.

It is safe to conclude that the future of ethnic fiction and limboric identity lies in the transnational because it provides characters with an outlet from stifling social, historical, and psychological conditions. The cure for not knowing the language, not feeling at home, and not belonging, seems to be belonging everywhere. Indeed, all of Lahiri's narratives emphasize this liberating subjectivising and transnational pattern of belonging.

Belonging nowhere is belonging everywhere.

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