

Cultural Dilemmas and Displacement in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri

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ABSTRACT

Cross-border migrations being common during colonial/post-colonial period and more frequent during the reforms period, there are scores of Indian diasporic writers including Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Nirad C. Choudhury, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, Agha Shahid Ali, Amitav Ghosh, M.G. Vassanji, Farrukh Dhondy, Amit Chaudhury, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, to name only a few who have attracted the readers and academia across world by producing the literature depicting typical diasporic sensibility among the expatriates. Jhumpa Lahiri was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000 for her debut collection of short stories entitled *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Her very first novel *The Namesake* (2003) shot her into limelight. Her second short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) has again proved her as one of the most excellent and commendable writers of fiction of the world. Jhumpa Lahiri documents the trauma of the protagonists in different context. Lahiri largely writes about the human condition of Indian diaspora in the USA. Her focus is the 'mindscape of characters' and 'human predicament' in its wider perspective.

Key Words: Dislocation, Alienation, Dilemma, Migration, Hybridity

This is the age of technology and science. Boundaries between nations are melting giving way to globalization. The rise of globalization has already diluted and demolished the national boundaries which had divided and confined the cultures and

promising personalities within the boundary of native countries. New conditions – such as – explosion of Mechatronics, international politics, liberal economy, multinational trades, emergence of multinational companies have availed many opportunities to writers and professionals. Cartography of diasporic locations is now well implanted between the countries of their origin and of their host. They now no more believe in their ethnic purity rather love to create and celebrate a new culture that is hybrid culture shaping a new world of multiculturalism. In this rapidly becoming global world, a large number of people are wiped out from their roots and are destined to lead the life of an exile. However, these exiles are not only the uprooted individuals lost in an alien world and permanently cursed to live on the periphery of society but are also a great source of vitality and creativity. A whole range of writing called diasporic literature has come out from these exiled people adding a new dimension to the literary world.

Migration is not a new phenomenon. The world has witnessed large scale of migrations in the past as well and those immigrants have also expressed their experiences in various ways. Andrew Smith defines “the term diaspora originally derives from the Greek words *speiro* (“to sow”) and *dia* (“over”), literally meaning ‘to scatter’, ‘to spread’ or ‘to disperse’”.(254) For the ancient Greeks, as Robin Cohen points out, “diaspora” was conceived “as migration and colonization.”(150)

Today, diasporic communities go beyond the host nation-state and motherland to network with their communities dispersed around the globe. In today’s academic circle, the term diaspora has multiple layers of meaning. Cross-border migrations being common during colonial/post-colonial period and more frequent during the reforms period, there are scores of Indian diasporic writers including Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Nirad C. Choudhury, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry,

Bharati Mukherjee, Agha Shahid Ali, Amitav Ghosh, M.G. Vassanji, Farrukh Dhondy, Amit Chaudhury, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, to name only a few who have attracted the readers and academia across world by producing the literature depicting typical diasporic sensibility among the expatriates.

The writers of the Indian diaspora write about India painting the vastness and the complexities of the home country which contains everything in multitudes – multiple truths, multiple crisis, multiple realities and this diversity is portrayed for the worldwide reading public. There is no denying the fact that the diasporic authors engage in cultural transmission that is equitably exchanged in the manner of translating a map of reality for multiple readerships. Above all, the terms ‘diaspora’, ‘exile’ alienation’, ‘expatriation’, are synonymous and possess an ambiguous status of being both a refugee and an ambassador. The two roles seem different but the diasporic writer attempts at doing justice to both. As a refugee, he seeks security and protection and as an ambassador projects his own culture and helps enhance its comprehensibility and unambiguousness. Diasporic writings hold important position around cultures and nations. The diasporic writings are the evidences of the experiences of the diasporic communities living in different socio-cultural settings. Diaspora literature more often than not involves a history of displacement, remembrances of the homeland (from where the dispersal occurred), feelings of alienation in the adopted country, and romantic desire for return (which is possibly impossible). Basically, ‘diaspora’ is a minority community living in exile. The term diaspora immediately conjures up the image of a journey. But this journey is altogether different one. Diasporic journeys are about settling down and putting roots or ‘staying put’ elsewhere (Brah 182). Brah writes in her book *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1997), “Home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no-return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’” (Brah 192). In

today's academic circle, the term diaspora has different connotations. From the original meaning of large scale of migration of people due to religious persecution, it has now come to refer to any movement of people from one land to another. Diaspora is often used as a synonym for migration or immigration and the diasporic is equated to an expatriate.

The Indian diaspora is marked by a strong tie with its cultural heritage and a common wistfulness for home. The diasporic experience, avers Stuart Hall:

is marked by the negotiation of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. (402)

Vijay Mishra, a noted scholar on Indian diaspora, reserves the term diaspora only for the unhappier breed, whose progress and prosperity could not compensate for the pain they once suffered and continue to suffer due to social exclusion, alienation, and marginalization. They still long for which is no longer existing in real terms. Other than the unhappier breed, they are immigrants, transnational or global people. As he states:

All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by specters, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements. Diasporas are both celebrated (by late/ postmodernity) and maligned (by early modernity).

(Mishra 1)

At present most societies are multi-cultural societies and the writer living and writing in such a society is affected at multiple levels by both the cultures. Such a writer is constantly in a state

of flux. The question of identity and dynamics of relationships affect the writer. The writer reflects, analyses, criticizes that particular environment and the world around him even when he/she does not become a part of it, belonging and yet not belonging. Jhumpa Lahiri has become internationally acclaimed. This paper is an attempt to study how people belonging to the Diaspora community evolve as personalities of Multiculturalism in the fictional works of Jhumpa Lahiri. Since they do not have a first-hand experience of their inherent culture, they are more easily influenced by the adopted culture. Diaspora literature reflects the ideas and feelings of these people. It is a mixture of both positive and negative experiences woven in the form of stories. Jhumpa Lahiri, as a person belonging to the second generation Diaspora, weaves the diasporic nuances in her novels and short stories. Her works cover the issues of emigration, the pros and cons of settlements in different cultures. She depicts displacement, dislocation, acculturation and assimilation in her fictional world.

Jhumpa Lahiri was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000 for her debut collection of short stories entitled *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Her very first novel *The Namesake* (2003) shot her into limelight. Her second short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) has again proved her as one of the most excellent and commendable writers of fiction of the world. Jhumpa Lahiri in *The Lowland: A Fiction* (2013) is a narration of the inheritance of alienation. Alienation is focal point in the development of her themes. She breathlessly recounted generation's alienating history. In fact she directed alienation into her character's veins. Alienation runs along with their blood circulation.

Lahiri, as a second generation Indian expatriate in America has never experienced personally the original migration from her homeland but has felt it through the experiences of her family and relatives, as she herself says:

I would learn things just by the virtue of being their child.
I think it has always been important to them to maintain
strong social ties with Indians, living abroad visiting
India. (195)

As a daughter of Bengali parents in America, Jhumpa Lahiri was born and brought up in the United Kingdom and the United States of America and thus her heritage and culture are inclined to both India and America. From her personal experience as a child of immigrant parents, she presents in her writings, the emotional journey of characters seeking love and affection beyond the barricade of nations, cultures, religions and generations. Permeated with the immigrant sensibility, her characters speak with universal articulacy and the empathy of a recluse. They reflect the experiences of both, the first and the second generation Indian immigrants, presenting the old world (India) knocking against the new world (U.S.A.). Lahiri explores the difficulties of establishing a sense of self for the second generation, an experience never quite replicated by other generations of the immigrant families, and ultimately her works point to the transience of 'ethnic American' identity in favour of a transnational post-ethnic global ethos. Lahiri negotiates the dilemmas of the cultural spaces lying across the continents with a master's touch. The transition from writing short stories to writing a novel is a difficult one but Jhumpa Lahiri seems to have crossed over quite easily. On the publication of her first novel *The Namesake*, once again she received the rave reviews. S Prasannarajan calls this novel:

An enlarged variation of the same existential trauma of
the culturally displaced that animates her debut *Interpreter
of Maladies*. (34)

Interpreter of Maladies was published in the year 1999. The book won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in the year 2000. The collection of nine short stories deal with the experiences of first and second generation people belonging to the diaspora communities. This book launched her on the path to becoming a successful writer.

India also takes credit for contributing another talented genius to the world of global literature. Lahiri's first collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* presents her trans-continental and trans-cultural experiences of India, England and America. It deals with the problem of exile – in one form or the other. The characters may belong to any section of society but the common thread that seems to bind all of them is their sense of being an exile, an alien, an outsider. Jhumpa is a rootless immigrant. Travelling from India to New England and back again, Lahiri charts the emotional voyages of characters seeking love beyond the barriers of nations, cultures, religions and generations. Her characters are mostly Indians with Bengali identity and she has tried to identify her immigrant self through them. The themes of her stories range from emotional struggle of love to an immigrant battling with the new worlds. Using a variety of characters, Lahiri gives life in these stories to the feeling of alienation, loss and hope which so often mark the immigrant experience. Homesick in America, Jhumpa feels culturally displaced in this fascinating metropolis and began writing stories about India, Indians and Indian culture. Her very first novel *The Namesake* (2003) shot her into lime light. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) is a novel about Asian, particularly Indian immigrants in America. *The Namesake* as an extremely touching novel explores immigrants' experience of the middle class Bengali Americans and their first generation off springs in the United States, struggling for their survival and assimilation. Lahiri in this novel meticulously deals with the life of the Ganguli family from India and their attempts to adapt to American culture, but more importantly, the novel speaks about the relationship and rituals of family and country in a simple yet elegant and profoundly controlled manner. *The Namesake* vividly portrays the hurdles, humiliation, identity-crisis, cultural-clashes, racial-prejudice, miserable condition, effort for cultural balance, lack of cultural assimilation and longing for original home/homeland of the migrants especially of the illegal

migrants. It deals with the multi-layered themes such as effort for getting US visa, migration, American dreams, and effort for transforming oneself into Western pattern, cultural-clash, racial-discrimination, search for identity, misery and humiliation of migrants' inferiority complex, dilemma, nostalgia and realization of migrated people of the scope and reality of the second home or host home. Home crisis, home sicknesses are the factors of migration. On the peripheral level the novel is a simple story of a family moving to America in search of a prospective livelihood. Ashoke Ganguli is an electrical engineer working towards his doctorate in MIT, Massachusetts. One summer he comes to India and returns with his new bride Ashima. For the next thirty years, the novel follows the lives of this young couple as they try to find their foothold in a foreign land. As they settle down with their two children, America almost becomes their home. A deeper look at the characters reveals a discontentment as they try to assimilate themselves. As first generation immigrants, Ashoke and Ashima look to India for bonding. Their children, Gogol and Sonia, born and brought up in America, cannot relate to this bonding. The central characters, especially Ashima and her son Gogol are like waves battling to reach their home but always returning discontent. As the story progresses, it seems that the characters sucked into the cultural whirlpool. Trying to find a balance between their inherent Indian culture and the adoptive American culture, they turn out to represent fine examples of Multiculturalism. The *Namesake* deals with the angst and anguish of the Indian migrants in the United States of America. The covert content of the book makes us realize that the diasporas coming out of one culture and inhabiting another feel themselves marginalized in the frame and when they are brought into the centre of canvas, the margins of their own identities are subjected to fading realities. The novel is a kaleidoscope of different shades of individual relationships, the conflicts and confusions of the characters' emotional pains and afflictions as Lahiri portrays the theme of cultural

dilemmas and dislocations. Her second short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) has again proved her as one of the most distinguished writers of fiction. *Unaccustomed Earth* is Lahiri's second collection of stories, the first being the Pulitzer-winning *Interpreter of Maladies*. As with much of Lahiri's work, *Unaccustomed Earth* considers the lives of Indian-American characters and how they deal with their mixed cultural environment. In Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*, the first generation migrants are shown collected together, expressing nostalgia, talking about their original homeland. Though they left it long back for the expectation of progress in life in an alien nation, they feel themselves isolated. They have sense of insecurity. They try to find out for people from their own community, craving for cultural similarities. In "*Unaccustomed Earth*", it can be noted that Ruma's father deals with to look like an American as he is expected to be in host society. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland: A Fiction* (2013) is a narration of the inheritance of isolation. The lowland is the second novel by Jhumpa Lahiri. The novel is about two brothers. When one of the brothers becomes involved in the Naxalite movement in the late 1960s, their paths change and one of them goes to the United States and the other one stays behind to take part in the movement for bringing drastic change in Indian society. The novel is about the consequences of each of their individual choices. The novel stretches for nearly four decades in time and shifts from India to America. It is the story of the dead Udayan and his elder brother Subhash who though look alike are of opposing characteristics. Udayan is drawn towards reform and revolution becomes active in the Naxal Movement. On the other hand, Subhash leaves for America for education. Lahiri's all characters are emotionally broken. It seems that alienation is part and parcel of their lives. It circulates into their veins constantly. Jhumpa Lahiri made alienation-isolation as necessary condition of diasporic lives.

Jhumpa Lahiri offers advantages and drawbacks of multicultural-hybridity. Jhumpa Lahiri touches upon a contemporary phenomenon of migration and brings out the psychological and the cultural problems which the immigrants face in their country of adoption. The characters of fictional works of Jhumpa Lahiri offer a wonderful variety of experiences gathered largely from the cultural clashes rippling outward in diverse directions. She has attempted to present the trauma of Indians in loneliness, and successfully balances their native and acquired selves in their home and foreign issues.

There is no denying the fact that the basic problem of diasporic writings is the feeling of dislocation without roots. The diasporans feel isolated and alienated in the foreign land. Dispersal of roots involves anguish, alienation and crisis identity crisis. Jhumpa Lahiri documents the trauma of the protagonists in different context. Lahiri largely writes about the human condition of Indian diaspora in the USA. Her focus is the 'mindscape of characters' and 'human predicament' in its wider perspective. Lahiri does not remain confined to the dislocations of migrants in foreign lands alone. Rather she seems to be philosophical in her approach; she presents dislocation as a permanent human condition. Suffering is inevitable. Man is dislocated in this world.

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