

Myriad Modes of Sexuality, Ecology, Pain and Ambition in *Jhumpa Lahiri & Margaret Wilson*

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Abstract: Diasporic literature can not shy away from sexuality and ecology of a particular cultural space. Due to different sexuality and ecology of the host land, the migrants often feel at a loss regarding their continuity with their native culture or acculturation with the host culture. This results in myriads of pain and trauma of the migrants. However, their traumas are more linked with their ambition and its fulfillment. The present paper makes an endeavour to delve deep into the inherent sexuality, ecology, pain and ambition in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Margaret Wilson whom I have categorized as Diasporic writers in their own context.

Keywords: Ecology, Sexuality, Culture, Acculturation

... it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, displacement – that we learn our most enduring lessons. (Homi K. Bhabha, 1992: 435-465)

Diasporic literature can not shy away from sexuality and ecology of a particular cultural space. Due to different sexuality and ecology of the host land, the migrants often feel at a loss regarding their continuity with their native culture or acculturation with the host culture. This results in myriads of pain and trauma of the migrants. However, their traumas are more linked with their ambition and its fulfillment. The present paper makes an endeavour to delve deep into the inherent sexuality, ecology, pain and ambition in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Margaret Wilson whom I have categorized as diasporic writers in their own context. Lahiri is a postcolonial writer of Indian origin living in America while Wilson is a writer of American origin who spent a couple of years as missionary in colonial British India and has expressed her experience in India in her collection of short stories entitled *Tales of a Polygamous City* and the novel, *Daughters of India*.

Treatment of Sexuality: There are three facets of human sexuality: biological, cultural and psychological. It is the harmony among them that results in a healthy human sexuality. Jhumpa Lahiri explores all the facets of sexuality in her different stories. In the story “An Interpreter of Maladies” the biological facet of sexuality is explored. The very beginning of the story reveals the frivolous relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Das who are least concerned with the things that could affect their conjugal bond. However, behind this surface relation lie more serious issues. Mrs. Das has three children – Ronny, Bobby and Jina, but Bobby is not from Mr. Das. The revelation of this fact by Mrs. Das to Mr. Kapasi

constitutes the very crux of Lahiri's narrative device which reflects on the natural relationship between a man and a woman, aside of any traditional or cultural bindings. As noticed by Mr. Kapasi, the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Das lacks the required warmth of conjugal affair which is identical to his own. His job of interpreter has never been admired by his wife, and the same job appears romantic to Mrs. Das who does not seem romantic to her husband anyway. Consequently, Mr. Kapasi feels, "Mr. and Mrs. Das were a bad match, just as he and his wife were" (53). The concept of marriage was evolved to curb aberrant sexuality which requires compatibility of couples on both physical and mental grounds. The lack of compatibility of any kinds leads to the frustration of sexuality which, in turn, occasions the collapse of marital bond, though the couples superficially continue to live together. This is corroborated by Mr. Kapasi's confession of his marital discord and his observation of the same in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Das.

Lahiri's "Sexy" presents the cultural aspect of human sexuality by juxtaposing the relationship of a man and a woman belonging to two different cultures in an extra marital affair. The loose sexuality of the Americanized Indian libertine, Dev and Laxmi's cousin's husband has also been juxtaposed with the tradition-bound domestic sexuality of Laxmi and her cousin. There is a crucial relationship between 'body' and 'sex'; the former is the stimulant of the latter; physical attraction and sexual stimulation are inextricably linked – it is the lack of both these things that lead to the collapse of marital bond of Laxmi's cousin. To what extent body is related to sexuality can well be explained by different sexual encounters of the central character of the story, Miranda. When the story opens, Miranda is engaged with the Indian married man, Dev whose love toward her is more of a sexual exploit than the love of the real sort. Miranda's sexual experience with Dev reveals a hypocritical male response to female sexuality, particularly in Indian context. In an orthodox society like India, marital sexuality is often imposed under traditional values; and the partner when exposed to the liberal sexuality of the West tends to play a dubious role, by pretending royalty to the married partner, and at the same time committing adultery by indulging in extramarital sexuality. Any judgment on the nature of human sexuality is a matter of the values established in a society. This conflict between Sex (Nature) and moral values (Culture) is explicitly noticeable in the sexual pursuits of Dev and Miranda.

The psychological facet of sex is portrayed in the story "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar". Through the portrayal of a hysteric character, apart from highlighting the atrocious attitude of Indian society, Lahiri seems to emphasize the role of sex in the healing of physical deformity and mental retardation. Although a long period of suffering, humiliation and indifferent attitude of the relatives has emaciated Bibi Haldar physically and mentally, the fire of sexuality burns as intensely in her as in any normal human being. Her desire for a man is well identified by other characters and when they discover that she is pregnant there runs a wave of shock in them. However, this stigma turns out to be a blessing as it

cures Bibi, and enables her to live a normal life with her unknown fathered child. Thus, in this story sex is used as purgation which purges Bibi of all her ailments. Sex as clinical purgation and sex as social stigma again raise the conflict between sex and culture, and they need to be distanced if the former is meant to be used clinically.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri presents sex both in biological and cultural perspectives. Ashoke and Ashima presents traditional domestic sex while Gogol's sexual exploits with Ruth, Maxine and Moushumi represents biological aspect of sex which aims at seeking of pleasure. No doubt he ties in marital bond with Moushumi but they soon separate for by this time Gogol has returned to Indian domestic sexuality while Moushumi still adheres to American life style which allows for extramarital sex. Such conflict runs throughout the novel, and also in her *Unaccustomed Earth* in the story of Hema and Kaushik.

In Margaret Wilson's *Daughters of India* the cultural aspect of sex has been treated extensively. Davida's response to the polygamous nature of Indian pariahs, her reaction on Taj's elopement and her psychological trauma for not being able to forget Ferguson while the Indians could easily go for their next sexual partners is the testimony of cultural conflict pertaining to sex. When Taj says that a woman's place is in her home, Davida's female being is stirred and realizes that,

I have no place in the world. How cozily love wrapped her around!
But I am naked, uncovered. I can't let her, that naughty little native
sweeper, stir me up all through and through, again. What do I care
if she marries? They marry everyday. They love easily. Anybody'll
do for them. Perhaps I am a pervert. There must be another man
like mine, some place in the world. But where could I find him? O
Lord! O my Master! this isn't good enough for me! She prayed. ...
'I want to sit down and eat with the rest of them. A woman's place –
how sweet that is when a woman says it, rejoicing. I have no place in
this world. (162)

Davida's mental condition in the above lines reveals her pang of sexual deprivation. Many a time she has been addressed as 'virgin' before the illiterate pariahs women who find it awkward to see such a beautiful lady still without a mate. This puts Davida often in a dilemma regarding her missionary vow and personal sexual longings.

Treatment of Ecology: Nature has always played a pivotal role in the shaping of literature. However, in recent time nature has been viewed differently under the ecocriticism; emphasis has been laid on the relation between man and his natural surrounding in all its manifestations. Significantly, Sherry B. Ortner wrote an essay "Is Female to Male as Nature to culture" in 1974 which gave birth to ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is at present used to analyse almost every genre of literature. In Jhumpa Lahiri and Margaret Wilson traces of Ecology and ecofeminism can be easily seen.

In the story "*Unaccustomed Earth*", Ruma's father makes a short visit to her. During his visit he starts giving shape to the otherwise withered garden within the campus of Ruma's apartment. He collects different

species of flowers and plants them in a systematic and scientific method, and very soon the garden appears to be the garden of a professional gardener. In fact, 'garden' appears in every work of Lahiri which suggests her ecological concern. However, Ruma's father's nurturing of a garden has another import. Since he has lost his wife (female/Nature) long ago, his care for the garden equates his longing to care and nurture his wife. Man can not live alone; he must need a companion, and in case of Ruma's father garden replaces his wife.

Moreover, 'garden' in "An Unaccustomed Earth" also suggests man's tendency to create life in an alien land as suggested in the epilogue. This tendency has been suggested in the cover page of Lahiri's *The Namesake*; on the front cover page there is a tree with two leaves while on the back cover page there is a well bloomed flower. The front cover picture indicates the arrival of Ashoke and Ashima on an alien land while the back cover picture suggests the fruits of their struggle on an alien land. In this way the cover page, with the help of ecological allusions, constitutes the very essence and gist of the novel.

Similarly, Margaret Wilson's novel *Daughters of India*, through its cover page picture: a hut with earthen pot and a bullock cart in front of it, a white woman in western attire sitting on the front of lowered bullock cart and the rustic Indian pariah women sitting on the ground with their veils on. This is the picture of the Flowery Basti where Davida herself has planted a tree of peace to be taken care of by the pastor Jalal and his wife Begum. In this novel life and characters portrayed are nearer to nature; no touch of industrial corruption is seen. The people are engaged in the struggle of survival as they lack the basic need of life, they are left to the mercy of nature regarding their health and hygiene. Wilson's concern for ecology is more reflected in her story "Taffeta trousers" of *Tales of a Polygamous City* in which she presents a beautiful natural sight viewed from a train compartment.

Forty eight hours north of Calcutta, as the train passed between walls of swamp-grass and willows, I stood expectantly at the car window. My friends had said repeatedly, 'be sure you look out at the city when you get to the river'. And as I waited – suddenly no more walls, but a great distance of gray sand stretching away to the purple foothills of the Himalayas, whose eternal snows glimmered shell pink in the sunset. Far away, this stream of soft sand was bounded on either side by olive green groves, and above it shone the highest, bluest sky I had ever seen. (721)

Such description of natural surroundings is abundant in *Tales of a Polygamous City* which reflects the rich ecological environment of India and its importance in the life of Indians.

Metaphors of Pain and Ambition: In both Jhumpa Lahiri and Margaret Wilson, the metaphor of pains and ambitions runs through in integrated and intricate manner. Significantly pains and ambitions are part and parcel of diasporic existence. Lahiri weaves her narratives in such a manner that characters are compelled to experience the poignant consequences of their ambition, the ambition that takes them away from

the place of their origin.

Significantly, trauma/pain is always associated with some kind of 'loss' or the 'presence' of loss in psyche, and in this sense Freud's notion of object loss in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) and also Derrida's notion of 'presence' acquire a focal point in the discussion of trauma. The 'object loss' indicates that what is physically absent but psychically ever remains with us. Such a feeling of loss is excruciatingly painful particularly when it is related to our existential essence of being and includes our culture, nation, ethnicity and history. It is such trauma that we witness in diasporic writings. According to Cathy Caruth, "Trauma is deeply tied to our own historical realities" (12), which is rarely space specific. Consequently, the exact dating of trauma is less important than the "posterior resubjectifications and the restructuring of the subject, that is the consequence" (Rauch 113). To define trauma as a consequence of an event, Julett Mitchell observes, "(trauma) must create a breach in a protective covering of such severity that it can not be coped with by the usual mechanisms by which we deal with pain or loss. ... In trauma we are untimely ripped" (21). Mitchell's view corroborates Freud's opinion that trauma is augmented by the memory of traumatic event more than the event itself. In such a curious relation between the past and present regarding the trauma of event, we find that all human beings are bound in their sense of trauma, and it is this sense that determines much of their thoughts and acts, their national, cultural and ethical values.

Pain in *Interpreter of Maladies* serves as a method of expressing inexpressible. In "A Temporary Matter", there is a pain of bearing illicit child and losing it and in "Interpreter of Maladies", there is a pain of being disloyal to husband and also keeping secret of begetting illicit child. While "When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine", "Sexy", "Mrs. Sen's" and "Third and Final Continents" presents the pain of displacement, the story "A Real Durwan" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" presents the pain of subjugation. Significantly, the pain of displacement is the outcome of ambition of making life better abroad. This is most explicitly expressed in *The Namesake* in which Ashoke and Ashima come to America just after their marriage for Ashoke's desire of seeking better future.

A reconsideration of major characters' predicament in the novel – Ashoke, Ashima, Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi – unfolds the high intensity psychological disturbance and uprooting they live with. Ashima typifies the highly disturbing experience of a person away from home. The novel commences with her painful pregnancy and child bearing abroad and culminates in her final decision to divide the rest of her life between America and India. The traumatic experience of Ashoke is in the nature of a psychical wound. The train accident that Ashoke had at the age of twenty deeply impinges in his psyche; it establishes a rapport between him and Gogol because it was the latter's book that saved the former. Ashoke's lifelong remembrance of the story "The Overcoat", his feeling of association with its protagonist, and his realization that all human beings have an experience of pain one way or other impact and haunt him for the rest of his life. When his son, Gogol attains his 20th years,

he lets out his secret to him, and the disclosing is as tormenting as the event was. Ashoke's emotional state is so touching that Gogol psychologically goes through that traumatic event and feels the pain of his father. This psychic experience of Gogol reveals to him a new significance of his pet name, Gogol (Nikhil is his real name). It is bound up with a catastrophe his father has been haunted by for years. The realization of the significance of his name in the life of Ashoke is so overwhelming that he asks his father, 'Do I remind you of that night?' 'Not at all', his father says eventually, one hand going to his ribs, a habitual gesture that has baffled Gogol until now. 'You remind of everything that followed. (124) In the representation of the trauma of Ashoke and Ashima, the first generation immigrants in the novel, the memory of events in the homeland holds the sway.

Margaret Wilson's *Tales of a Polygamous City* presents the pains and ambitions of missionary workers no doubt, but it concentrates more on the Indian's pains and ambitions concerning their common affairs. For instance, the story "A Mother" presents the trauma of a child widow, Aziz whose mother anxiously strives to seek a means to make her smile. "God's Little Joke" seems to be a saga of pain for its depiction of a pathetic Farkhanda's decision to adopt stern asceticism to expiate the sin of her brother's committing suicide which eventually turns into an astonishingly miserable creature. In her *Daughters of India*, the protagonist, Davida feels pain for the failure of her missionary ambition to reform the pariahs of the Flowery Basti. Though the sweepers are given education through Christianization, they are not upgraded from their traditional dirty works. Wilson painfully records,

But from the broom and the basket they had not redeemed them, and as Davida came into the village she met one woman and another returning from the hated work. Some of them carried their babies balanced on one hip, and some of them had left the babies at home in the care of the smaller girls, who took them to the little school, (26)

Being a woman both the novelist and the protagonist are hurt to see the miserable plight of woman in India. The way the character and plight of the dying sister is presented speaks a volume about what substance a woman holds in Indian society.

In her childhood she (the dying sister) had been given unseen to someone in marriage, of her own inferior Hindu caste – she couldn't tell how old she had been then – when he lifted her veil and saw her dark, unlovely face and that hand of hers which was deformed, he had cried out that he had been cheated in the bargain and had struck her such a blow that she fell down. And presently he had passed her on, unseen, to a man to whom he owed money. And that man, seeing her, had kicked her into a corner, but kept awhile. He was a gambler and, having lost all that he had, he staked her, at length, in a game of dice. And the winner had sold her to a man who put her into an inspected house of prostitution in a great cantonment. And when she had become too diseased to serve longer their, they had sent her to a government hospital to die. (41)

In the suffering of dying sister, we also notice the pain of gender subalternity which is embedded in the thematic texture of the novel.

While reflecting on the painful existence of the Indian pariahs, the novelist realizes the futility and meaninglessness of life in this world,

And presently in the dullness of that Indian remoteness, where the streets, the earth, the houses, the walls were one unvarying khaki – khak being the Indian word for clay – from khak were we made, and into khak shall we all return – (30).

This painful awareness of human existence makes both the writer and the protagonist matured in their response towards life and events. Consequently, Davida appears matured in her perception of the problems and feelings of the pariahs of Flowery Basti. Moreover, it also helps her to handle some painfully awkward questions of pariahs pertaining to her virginity, love and marriage. It is in India that she realizes the importance of having husband and 'a home' and her sense of absence of both add to her myriad pains of living alone in an alien land.

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