

Jhumpa Lahiri's Literary Trajectory and Indian Diasporic Writing

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Abstract

This paper explores the conceptualizations of identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's literary works through the lens of diaspora discourse. The identities of the protagonists are constantly relocated and reconstructed along with their routes. Jhumpa Lahiri's writings challenge the limits of identity labels like Indian, and Indian-American, while portraying the complex identity formation of diasporas.

Keywords: diaspora, literature, multiculturalism, identity en route, Jhumpa Lahiri

"Try to remember it always," he said once Gogol had reached him, leading him slowly back across the breakwater, to where his mother and Sonia stood waiting. "Remember that you and I made this journey together to a place where there was nowhere left to go."

? Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (Lahiri, *The Namesake*)

"Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood, a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated. They are a reminder, too, that one is not all things to all people."

? Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*

Diaspora writings have been prolifically flourishing and promoting multiculturalism and globalization. It has been crucial in providing diversity to the world literature. The advancement in technology which provides virtual and simulated experience has led to growth in multiculturalism and diversity in cultural experience. Further, movement of people from one part of the world for education and work has also led to increase in diaspora writings and multiculturalism.

The concept of a diaspora culture is an age old tradition. Diasporas - the transnational communities wedded to host lands and profoundly connected to homelands - have added a new dimension to the national cultures. Whenever, peoples with shared values, cultural ethnicity, and national identity are scattered into antagonistic milieu, there surfaces concurrently a culture which

preserves many of the enduring traditions while endeavoring to adjust with the dominant foreign society around them. It is a tendency to look at Asian Americans as foreigners and a hyphenated identity.

"Three semantic notions commonly skew perceptions of Asian Americans by identifying them as (a) foreigners, (b) the model minority, and (c) sexual exotics. The association with foreignness implies "foreign until proven otherwise (Johnson)."

"The hyphen is a metaphor which highlights the boundary between minority Americans and white Americans. The hyphen often provides the locus for homelessness while marginalizing the social position of Asian Americans [*italics added*]." Dominant ideology, thus, displaces Asian Americans into the margin based on minority and authenticity criteria (Johnson)."

This article attempts to portray a comprehensive framework for understanding the Indian diaspora in the literary works of Jhumpa Lahiri, which includes a diverse set of people who, live outside India. This diversity represents plurality and heterogeneity of Indian society in the point of migration. It also delineates variation. However, Indians reflect a commonality in the diaspora. Thus, making their identity a play between the divergences and the unification of Indians.

David Kippen opined: Theme-wise, *The Namesake*, marks no special advance over "*Interpreter of Maladies*" (Lahiri). It's a novel about an immigrant family's awkward assimilation into America.

The preoccupation with ethnicity leads to a "high cultural pluralism (Kippen)" a phrase that describes an impressive array of authors from Jews like Philip Roth and Saul Bellow to Native Americans like N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich; Asian Americans like Maxine Hong Kingston and Changrae Lee; Chicanas like Sandra Cisneros; and African Americans like Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed, and Toni Morrison.... a focus on high cultural pluralism suggests that the postmodern is intimately related to what the late Arthur Schlesinger Jr. famously denounced as a "cult of ethnicity" (Schlesinger).

Bart Kosko in *Fuzzy Thinking* (Flamingo, London 1994) puts forth a rhetoric question-

"take a bite... take another... is the object in your hand still an apple?... When does it change from apple to non-apple?" The same question could be asked about culture. When does culture become non-culture? "Take a piece of India out of Jhumpa Lahiri, and does she (or when does she?) become a non-Indian?" (Mongia)

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London to Bengali parents and was brought up in Rhode Island. She was a frequent visitor to Bengal. The stories deal with Indians in India and in the US. The Indians in the US belong to first or second generation immigrants. There are six stories which are localized in US and three are localized in India. All the stories depict fluid cultural affiliations and a struggle for assimilation in the host culture. It is also an eye opener towards reality that is very harsh which, happens to be the hope to reach the perfect world of dream.

The first story, "A Temporary Matter" deals with the great American quest for perfect sex and marriage. The second story "Mr. Pirzada came to Dine" is narrative of ethnic bildungsroman. America becomes the locus for Mr. Pirzada's emergence as an individual with desires and "choices." It is a story of a young Indian American girl called Lilia. She is growing up in safe suburban home in New England. She is in middle school and enjoys trick-or-treating on Halloween. She is enchanted by the title of a family guest- Mr. Pirzada. Mr. Pirzada is researching in the US while, his family lives in an unsafe place which will soon be converted to Bangladesh. In the beginning of the story, Pakistan's civil war has just broken out:

"In March, Dacca had been invaded, torched, and shelled by the Pakistani army. Teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped. By the end of the summer, three hundred thousand people were said to have died (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* 23)."

This story also proves that cultural affiliations are fluid and with time and circumstances they change. "Interpreter of Maladies" is a very powerful story about second-generation American Indian couple with three children. The protagonist looks at the interpreter of maladies to solve her malady too. "A Real Durwan" highlights the tragedy of poor Indians who, value telephone and washbasin. Telephone and washbasin represent fetishness for the west. The missing wash basin represents a lurking fear of losing hope.

Lahiri's text, *The Namesake*, gives a keen perception of diasporic subjectivity that widens beyond a bipolar

construction of identity. Lahiri characterizes the space between home and country as being fairly constant and consistent. The protagonist Gogol Ganguli - the second-generation son of Bengali immigrants Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli - in the novel, *The Namesake* by Lahiri provides a link between Gogol who, moves back and forth between differing backgrounds.

Aparajita De mentions that-

"Gogols newly constituted self at the end of the novel contests the borders of any unipolar hegemonic structure of identity that may seek to assimilate the diasporic individual in homogeneity within it (De) p.12). "

The Namesake, is imbued with "a sense of pluralist identity" since such characters "move fluidly between the private sphere of their Indian home life and the public sphere of their American experience"(115).

The Ganguli's in the novel "The Namesake" rejects earlier literary tropes and retain their ethnic identity. They do not consider hiding their ethnicity; nor, they attempt to confront US social expectations. R. Radhakrishnan has mentioned:

"the narrative of ethnicity in the United States follows a dialectic model whereby the first phase - suppressing ethnicity in favor of opportunistic assimilation - is countered by a "DuBoisian period" in which pragmatic opportunism is overcome by moral revolutions and "immigrants reassert ethnicity in all its autonomy." This leads to the synthetic third phase that integrates "ethnic identity with [US] national identity under conditions that do not privilege the national* at the expense of the ethnic (Radhakrishnan) p.121"

The novel, *The Namesake*, by Lahiri carries deeply ingrained home culture. Gogol's father Ashoke is a voracious reader of "the Russians." This characteristics he has inherited from his grandfather. In fact, he is reading the book by the author Gogol on a train when a massive accident takes place. Young Ashoke is left with a permanent limp. He gets superstitious that it is this very book which has saved his life since, the saviors see the pages of the text in the wreckage before they see him. Thus, he names his son Gogol. Incidentally, Ashoke's naming of his son supplants the Bengali tradition of the grandmother choosing a name since her letter to the US, where Gogol is born, gets lost in the mail. The very birth and naming of Gogol, therefore, establishes "home" - especially the social and cultural heritage to which the senior Gangulis assert claim - as already plural.

The Namesake, also highlights the "Indian" experiences

wherein, Bengali's make long weekend trips to other Bengali houses. They prepare dinner for large gatherings. The Bengali festivals are celebrated by ordering food from fast food restaurants in the streets. "It is in this light, for instance, that we can understand Friedman's distinction of Gogol's "Indian private life" versus his "American public life. Lahiri's novel contains moments and tropes that resemble those of the travel narrative genre, particularly in its detached tone and digressive, pluralist narration. (Friedman)" Lahiri's, *The Namesake*, is an illustration of the contemporary immigrant literary trajectory. It does not put the idea of an "American Dream" at the crux of the story, but rather localizes the immigrant ethnic family within a community of cosmopolitan travelers. The American-born children look at the experiences of high-class South Asian immigration. The interpreter of *Maladies*

Thus, we find protagonists in Jhumpa Lahiri's literary trajectory moving from "Indian private life" to "American public life." making their identity a play between the divergences and the unification of Indians. The most important thing is that the characters have retained their ethnic identity. All the stories depict sinuous cultural affiliations and a struggle for perfect mingling in the host culture.

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