

Cultural Hybridity in the Select Fictions of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract: Scholarly debates over immigration and “diaspora” have shifted in recent years to pluralistic approaches of critics such as Homi K. Bhabha and John Stuart Hall who argue that the “hybridity” and “in-betweenness” of immigrants’ life might function as a suitable ground for the social and cultural improvement of their life-conditions. Drawing on such ideas, this paper will discuss the positive effects of social changes presented in Jhumpa Lahiri’s short stories such as “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, “This Blessed House”, and “The Third and Final Continent”, published in her debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, which challenge the common negative outlooks toward them. In spite of depicting the problems immigrants encounter in their diasporic life, Lahiri also depicts flexibility as an apposite ground for productive changes which are mostly observed in the life of those characters that do not stick to old beliefs and traditions and are active in initiating changes, and venture going through inexperienced experiences to improve their life conditions.

Lahiri uses her cultural background as an Indian - American to create plots and characters that express the juxtaposition in her own life. She uses her stories to represent both societies in order to transcend cultural boundaries. Lahiri’s rhetorical aim is not to debate or to convince her readers in which society is superior, but to provide them with a new cultural outlook that will allow them to transform their cultural perspective. Though Lahiri presents a double-sided outlook about the diasporic life in her stories, a meticulous appraisal of her work reveals the fact she opposes too much insistence on traditional definitions of home and motherland, and instead pays tribute to the fluidity and flexibility of hybrid identity.

Keywords: Immigration, Diasporic Life, Hybridity, In-betweenness, Unhomeliness.

Diaspora is a loaded term that brings to mind the various contested ideas and images. It can be a positive sight for the affirmation of the identity or conversely, a negative sight of fears of losing the identity. Etymologically speaking diaspora is a Greek word which “combines the words *speiro* (meaning “to sow”) and *dia* (“over”) (Smith 254). Robert Cohen describes diaspora as “the communities of people living together in one country who acknowledge that the old country- a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore- always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions” (ix).

The present paper challenges negative outlooks toward immigration and its subsequent changes, and instead notices its positive aspects presented in Lahiri’s stories. One of the merits of Lahiri’s work is its openness to different interpretations; though the first impression created by her stories is a nostalgic feeling generated by exposing the sense of displacement and miscommunication among immigrants, optimistic perspectives are also observed in them. To show such a point, we mostly resort to the inquiries of such cultural critics as Homi K. Bhabha and John Stuart Hall into the notion of homeland, diaspora and hybridity which counter the widely held idea that immigrants experience “in-betweenness” and thus suffer from displacement.

The post-colonial theoretician, Homi Bhabha coined the term “hybridity” in a view that many writers have a sense of belonging to both cultures. This interaction of the cultures no doubt leads to further conflicts, but it certainly opens new

routes and modes of thinking for the individual and group identities of the diaspora and guides them to outgrow the stereotyped experiences of being uprooted, displacement and marginalization. Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* that “the very concepts of homogenous national cultures” must go through “a profound process of redefinition” (5), as he believes that human beings have “no necessary or eternal belongingness” (175) to lose. The hybridity is positioned within the third space, and according to Bhabha, “this hybrid third space is an ambivalent site where cultural meaning and representation have no ‘pre-mordial unity or fixity’.

To elaborate on Bhabha’s idea, Huddart remarks that he has challenged the inclination toward the polarity of the world into the “self” and the “other” by such concepts as hybridity which imply the “mixed – ness” and “impurity” of contemporary cultures. Since all cultures interact with each other, he believes that “cultures are not discrete phenomena” (4). Moreover, the cultural effects of globalization are increasingly reciprocal, with mass migration producing significant cultural changes in host nations. As Vertovec implies in his work on “super-diversity,” migrants cannot be conveniently grouped into clear-cut “diasporas” because the realities of cultural dynamics are much more complex than those envisioned in simplistic models of “multiculturalism,” which wrongly attribute homogeneity and cultural stasis to groups of people from particular parts of the world.

Besides Bhabha, Stuart Hall has highlighted the transcendental quality of identity on the whole and diasporic identity in particular. In his “Introduction” to the Questions of Cultural Identity, Hall argues that “identities are never unified,” but “increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across” therefore they are “constantly in the process of change and transformation” (4). Inquiring into diasporic culture, both Bhabha and Hall move away from the “bipolar model” to “tripolar model” that gives priority neither to the motherland nor to the residing country, rather accentuates the “middle ground” which Bhabha calls “the third space” (Kral,12).

The fluidity and flexibility of hybrid identity can be compare to cosmopolitanism .

Various definitions of cosmopolitanism have been proposed by various critics, all of which suggest that, whereas globalization is an ongoing phenomenon, cosmopolitanism is an attitude cultivated partly in response to the reality of globalization. Globalization is happening, whether we like it or not. Ideally, in this globalized world, close connections between people of diverse origins will reduce mutual misunderstanding, hostility, and conflict. As Rachel Trousdale notes in her discussion of transnational fiction, people with a cosmopolitan orientation conceive of their communities “based not on the location of their roots but on a shared willingness to reach beyond them” (194).

Jhumpa Lahiri was born to a Bengali family from Calcutta in 1967 in London, but her family moved to America when she was just three years old. Her father worked as a librarian and her mother a teacher; therefore, literature became a “natural” calling. Thanks to being born to immigrant parents, she has experienced a “multicultural life style” (Lyer 156) which is also reflected in her stories. She has travelled several times to Calcutta and her recurrent going to Calcutta initiated her talent for fiction writing, as she stated herself, “Calcutta nourished my mind, my eyes as a writer and my interest in seeing things from a different point of view” (Jha 139). But in some ways Lahiri herself struggles to understand Indian culture. In an interview with India-West, Lahiri admits: “I’m lucky that I’m between two worlds. . . I don’t really know what a distinct South Asian identity means. I don’t think about that when I write, I just try to bring a person to life” (Tsering).

Through *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri recounts the lives of Indians and Indian – Americans who are caught between the culture they inherited and the world in which they now find themselves. The characters she portrays in her stories are either of the first or the second generations of Indian immigrants living in America. The first collection of Lahiri’s short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) depicts the problems faced by the first- generation Indian immigrants such as the feeling of displacement and loss. The collection won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. The second collection of her short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) portrays the problems of second - generation Indian immigrants such as alienation and miscommunication.

As the result of Lahiri’s portrayal of those problems in her stories, most reviewers of her work have considered her a diasporic writer who often depicts the drawbacks of immigrants’ lives.. There are only a few critics who have heeded her portrayal of “cultural diversity and preservation of one’s ethnic roots” (Filipczak 8). Munos has pointed out that the “notion of homeland and the trope of the return are not unavoidably and exclusively tied up with a nostalgic, backward –

looking stance” in Lahiri’s stories, but can be associated, albeit in a circuitous way, with the advent of new becomings for a second generation” (140). As author Jaydeep Sarangi explains, "Jhumpa Lahiri's stories are the gateways into the large submerged territory of 'cross-culturalism'. It is a metaphor to share cultures. . . something that will allow them/us to share, instead of dividing, what is on either side" (117). As a popular young writer of Indian background, Lahiri is a sort of representative figure for non-immigrant Americans who do not fully understand what it means to straddle the line between two cultures.

As a writer Lahiri’s own life is “the very prototype of diasporic culture” (Daiya32), she portrays the upsetting aspects of immigrants’ life, but simultaneously reveals that their dismal experiences might be the cause of some improvements in their life. Her attitude toward immigration seems to be close to that of cultural critics such as Bhabha who commend the transitory, flexible nature of hybrid identity. To foreground such flexibility in her stories, Lahiri centralizes characters that are active and productive; do not stick to old beliefs; have open minds, and thus consequently attempt to improve their life.

For instance, cultural hybridity is brilliantly highlighted in the story, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”. The young Lilia, who experiences “ in-betweenness” in the story, really enjoys the “ third space” of her diasporic life. She likes learning about both Indian and American cultures, and deems it a privilege in comparison to American youngsters who only know about their own culture. On the other hand she enjoys her secure life in America which many Indian teenagers are deprived of in their homeland, as the story is written against the backdrop of Indo- Pak war of 1971. Lack of religious quarrels in America is a remarkable fact for her, since such quarrels perturb her relatives in India. The advantages of diasporic life urge Lilia to question inflexible definitions of nation and geographical borderlines that separate people of the world. One of her delightful experiences is to observe that her parents and Mr. Pirzada, who have migrated from different countries to the United States, “ spoke the same language, laughed at the same joke,[and] looked more or less the same (28).

“ The Blessed House” is the story that shows the adjustment of young immigrant Indians to a new culture and beliefs. The man Sanjeev is one of those immigrants who will stick to old, rigid customs, whereas his wife Twinkle is flexible and creative. The story arrests our attention as it records the emotional and cultural clash between a Hindu husband and his dislike for his wife’s fascination for Christmas artifacts. But in reality it is nothing about the religious divide but it is the subtlety of human feelings that makes up everything. After Sanjeev discovers his malady of possessive love, he "pressed the massive silver face to his ribs, careful not to let the feather slip, and followed her" (157). In portraying Twinkle’s character, Lahiri pictures what Cohen considers fluidity in defining and forming one’s identity (69).

In the collection's closing story, "The Third and Final Continent," we meet one of the few characters who are well-adjusted and happy. He is the narrator of the story, and remains unnamed throughout. He tells us of his immigration first to Great Britain and then to the United States , focusing on the six-week period from his arrival in America until the arrival of his wife, who he has married in an arranged ceremony in India. He has left her behind while her documents for her immigration to America are arranged, so that he may prepare a home for them to live in when she arrives. Although he remains in the United States , the narrator does not let himself lose his Indian identity in the effort to become American. Lahiri seems to be suggesting at the close of her book that this loss of Indian identity is at the root of the isolation so many of the other characters experience. The narrator expresses his intention not to let his own son experience this loss: " we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die" (197). This moment of concern by a first generation immigrant for his son is unique in the collection. The impact of “ double consciousness” can be seen in Lahiri’s stories, a term coined by W.E.B.Du Bois. Lahiri points out to make a balance between two cultures as both are important, thus what they can do is doing negotiation between two cultures.

Ruma’s father in the “Unaccustomed Earth” is another diasporic character who has a flexible attitude toward the “borderline work of culture”. Though “ in-betweenness” is grimly portrayed in “ A Temporary Matter,” Lahiri also exposes its positive outcomes. In some stories like “A Temporary Matter”, “ Boori Ma,” and “ Treatment of Bibi Halder” Lahiri portrays the problem of “unhomeliness” – being physically at home, but not feeling at home(Bhabha). By showing such problems in one’s homeland, Lahiri renounces the old definitions of home as a place where you feel safe, serene and at ease.

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Thus, there comes a considerable change in the outlook and identities of diasporas with the changed global economic, political and cultural scenario. Lahiri's fiction is an example of a new type of literature, that deconstructs simplistic binaries of power, geographical origin, geographical location, and cultural identity. By depicting different dimensions of immigrants' life, Lahiri portrays the positive consequences of flexibility and changing life-style in immigrants' life and urges her readers to give a second thought to the fluidity and flexibility of hybrid identity.

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