

Major issues in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract: Jhumpa Lahiri is a notable second generation American writer of Indian origin. She was born in 1967 in London. She grew up in Rhode Island in America. Lahiri's collection of her short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* won her prestigious Pulitzer Prize in the year 2000. It is a collection of nine short stories set in India and the United States. The two main themes of the stories are the emotional anguish and nostalgia for the homeland. As a child of immigrant parents, Lahiri has undergone the experience of living two lives—one in India and the other in America. *The Namesake* throws light on the cultural dilemmas of the immigrant characters in foreign lands.

I. INTRODUCTION

Lahiri traces the shift of the immigrants who remain to stick to their own culture and then gradually imbibe the culture of their adopted land, too. She also portrays the difficulties of second generation immigrants who are groomed to be "bilingual" and "bicultural." They face the problems of cultural dilemmas and an acute sense of displacement. They are torn between the values of their motherland and the values of the western world. In *The Third and the Final Continent*, Lahiri advocates that assimilation is the only solution to the existential situation of diaspora. Through her works, she seems to convey the message that in order to survive in an alien land, one has to adapt to the new environment. *The Namesake* is an attempt to bridge the gap between first and second generation immigrants. Ashima and Ashoke adapt and integrate into the ways of their adopted land. Gogol, who grows up in America tries to reject Indian things. His struggle represents the struggle of second generation immigrants. He was unable to live up to the ideals of his parents. He blends well with the American culture. In her collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, the story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" has Pirzada yearning for his homeland. Yet a Muslim Pirzada and a Hindu Lilia harmoniously survive in America. "The Third and the Final Continent" is a story of a Bengali man who struggles hard to adapt to the alien environment of America.

Many writers of the diaspora assimilate themselves to their host land so well that they disconnect themselves from their motherland. In their works they make no attempt to recall their lost land. As G.S. Sharat Chandra states in *Sari of the Gods* (1998):

I was twenty-seven when I left India for good. Since then; I've steered a new course in my life... Though India is always on my mind, there's no link that connects the sudden stop my life came to there and my new self. I leaped from one life to

another, and in between I left nothing but a vacuum. Only imagination and memory, when I need them, act as my bridges. Thus, whenever I go back to India, I'm a stranger wandering almost invisibly in familiar neighborhoods. (232).

This is the most complicated category of diasporic writers. Their origin is India, but there is no reference of India in their works. Bidisha Bandopadhyay is a second-generation Bengali writer. She was born and brought up in England. Her debut novel *Seahorses* (1997) is about three young British men. There is no reference even remotely to India, the land of her origin. Another example is of Abha Dawesar. Her debut novel *The Three of Us* (2003) is a story of a white male banker in New York. His affairs range from having sex with his boss and his wife. Dawesar in an article entitled "India Away From Home" explains her predicament as:

My novel was about and in the voice of a young man: Andre Bernard. A white man. A gay man. An American. The book was not of India in any sense of the term. Can I be considered an Indian writer by virtue of my birth alone? Is it my literature that makes me Indian in my passport? This class of questions will gain in significance as diasporic writing speaks in more and more tongues. (30).

(The above account of diasporic writers lends voice to the experience of immigrants in their own respective manner. They bring forth nostalgia, memories, exiles, marginality, detachment, hybridity and celebration experienced between displacement and relocation. A study of the above stated diasporic writers provides an opportunity for seeing how they see themselves on the alien land and their relationship to the host country. It enables us to see how these writers grapple with their consciousness of identity as a minority community, what strategies they employ to identify their homeland and its presence in the psyche, what are the effects of their migration and how a new integrated cultural identity is formed.

Although the diasporic writing depicts the traumas of alienation, in-betweenness and sense of longing for the native land, yet it is about the intermingling of different cultures. It is about open spaces and not about closure. It is the joy of double vision and not the pain of being split. The diasporic writers belong to the in-between space, the cultural no-man's land. The diasporic writers relish the discomfiture and the adventure of exploring their new land. The diasporic writers penetrate the culture/ nation/ language boundaries and celebrate their hybridity without need of a specific space. There may be a great loss and much yearning in rootlessness,

but there is also much gain. It is not only geographical boundaries that they go beyond, but it is also a mental leap that enables them to see things from a global perspective. It enables them to have a transcultural approach to life.

Are in double jeopardy by virtue of their newness and color. (SACLIT 9) The play, *Job Stealer* (1987) reflects the inconstancy of "all immigrants who arrive without a prior job offer. They suffer hardships and humiliation in the vicious circle of "No immigration without a job and no job without Canadian experience and by committing the sin of being overqualified. Desperate to earn something, anything, they fall prey to exploiting employers who pay them less than is legal for jobs that no Canadian would care to take up anyway" (125). *Equal Wages* voices the injustice done to the immigrant women workers. In the play, a garment factory gives the sewing machines to the women workers at home. By doing this, "employers do not incur any overhead related to maintaining a building and machinery, etc. and do not have to pay any of the benefits that labor laws require" (11). *No Man's Land* presents a poignant story of an immigrant family in Canada. The play picks up the issue of Quebec separatism and "the abusiveness of the workplace for immigrants trapped in sweat shops" (Varma, Land 14). This play has a radio version also, called *Trading Injuries*.

Amitav Ghosh (1956) is a versatile scholar, anthropologist, sociologist and creative artist. His works include *In an Antique Land*, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Circle of Reason* and *The Calcutta Chromosome*. His novels blur boundaries of different genres - fiction, history, anthropology and so on. Migration becomes an important theme in his novels. Each journey depicted serves to impact the identity of the traveler or the migrant. In *An Antique Land* shows how imperialism results in the ruthless exploitation of the people of developing countries. Ghosh shows the ill-treatment of the Egyptians by the Iraqis. The same is true of the people of Indian diaspora in Burma who work in docks, mills, and pull rickshaws and empty latrines. Colonialism was responsible for the first wave diaspora while neocolonialism and neo-imperialism was the cause of the second wave diaspora. The first wave migrants brought more men from their countries as indentured labor helping the empire and colonizers. *The Glass Palace* shows the suffering 'of soldiers from India in British Indian Army. Many Indian soldiers of the Empire died tragic deaths in Malaya, Singapore and Burma while they longed for their homes. Amitav Ghosh's works stress the fact that homelessness is a fatal curse that befalls human beings during the course of history. *Sadhu Binning* (1947) is an Indo-Canadian writer and actor who has produced many powerful plays. *Sadhu Binning* and *Sukhwan Hundal* have written many successful plays collectively. They are the main writers of the theatre group known as 'vancouverath' in western Canada. *Lesson of a Different Kind* is a one-act play with three scenes. The theme of the play is "neo-colonial exploitation" whereby the system

employs middleman who exploit members of their own minority community. In the first scene Resham Gill is asked to submit an oral research report. The second scene takes the readers to a basement storeroom of an office building which "also symbolizes the Indo-Canadians at the bottom of the vertical mosaic that is Canadian multiculturalism" (121). The second scene presents the dismal state of the immigrant workers. The workers get the job only through personal recommendation. Daljit, one of the characters of the play, says, "The employers here know that the best way to exploit immigrant labor is to do it through their own people and as a result you get this contracting system. And your poor cousin is only a link in the chain. The real villains are the people who keep this system in place"(123).

Jhumpa Lahiri's *narratology* unfolds the complexity of diasporic life in terms of variations and diversities as also the contrasts and contradictions of human experience. The language she uses is relaxed and sparkling, and carries nuanced notations of layered significances and enriched meanings with effortless ease. She depicts not merely the uprootedness of her diasporic characters from their homeland and their loneliness in an alien geographical location, but also indicates that one's home is wherever one lives or has lived; in the present case, the USA. In almost all her stories there is a longing for the native land, the life led in India before their migration to the US. Even the second-generation settlers are not free from the connection they have with the country of the birth of their parents. Politically and nationally they are Americans but the 'added baggage' of their parents' memories of their country is something that they have to contend with. The first-generation settlers fear that the children may forget the traditions and culture of their parents and become completely Americanized. Thus they have to keep alive the traditions of their forefathers in the 'Little-India' that they create in their apartments. The occasional visits to India also keep them in touch with their 'roots' and the magic that India possesses keeps them bound to her.

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