
QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S FICTION

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Introduction

Lahiri began writing at the age seven, co-writing stories with her best friend in primary school. She abandoned writing fiction as an adolescent, and lacked the confidence to resume the pursuit during her university years. While employed as a researcher, she found the stimulus to resume writing fiction and, after achieving a PhD in Renaissance Studies at Boston University, turned once again to creative writing. With a string of degrees behind her, she decided that the life of a scholar was less interesting than that of a fiction writer, and began seriously submitting stories for publication.

After being published in prestigious magazines such as *The New Yorker*, Lahiri was awarded the highest literary honour in the United States, the Pulitzer Prize for Literature, in 2000. Since then, she has been awarded many other prizes, including the O' Henry Award for short stories. In 2003, she wrote the novel *The Namesake*, which was made into a movie in 2006. In 2008, a second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, was published. Lahiri lives in New York City with her husband and two children.

Jhumpa Lahiri is of Indian descent; both her parents were born in India. She was born in London but grew up in Rhode Island, a state on the east coast of the United States. From childhood, she often accompanied her parents back to India – particularly to Calcutta the third-largest city in India, located in the state of West Bengal, close to India's eastern border with Bangladesh. Her father worked as a librarian and her mother remained a traditional Indian wife, maintaining the customs of her youth.

Review of Literature

Large numbers of researchers work continuously to discover new dimensions in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. In the past, migration was largely conceptualised as a bipolar relation between sending and receiving countries and the post-migration situation was perceived as being localised in the new country of residence. However, the effect of mass migrations can be distinctly seen in the works of diasporic writers. Narratives of migration and exile are often seen

through acts of personal and collective memory. Rushdie observes that “Lahiri has created great literature out of the phenomenon of cultural transplantation, out of examining the ways in which people cope with a new world” (Gangopadhyay 2010, 239).

The hidden baggage of nostalgia is dismantled and repackaged through allegory and irony. For these hyphenated beings that carry traces of multiple cultures within themselves, a form of double consciousness occurs whenever they confront the pull factors of different social codes. Stuart Hall is of the opinion that identity in Lahiri is a “production, which is never complete, always in process” (Hall 1990, 222). It undergoes transformation and is never fixed to an “essentialised past” (Hall 1990, 225). Agreeing with Hall, Mishra believes that the new Indian diaspora of ‘border’ is a site for “rearticulation of an intercultural formation” (Mishra 1996, 426), that is heterogeneous in character and advocates the synthesis of differing cultural trajectories.

Mary Louise Pratt explains the term transculturation as a “a phenomenon of the contact zone” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2009, 233). Pratt further defines that ‘contact zones’ are social spaces where disparate cultures meet “often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2009, 233). Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* shows traces of transculturation. It portrays two generations in the Ganguli family, each having different sets of histories.

The Problem

Jhumpa Lahiri’s Indian heritage forms the basis for her short stories; stories in which she deals with questions of identity, alienation and the plight of those who are culturally displaced. She vividly shows the estrangement and isolation that often afflict first- and even second-generation immigrants. Although the immigrant experience is central to her work, it is not her exclusive concern: in the title story, she suggests, through her characters, that there are ‘maladies’ that trouble all of us. This contributes to our understanding of other people and of ourselves. She, like many Americans and Australians, is a second-generation immigrant who feels just as much at home in her parents’ homeland as she does in her own – yet she felt she belonged nowhere when she was young.

The psychological dislocation that immigrants often suffer can cause their children to feel a similar sense of alienation. Although Lahiri’s parents ultimately adjusted to living in America, they must have frequently longed for their mother country, giving Lahiri the opportunity to

observe, at first hand, the often painful adjustment of immigrants to life in an adopted country. Her narratives weave together not only the stories of immigrants, but also those of their children, who feel that they belong neither in one place nor another.

The Argument

Lahiri sees tolerance as essential both to cultural harmony and within relationships. Through 'This Blessed House' (pp.136–57), she explores both the complications of an arranged marriage and the adjustments that must be made to accommodate a couple's disparate personalities within any relationship.

Sanjeev obviously prefers his bachelor existence 'when he would walk each evening across the Mass. Avenue bridge' (p.138) and need not consider anyone else in his solitary evenings. He and Twinkle are completely mismatched: he prefers an orderly existence, while Twinkle is lazy, slovenly and careless of convention. Further, she was 'excited and delighted by little things ... as if the world contained hidden wonders' (p.142). These qualities make Sanjeev 'feel stupid', because he does not understand her zest for life.

When Twinkle becomes obsessed with the Christian artefacts left behind by a previous owner in their new house, Sanjeev becomes even more uptight wondering what the 'people from the office' (p.139) will make of these Christian symbols in a Hindu house. He hates the fact that Twinkle is fascinated with them, but in the face of her refusal to abandon them he concedes that he 'will tolerate' her 'little biblical menagerie' (p.139). This is a further sign that he will accommodate Twinkle's excesses for the sake of harmony. He continues to clear up after her, but their differences become obvious when he plays Mahler's Fifth Symphony as a romantic gesture only to have Twinkle advise him that if he wants 'to impress people' he should not 'play this music' (p.140). The charms of the 'tender fourth movement' (p.140) are completely lost on Twinkle.

The couple had met 'only four months before' (p.142), and were brought together by the wishes of their parents. This is the situation at the heart of their story, for their obvious differences soon become apparent: Sanjeev is the son of parents who live in Calcutta, while Twinkle is a second-generation American. This basic cultural difference is a further obstacle to their establishment of a successful relationship. Sanjeev had been lonely in America and Twinkle had recently been abandoned by an American man. Brought together by the parents, they

believed they had some things in common such as a 'persistent fondness for Wodehouse novels' (p.143). With this comment, Lahiri shows her sense of the absurd. To make a marriage work, especially from culturally diverse backgrounds, she shows that a great deal of adjustment and compromise must take place on both sides, and also that tolerance extends beyond a mere shared passion for an author.

Twinkle is not interested in the complications of Indian cookery which, she complained, 'was a bother' (p.144), preferring a more American style of food. Sanjeev's admission that her cooking is 'unusually tasty' (p.144) suggests that he is prepared to tolerate her differences. Twinkle, for her part, tolerates Sanjeev's fussiness and, happy that she has salvaged the Christian artefacts, declares 'this house is blessed' (p.144).

Sanjeev does not know if he loves Twinkle, although he has chosen her above all the other Indian brides that were suggested to him. He is clearly mesmerised by her, but 'did not know what love was, only what he thought it was not' (p.147). In Twinkle, he asks himself, 'what was there not to love?' (p.148). The tension between the two reaches its peak when Sanjeev threatens to take the statue of the Virgin to 'the dump' (p.148).

Sanjeev is humbled both by Twinkle's love for him and by the respect shown toward him by his friends and colleagues. His irritation at Twinkle and the feelings that overwhelm him are finally dissipated by the 'pang of anticipation' (p.155) he feels at the sight of Twinkle's shoes. Although he does not share Twinkle's taste in Christian paraphernalia, he knows that they will be together for the 'rest of their days' (p.157). He loves her because she is unique, and their relationship will be cemented because of their ability to compromise.

Lahiri points out that communication is essential, both for societies and for individuals within society. Lack of communication and miscommunication often lead her characters to feel emotionally isolated and to suffer from cultural displacement. This is particularly true for immigrants who feel divide between the customs of their homeland and those of their adopted society. For Mrs. Sen 'everything is there' (p.113) – that is, in India – and she can not assimilate to life in America. Although her Indian cooking practices function as the obvious symbol of her lack of adjustment, her separation from her family is at the heart of her alienation. She waits fretfully for the 'blue aerogram' (p.121) that brings news from the family, an anxiety that Eliot finds 'incomprehensible' (p.121). Her alienation is heightened because she is unable to communicate successfully even with her husband, as Mr. Sen has not understood her feelings of

isolation and simply expects her to be able to cope alone. Her failure to learn to drive is the motif through which Lahiri demonstrates Mrs. Sen's ongoing sense of cultural displacement. After the accident, she becomes even more isolated.

At the same time, though, Eliot's mother is shown to be equally incapable of communication. Her relationship with Eliot is distant and, in contrast with Mrs. Sen, without warmth or real affection. If food is a symbol of Mrs. Sen's marginality, then Eliot's mother's isolation is shown through her failure to cook for either of them, relying on pizza and bread and cheese (p.118). She represents the failure of society to bridge the cultural divide through communication and is uncomfortable around Mrs Sen, merely nibbling her Indian 'concoctions' (p.118) without offering her any real sense of inclusion. When their association ends, she is 'relieved' (p.135).

Conclusion

Lahiri shows that in any relationship the two people must be able to learn to tolerate each other's differences. This is even more so in an arranged marriage, where the couple must develop mutual love and respect. Through describing Twinkle's taste for Christian artefacts, Lahiri implies that Sanjeev also must develop a more tolerant attitude toward his new culture if he is to adapt successfully. As Sanjeev's character shows, the immigrant experience is often painful and the adjustments frequently overwhelming.

She uses her acute powers of observation, together with her personal experiences, to create stories that transport readers to an imaginary landscape, exploring and exposing the frailties common to all of humanity. As the short story genre uses a wide variety of plot types, several strategies must be employed to gain an overall picture of how different stories are connected. Although each of Lahiri's stories has its own self-contained plot and characters, they are linked in ways that bind the collection together as a complete entity. All her stories revolve around people who are either Indian in India, Indian in the United States or Americans of Indian descent. Further, the stories can be separated into distinct groupings and associations, based on their relation to Indian culture. The first and most obvious group of stories are the two that are set in India itself, and concern only Indians in India: 'The Treatment of Bibi Haldar' and 'A Real Durwan'. Here, Lahiri explores the elements of Indian society that have not been muted or changed by association with the outside world. Both of the main characters – Bibi Haldar and

Boori Ma – have characteristics and experiences that are peculiar to Indian society, many of which could not exist elsewhere. These women are both subject to the repressive mores of an Indian society that appears to render them powerless.

It is useful to link these two stories with the only other story set in India, which portrays an Indian man who comes into contact with an American family of Indian descent. The title story, ‘An Interpreter of Maladies’, not only illustrates the main theme uniting the stories, the ‘maladies’ that afflict Lahiri’s various characters, but also bridges the geographic divide between the subcontinent of India and continental North America. Mr Kapasi does not understand the tourists in his taxi, who look Indian despite their foreign mannerisms and behaviour. This immediate confusion points to one of her major themes –that of disjunction between cultures. Through this story, she is able to deepen the connection between her narratives.

Another grouping concerns first-generation Indians who are inevitably alienated from American culture because they have left the land in which they were born and raised. Mrs. Sen, while still quite young, is made to seem old because she cannot adapt to life in America. She is a completely displaced person who yearns only for India and makes no attempt to assimilate. In a similar way, Mr. Pirzada lives in America but is completely absorbed by what is happening in the war in his homeland, where his wife and children still reside.

The largest grouping of stories centres on marriage and relationships, particularly the arranged marriages that underpin Indian society. ‘A Temporary Matter’, ‘Sexy’, ‘This Blessed House’ and ‘The Third and Final Continent’, while also portraying memorable characters struggling to adapt to American culture, dwell on the intricacies of marriage and the difficulties that all individuals have in adapting to life as a family.

A closed national culture is hardly seen in postcolonial literary studies. As people move, the cultural centre also moves, not in any specific direction, but in a diffusing outward spread. Mass migration generates new forms of communication and recognition of ‘other’ places and in consideration of this, it becomes important to acknowledge the presence of diasporic identities within the national texture of a country. The kaleidoscopic quality of the world geography, its conditional elasticity and flexibility, leave the contemporary subject at a loss, on shaky ground and struggling to find his or her bearings in a world where new territorialities have emerged at the crossroads because of increased mobility. Lahiri’s characters participate in the cultural

politics of diasporic difference and in the process, they contest the challenges thrown in by migrating to a foreign country and an alien culture.

Lahiri explores the idea that identity, especially for immigrants, is something that must be sought. We gain a sense of identity through family, society and culture. For the culturally displaced, this is a difficult endeavour. The speaker in 'The Third and Final Continent' (pp.173–98) searches for his identity across continents. He is born in Asia, travels to Europe to study, and finally immigrates to North America. Although he has adapted to the British way of life as a student, it is not a true cultural integration as he lives in a 'house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like 'himself' (p.173). He attempts to keep his cultural identity intact by keeping the most trivial of Indian traditions alive, such as eating 'egg curry' (p.173). When he is posted to America he relies on the Britishness that he has learned in London, converting 'ounces to grams' and comparing 'prices to things in England' (p.175) as a survival strategy. His search for identity is further strained by his arranged marriage, more or less en route to his new job in America, to a woman he has never met. In America, his cultural conflict is manifest in his refusal to eat 'hamburgers or hot dogs' (p.175), as the consumption of beef is sacrilegious according to his Hindu beliefs.

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