Politics of In-between Spaces: Diasporic Travails in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction

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Abstract

Today's world is more mobile and interconnected than ever before in the history of mankind. Fast–paced communicational advances and technological progress have accelerated the process of shrinking the entire world into a global village. Against the larger multicultural scenario, people of different ethnicities, cultures, religions and races criss-cross, clash and collide with each other. Migration has become the order of the day, and with large-scale intra and inter migratory movements across the globe, the concept of home acquires newer dimensions. The postcolonial era has witnessed the production of a number of literary texts by diasporic writers which aim at recreating. "Indias of the mind." South Asian diasporic literature is an effective documentation of the cultural and diasporic experience of the immigrants who are torn between the exigencies of self recognition in a hostile land and the loyalty towards ethno-religious traditions of the homeland. The pervasive trope of displacement found in these works focuses on the constantly changing nature of diasporic identities. This article proposes to undertake a postcolonial reading of Jhumpa Lahiri as a diasporic writer with special reference to her novels. In her novels, one finds the search for self-identity by characters who reflect the mood and sensibility of the Indians who migrate to the West in search of newer pastures, but in due course are forced to succumb to the tense forces of cross-cultural conflicts.

Keywords

Jhumpa Lahiri, migration, diaspora, conflicting pulls, displacement, identity

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migratory movements across the globe, the concept of home acquires newer dimensions. The postcolonial era has witnessed the production of a number of literary texts by diasporic writers which aim at recreating "Indias of the mind." South Asian diasporic literature is an effective documentation of the cultural and diasporic experience of the immigrants who are torn between the exigencies of self recognition in a hostile land and the loyalty towards ethno-religious traditions of the homeland. The pervasive trope of displacement found in these works focuses on the constantly changing nature of diasporic identities. This article proposes to undertake a postcolonial reading of Jhumpa Lahiri as a diasporic writer with special reference to her novels. In her novels, one finds the search for self-identity by characters who reflect the mood and sensibility of the Indians who migrate to the West in search of newer pastures, but in due course are forced to succumb to the tense forces of cross-cultural conflicts.

Travelling and migration have become rampant in the contemporary world. Many Indian writers like Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee and so on have settled in other lands. One of the most prominent among the contemporary women writers in Indian English literature, Jhumpa Lahiri is an author of considerable repute. Her debut literary endeavour is a collection of short stories titled *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond* (1999). However, it was *The Namesake* which won her much critical acclaim and popularity. *The Lowland* is her most recent work of fiction, and taken together, *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* have evoked significant attention in the field of diaspora studies. Herself a second-generation immigrant, Lahiri's writings are a brilliant elucidation of the feeling of in-betweeness and the psychological trauma faced by the diasporic characters who experience problems like displacement, alienation, feeling of rootlessness, quest for identity and questions of adjustment to the hostland.

Diaspora is one of the key terms in the socio-literary discourse of contemporary times. With its varied and wide ramifications in social, cultural and literary circles, disaspora studies has established itself as an academic discipline in its own right. The increased pace of social and geographical mobility effected by the process of globalisation has resulted in the blurring of borders and boundaries. Global interactions have become a quotidian reality because of the rapid growth in patterns of international migration.

The process of interaction between individuals and groups is not a simple one, and it has become much more problematic in recent times. In fact, it assumes serious proportions in the case of the diasporic population scattered across the globe. Against the context of the present day world conceived as a global village, several cultures meet, clash, collide and criss-cross with one another. To the immigrants, the term "diaspora" signals an interaction between two cultures – cultures which are totally different and distinct from one another, and whose interactions frequently involve politics. The resultant

interaction raises issues pertaining to the nature of the relationship which may be characterised by domination, subjugation or marginalisation.

As a heavily loaded term, "disaspora" brings within our purview a conglomeration of several ethno-religious and cultural identities and, subsequently, issues emanating out of spatial and temporal dislocations. Diaspora implies dealings with space and time, and as it involves acts of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation, there also takes place a negotiation between two lands. It then follows that diaspora allows for either an affirmation of one's identity or a loss of that identity.

Originally derived from the Greek, the term "diaspora" means "to disperse" or "to scatter," but from its primary agricultural connotations, the term has now been extended to refer to movement across the globe, especially from one's homeland to hostland. The term connotes the scattering of people who either voluntarily or involuntarily displace themselves from their homelands, and these movements entail either isolation or assimilation. The term "diaspora" came into use initially with reference to the Jews who dispersed to different parts of the world either forcibly or for other reasons. Pradeep Anand says:

> Diaspora is spreading of the seed when planted in different parts of the world, absorbs unique characteristics from the local soil. Every story about the Diaspora thus becomes a unique context, a coordination of space, time and experience, which someday will collectively tell the whole story of a Diaspora. (4)

It is clearly established that diasporic experiences are inextricably linked to culture, history, past traditions, customs and practices of the individuals. But in the age of globalisation, there has taken place cultural diffusion, and one cannot think in terms of a notion of pure culture. The movements away from the centre of homelands to the periphery of hostlands point to the attendant problem of either preserving one's native culture in an alien land or submitting oneself to the patterns of the new culture.

In the present time, diasporic movements have also contributed to the growth and development of diasporic literature which in general aims at capturing the specific nuances of the lived experiences of the diasporic individuals. Diasporic writings explore the tension arising out of the clash between two identities – social and cultural. Under such conditions, the diasporics who are caught between the needs and demands of the present and the nostalgia and sentiments of the past resort to either integration in the host country or reclamation of the homeland through nostalgia and memorialisation. It this sense, it can be said that a diasporic individual positions himself in an in-between space engendered by an attempt to negotiate between the changing

realities of the present and the eternal sentiments of the past. Lois Tyson comments thus:

> Double consciousness and homeliness are the two features of postcolonial diasporas. 'Double consciousness' or unstable sense of the self is the result of forced migration colonialism frequently caused. In the diaspora this feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither, rather than to both, of finding oneself arrested in psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological order, but from the trauma of the cultural displacement within which one lives is referred to by Homi Bhabha, and others as 'unhomeliness'. To be 'unhomed' is not the same as being homeless. To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak. (421)

Published in 2003, *The Namesake* is Lahiri's first novel, in which she narrates the tale of two generations and their respective attitudes towards issues of identity. The central part of the narrative revolves round the highly disturbing and agonising experiences of the first generation immigrant couple – Ashoke Ganguly and Ashima, and their children, Gogol and Sonia, who belong to the second generation. Having got married to Ashoke Ganguly, Ashima comes over to Cambridge where she has been living for the past eighteen months. Living eight thousand miles away her native land, Ashima fails to adjust and adapt herself to the culture and lifestyle of the US. Here, displacement from India to America is not merely a geographical dislocation, but a socio-cultural and psychological one. What is even more significant is that she faces an emotional uprootedness which in turn creates a deep sense of alienation forcing her to experience loneliness. According to first generation immigrants like Ashima, the Indian socio-cultural system which reflects itself in its values, attitudes, rites, rituals, customs and gendered behaviour patterns is being transmitted from generation to generation within the personal space of home. It is, therefore, quite natural that she who was born and raised in a typical Bengali family is emotionally attached to her native place. Imbued with a sense of belonging, Ashima's emotional attachment to Calcutta is so intense that she cannot sever herself from the memories of her own place. In this context, one is reminded of Gaur's observations that "Being in a foreign country means walking a tight rope high above the ground without the net afforded a person by the country where he has his family, colleagues and friends and where he can easily say what he has to say in a language he has known from childhood" (100).

As the events of the novel unfold, one finds that Ashima with her deep-rooted faith in the ideas and ideologies she imbibed from her native culture blatantly rejects the space of diaspora. The only means by which she reconciles herself with the diasporic space is her act of recalling the past, and revisiting

memories of the past that are intimately related to her hometown Calcutta. Family, thus, becomes a focal point in the novel, and as Benedict Anderson points out, the family has always remained a "domain of disinterested love and solidarity" (37). When confronted with the American ways of life, Ashima consciously reverts to remembering everything Bengali, as she fails to find her "place" in the diasporic "space." During such traumatic moments, her only solace was "her watch, a bon voyage gift from her parents, slipped over her wrist the last time she saw them, amid airport confusion and tears" (*The Namesake* 4) and "a tattered copy of *Desh* magazine" (*The Namesake* 6). Unable to fit herself into the larger cultural paradigms of American society, Ashima, the first-generation immigrant, finds herself in a diasporic liminal state, having been caught between her affiliation to the homeland to which she no longer belongs (at least physically) and her adopted home where she is on the margins. Ashima's isolation from the host society is compounded by her husband's inability to be a supportive influence on her because of his professional assignments. Despite the physical presence of her husband and children, Ashima feels a strange sense of loneliness, and the trauma of her solitary existence becomes unbearable when Ashoke goes out of Boston for nine months on a research project at a small university somewhere outside Cleveland. As she says, "At forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind. "It's not such a big deal," her children tell her. "Everyone should live on their own at some point" (*The Namesake* 161). As Ashima's character shows, the immigrant experience offers only pain and overwhelming trauma for her. She feels that her identity is strongly rooted in her homeland, and she attempts hard to keep her cultural identity intact by all means.

In contrast, Lahiri introduces us to the second-generation immigrants like Gogol and Sonia who, having been born and brought up in America, as the narrator says in the context of Gogol, "never thinks of India as desh. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India" (*The Namesake* 118). Further, they are interested in everything American, and in keeping with the Western ways of life, Gogol enjoys having love affairs with Ruth and Maxine. But towards the end of the novel, Gogol experiences a spiritual and emotional crisis, as he realises that he is neither an Indian nor is he a complete American. He is no longer defined by his construction of his American identity; he is able to only partially identify himself with both the cultures. He sacrifices his personal life in favour of an ambivalent space which is a suspended state between "roots" and "routes." Gogol's ultimate failure to relate himself to America enables him to understand the significance of the need to have a definite identity, in a totally different space – a third space where he manages to make sense of his existence. As Kaur observes:

> Gogol (Nikhil), though having passed through many emotional setbacks because of his 'bicultural' identity is shown to be feeling dejected, distressed, displaced and lonely in the end not knowing what to do after the thwarting of his dreams, his father's death, his wife's desertion and his mother's impending departure to India, but his desire to settle a home, have a family and a son and rise professionally in other countries hint at his quest for the new 'route' which will dawn on him after his reflections in the company of the stories by his namesake, Nikolai Gogol – gifted to him by his father. (41-42)

One of the major issues pertaining to the Indian diaspora is how to preserve Indian cultural identity in the midst of the multiple and diverse order of today. The process of globalisation has unsettled people and cultures, and contributed towards creating new identities and affiliations. The first-generation characters have a strong attachment to the country of their origin, but to the second-generation, the adopted country becomes their homeland and they effortlessly identify themselves with it.

The Lowland is the second novel penned by Lahiri which was published in 2013, ten years after the publication of *The Namesake*. It was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize (2013), the National Book Award (2013) and the 2014 Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction. Spanning over four decades, the action of the novel shuttles between Tollygunge, Calcutta and Rhode Island, the US. The process of globalisation has effected speedy economic transactions, human mobility and increased educational opportunities. It tracks the stories of two brothers, Subhash Mitra and Udayan, who hailed from "modest middle-class homes" (*The Lowland* 3).

Though the two brothers were inseparable in their childhood, ideological differences between the two caused them to drift apart later. Unlike Subhash, Udayan was not interested in building up a career. Subhash, on the other hand, leaves Tollygunge for the US to pursue a PhD programme. He comes to learn about Udayan's involvement in the Naxalbari movement in the hope to create "a more egalitarian structure" (*The Lowland* 50), and also about his "premature decision" (*The Lowland* 57) to marry. Despite being geographically separated, Subhash cannot transform his conventional attitude associated with marital matters. In keeping with the spirit of a typical diasporic individual, Subhash maintains a link with his home country through letters.

Following Udayan's death at the hands of the police, Subhash comes back to Calcutta to learn of his parents' ill-treatment of Gauri who is forced to lead the typical life of a Bengali widow. In order to escape from the drudgery of existence as a lonely soul, Gauri gets married to Subhash. Here, one can note how Gauri relies much on the memories of her past life with Udayan to make sense of her present. As a striking contrast to Ashima, the character of Gauri evolves beyond contemplation. Having come under the heavy influence of the

US, Gauri allows herself to be overtaken by the realities of the present. In the course of her life in the US, Gauri accepts her new role, and in her attempts to create a space for herself in the American society, she dresses up in the western fashion and even cuts her hair short. Instead of relying on the pristine and unsullied past, Gauri "becomes" an American woman. As Stuart Hall conceptualises in his "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" a diasporic individual's identity is not "an accomplished fact," but a "production" (222), an ongoing process, and his identity is a matter of "becoming" as well as "being" (225).

Gauri presents a striking contract to Ashima in Lahiri's first novel in refusing to toe the line of a traditional woman. In chronicling the development and evolution of Gauri from a simple rural woman to a self-sufficient urban woman, Lahiri throws light on her border configurations of her self which mature in the course of time. She responds to the exigencies of the new circumstances in an unquestioning fashion as she reroots and relocates herself in an alien land. Though Gauri comes to the US at Subhash's insistence, she fits into her new role so uncompromisingly that she dares to harbour western views and attitudes in an "impersonal ongoing space" (*The Lowland* 286). As Lahiri tell us:

> And yet she remained, in spite of her western clothes, her Western academic interest, a woman who spoke English with a foreign accent, whose physical appearance and complexion were unchangeable and, against the back-drop of most of America, still unconventional. She continued to introduce herself by an unusual name, the first given by her parents, the last by the two brothers she had wed. (*The Lowland* 286)

Gauri's integration into the host culture invests her with a sense of freedom and a spirit of assertiveness. She deviates from the heteronormative approach to life to enter into a lesbian relationship with Lorna. Though she had many fellow academics as her friends, she had "never allowed herself to reach the point where they might complicate her life" (*The Lowland* 287). It was Lorna who had enchanted Gauri, and as Gauri takes stock of the changing roles in her life she feels that she alone is responsible for the shifting roles she played in her life.

It needs to be noted that Gauri lives in an in-between space as a victim of cross-cultural crisis. She acknowledges that her roots lay somewhere back "in the humid climate of Calcutta" (*The Lowland* 3) in Tollygunge with its "lowland spanning a few acres" (*LL*3). In fact, her conscious participation in American society and conformity with the western notions of socio-cultural life is an act of self-discovery. To her surprise, she rightly comprehends that however much she tries to "suppress" her past life, it "expresses" itself into her present life, and in the process, we find Gauri, unlike Ashima, evolving as an individual managing to make sense of the totality of her existence through a connection between the lived past and the living present. In the process of her

development from a simple girl to an intrepid academic, she displays her spirit of stoic endurance. She, somehow, overcomes or rather trivialises the sense of loss by negotiating the rules and strictures of the demanding present.

In the present day globalised world, the severing of people from their homeland, culture and language causes them to reassess and rethink their original identities. In the contact zones where people of disparate socio-cultural background are brought into contact with each other, we find them being faced with the pressures of coercion, inequality and conflicts. In this context, it is relevant to note Mary Louise Pratt who has put forth the concept of the contact zone as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today" (4). In *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*, Lahiri stages the socio-cultural and political nuances of the concept of home, and its impact on those diasporic spaces. Physical alienation from their homeland forces them either to recall their past home or to recreate a new one. In both the novels, Lahiri has projected the issues faced by the immigrants in negotiating between the two value systems. Ashima's link with her mother country is deep, but Gauri acts according to the need of the hour. Gauri's experiences of immigration are markedly different from those of Ashima. Caught in the moral and psychological tension arising out of her inability to relate herself to the new home, Ashima's case clearly reflects the muddled position of being an immigrant. At this juncture, it is appropriate to make note of the observations made by McLeod in his *Beginning Postcolonialism* that "To live as a migrant may well evoke the pain of loss and of not being firmly rooted in a secure place; but it also means to live in a world of immense possibility with the realization that new knowledges and ways of seeing can be constructed out of the myriad combinations of the 'scraps' which Rushdie describes – knowledges which challenge the authority of older ideas of rootedness and fixity" (215). Finally, it can be said that as the process of immigration entails cross-cultural conflicts, social clashes, fluid identities, and so a logical and judicious approach should be maintained in relation to the dragging influence of the past homeland and the pressurising influences of the present hostland to be part of today's cosmopolitan world. The two novels under discussion point to the crucial importance of a process of negotiation with the cross-cultural and cross-generational encounters to bridge the problems of in-betweenness. Regarding identity formation in the hybrid space, Brah argues:

> [the] word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are congested cultural and political terrains

> where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure. (193)

Finally, it can be said that as the process of immigration entails cross-cultural conflicts, social clashes, fluid identities, a logical and judicious approach should be maintained in relation to the dragging influence of the past homeland and the pressurising influences of the present hostland to be part of the cosmopolitan world that it is today.

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