

Delphine Munos, *After Melancholia: A Reappraisal of Second-Generation Diasporic Subjectivity in the Work of Jhumpa Lahiri*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013. 237 pp. ISBN 978-94-012-0991-5.

In 1999, a young writer of Indian decent in the United States came into limelight by winning the famed Pulitzer Prize, an award given to an American writer for publishing the best work of fiction that same year, and with that Jhumpa Lahiri and her *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond* entered the reader's domain in a big way. She was acclaimed not only for her powerful literary style but also for bringing to our notice the plight of Asians in America, or to be more precise, a specific sub-genre within that class, namely Bengalis in America and Kolkata who suffer from the traditional problems of cross-cultural identity crisis, acculturation problems and all the related issues discussed ad nauseam in studies of the diaspora sensibility. Apart from the two novels she has penned till date, *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowlands* (2013), which have also dealt in details about the plight of Bengali Americans in various manifestations, we have tasted the unusual power of her observations in the other anthology of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008).

Unaccustomed Earth is divided in two sections. Part One contains five stories, three of which were earlier published in different issues of *The New Yorker*. Part Two contains three interrelated stories about two characters Hema and Kaushik. The three interrelated stories, "Once in a Lifetime," "Year's End" and "Getting Ashore" are also a unique experiment of first person narration. According to the author herself, as stated in the dust-jacket of the US edition, this triptych is "a luminous, intensely compelling elegy of life, death, love, and fate – we follow the lives of a girl and boy who, one winter, share a house in Massachusetts. They travel from innocence to experience on separate, sometimes painful paths, until destiny brings them together again years later in Rome." [Incidentally, like the characters of her stories, Jhumpa Lahiri, after spending her time in Rhode Island, Connecticut and Brooklyn, New York, is living for quite some time now with her husband and two children in Rome.]

Such an introduction of Lahiri becomes necessary for this reviewer before discussing the particular book under review because it is an in-depth study of these three interrelated "Hema and Kaushik" stories from a totally new perspective. Delphine Munos, the author of the book is at present a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of English and American Literatures at the University of Leige in Belgium, and the book is the outcome of her doctoral research. Mindful of the tunnel vision sometimes created by the privileging of "hybridity talk" and matters of culture in discussions of texts by

minority writers, the author reads the work of Jhumpa Lahiri against the grain, by shifting the ground of analysis from the cultural to the literary. She wants her work to be different from those of critics who work from the narrower theoretical boundaries of transnationalism, diaspora studies, postcolonial theory and Asian-American studies. With the help of psychoanalytic theories ranging from Sigmund Freud through Andre Green and Nicholas Abraham to Jean Laplanche, and even Julia Kristeva, she re-evaluates the complexity of Lahiri's craft and offers major insights into the author's representation of second-generation diaspora subjectivity. She feels that Freud's father-centred Oedipus masterplot gives way to more mother(s)-centred theoretical frameworks. She feels that the triptych of short stories discussed is exemplary texts in which Lahiri redefines notions of belonging and arrival regarding the Bengali-American second generation, not in terms of cultural assimilation – which would hardly make sense for characters born in the United States in the first place – but in terms of a re-symbolisation of the gaps in the parents' migrant narratives. It is her contention that, "by reversing the order of priorities and focusing primarily on the *literary* (with the help of psychoanalytic theories), a quite different picture of Lahiri's cultural agenda will eventually emerge – one that challenges most of the usual assumptions concerning 'the easy consumability of her fiction,' and her perceived investment in claiming mainstream America through 'model-minority' narratives of compliant assimilation" (xx).

In the introductory chapter of the book, the author tries to explain the reason of her choice of subject and also takes recourse to discuss different issues of diaspora theory by mentioning critics like Makarand Paranjape, and especially Vijay Mishra. She imports some of Mishra's insights into her considerations of the Bengali-American second generation diasporic imaginary as portrayed by Lahiri. She argues that "while much critical attention has been paid to the class-streamed form of migration inherent in the 'new' Indian diaspora, the fact that the voluntary migration applies *only* to the male body of this affluent diaspora... has been virtually ignored" (xxvi). She feels that the involuntary journey of the wives who follow them after their marriages are arranged, the way in which "such a lopsided parental severing from India might have an impact on the second generation's own sense of arrival in the land of their birth remains, thus far, a neglected issue" (xxvii). Referring to Freud's 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia" she suggests that one of the key aspects of Freud is that the melancholic is only able to deny the all-too-blatant reality of loss by *becoming* the lost object or ideal – by incorporating it into him/herself. But other critics have gone further.

Munos's in-depth reading of the trilogy is concerned with exploring how "Hema and Kaushik" signifies on the absent presences haunting trans-generational relationships within the US diasporic family of Bengali descent.

Relationships are no longer discussed in the usual binaries, and with time, the diasporic sensibility gradually becomes darker, deeper and more complicated. Bringing to the forefront such “negative” categories as the gap, the absent, the unsaid, the melancholically absented mother, *After Melancholia* reveals that the second-generation “Mother Diaspora” is no less haunting than her first-generation counterpart, “Mother India.” In the chapter entitled “Diaspora’s Hereafters” Munos analyses how in the collection of stories in *Unaccustomed Earth*, the notion of the parents’ homeland and the trope of the return are not inevitably and exclusively tied up with a nostalgic, backward-looking stance but can also be associated with the advent of new beginnings for a second generation. The “Hema and Kaushik” stories focus on the ways in which the death of Kaushik’s mother at an early age bears on the destinies of the two eponymous protagonists. This death opens avenues for thinking of the emergence of a new generational sense of the future in terms of a dialectical relation between mourning and melancholia.

In the next chapter “Revenant Melancholy” Munos delves into deeper analyses of Kaushik’s exile of self, the resurfacing of his mother’s photographs etc. leads him to extreme reactions. Issues of surrogate mother figure are also discussed in details especially found in the story “Year’s End.” The title of the next chapter “Dead Mothers and Hauntings” clearly explains how Munos delves deeper and deeper into psychological analysis of each of the character’s actions and it sometimes feels as if she is reading too much into some observations and actions that Lahiri has casually incorporated in the stories. This is how Munos concludes her discussion of the chapter:

What I am suggesting is that Kaushik’s symbolic putting to death of the historical mother, his encounter with an unacceptable form of eroticism through his stepmother, and his melancholic embrace of nothingness in Maine all too perfectly echo Hema’s secret predicament. Snow as blank mourning, the uncovering of Emma Simond’s tomb as a promise of bringing Hema back to life: seen through the perspective of Green’s dead mother, it thus becomes all the more apparent that Parul’s breast cancer and Kaushik’s story of wild grief furnish a ‘plot,’ in more ways than one, to externalize and perhaps mourn the ‘great unspeakable’ in Hema’s life. (94)

In the last chapter titled “The Future of Diaspora” Munos tries to justify her analysis of the stories through other theoretical positions as well. She tries to remind the reader of “the ways in which ‘Year’s End’ and ‘Once in a Lifetime’ use the threads of ‘afterwards-ness’ to weave the motif of the dead mother into the ever-displaced motif of the sexual mother (or into the mother as a figure of unapproachable alterity)” (104). What interests her most is that “the interweaving of both motifs can be seen to work in conformity with Laplanche’s refiguration of the second moment of the primal situation as one of

deferred encounter with the ‘sexual’ message of the mother: i.e. with her unconscious or irreducible otherness” (104). Later in the chapter she tries to find hidden metaphors embedded in the incident of Parul’s lost luggage and believes that “the non-arrival of the mother’s luggage in the USA indicates that the untenable nature of her own fantasies might just as well never come home, both literally and figuratively speaking, in other people, either, not even after a generational lag” (114). She compares Kaushik’s invisible attachment to his mother’s back-and-forth migration between India and the USA with Gogol being tied up in his father’s derailment in *The Namesake* without his knowledge. She does more than link melancholia with a regression to “the paradise or inferno of an unsurpassable experience, with the melancholic subject returning to a ‘before-the-break’ spot of time in relation to early childhood” (197). After discussing several other perspectives, the author concludes in the following manner:

Lahiri never lets us forget that melancholia is also a raging signifying machine disturbing the smooth running of ‘reality’ by pushing meaning to the outmost confines of the Symbolic, towards its frontier line with the Real – a machine that is sensitive to “the call of the melancholy voice from behind the screen” and eventually one that reshuffles the rules of grammar by marking the empty space of the Thing, “the person who speaks to us.” (205)

The book leads us therefore to label Jhumpa Lahiri not only as an Asian-American minority writer, an ethnic writer, or a melancholic assimilationist. As the detailed discussion of the “Hema and Kaushik” stories by Munos rightly exemplifies, it is time we should rethink Lahiri’s transnationalism and do away with all earlier labels slapped upon her and just start calling her “an universal writer.” The kind of analysis offered by Munos actually can also inspire us to re-evaluate her novel *The Namesake* once again. Also, *After Melancholia* is recommended to all Lahiri researchers for the sole reason that it gives us a new perspective of looking at the writer’s work, not from the traditional Indian point of view (especially because she has been appropriated by several Indian scholars to be an Indian writer in English, and by Bengalis of Kolkata in particular as “*amader meye*,” literally meaning “our girl,” because both Bengaliness and Kolkata feature so recurrently in her writing), nor from the multicultural Asian-American point of view, which scholars settled in the United States believe to include her in their own bandwagon only. Coming from an European scholar settled midway between these two far-reaching continents, somewhere between Bengal and Boston (to quote Lahiri’s own definition) Delphine Munos gives us a third perspective, new untainted and unbiased, with a logic entirely her own.

Whether all scholars and especially Jhumpa Lahiri herself will accept her analysis of course remains a debatable point.

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