

IDENTIFYING HYBRIDITY IN THE FICTION OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the protagonists of Jhumpa Lahiri's novels navigated cultural tension and difficulty as they immigrated to America. It is a practical application of the theoretical ideas of hybridity and assimilation that critics like Homi Bhabha have discussed in the context of post-colonial criticism. With its themes of displacement, assimilation, and the conflict between several cultures and individual identity, Lahiri's literary work engages in postcolonial discourse. The Namesake covers the tale of two generations of an Indian immigrant family in the United States as they struggle with issues like identity development and the immigrant experience, among other things. The short stories in The Interpreter of Maladies address the themes of dislocation, and cultural anxiety to varying degrees. The researcher will go through how the characters ultimately come up with fresh, anti-monolithic theories of cultural development and exchange. As a result, in what way they are able to adopt a new culture while retaining their desi background.

KEYWORDS: *Immigration, Post-Colonialism, Displacement, Cultural Anxiety, Hybridity.*

INTRODUCTION

Mass migration causes considerable cultural changes in host countries, furthering the reciprocal cultural consequences of globalisation. Because the realities of cultural dynamics are much more complex than those envisioned in simplistic models of "multiculturalism," which incorrectly attribute homogeneity and cultural stasis to groups of people from particular parts of the world, migrants cannot be conveniently grouped into clear-cut "diasporas," as Vertovec implies in his work on "super-diversity." Along with Bhabha, Stuart Hall has emphasised the transcendental nature of identity generally and diasporic identity specifically. Hall asserts in his "Introduction" to the Questions of Cultural Identity, "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). When examining diasporic culture, Bhabha and Hall go from the "bipolar model" to the "tripolar model," which emphasises the "middle ground," or what Bhabha refers to as "the third space," rather than giving importance to either the motherland or the dwelling country (Kral, 12).

Her stance on immigration appears to be similar to that of cultural critics like Bhabha, who praise the transient, adaptable quality of hybrid identities that can adapt to shifting social circumstances. Lahiri emphasises people that are active and productive, do not adhere to

outdated views, have open minds and, as a result, abandon restrictive traditional customs imposed on them and afterwards make an effort to improve their lives in order to highlight this flexibility in her stories. We see several instances of this amalgamation in Lahiri's stories, which are consistent with Bhabha's claims about "the third space," "in-betweenness," and "the borderline work of culture" that lead to an amalgamation of the cultures of the motherland left behind and the country of residence (Location of Culture 1994, 7).

Critically highlighting the idea of hybridity as a state of Self in the postcolonial world is a key component of the very influential work of postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha. With the publication of *The Location of Culture* in 1994, he appropriated a biological term that had previously been used to describe a situation in which racial boundaries were crossed and that had connotations of disease and moral decay. He then turned the term into a positive state of personal development and a normative aspect of societal development. However, hybridity as a state should not be viewed as the simple combination of pre-existing cultural components but rather as a third condition, a state unto itself, with a unique dynamic nature that sets it apart from pre-existing cultural identities. According to Bhabha, the Third Space of enunciation's intervention contradicts our perception of culture's historical identity as a homogenising, unifying force (37).

Homi Bhabha, a post-colonial theorist who now resides in America, created the word "hybridity." Hybridity is a crucial component of the theory of the Diaspora because it explains how the Diaspora alters its beliefs and practises while residing in other nations under the influence of those nations, such as; The subjectivities and ways of thinking of the diasporas also evolve when they are living in the new nation and interact with the representative culture, and they also participate in the dominant culture's cultural discourse. Densingh No. 3 According to Bhabha, subjects who are caught between two dominant cultures and preconceived identities occupy a third space, which is best suited to resist a dyadic interpretation of the world and more likely to produce new hybrid forms of cultural identity. The first two spaces, which are the two dominant, potentially conflicting, cultures, are where these subjects find themselves. However, it should be noted that Bhabha contends that all cultural statements and systems are created in this ambivalent and contradictory space of enunciation (37) but he acknowledges that some cultures are dominant and active participants in the construction of identity.

The identity of those in the Diaspora is heavily influenced by the mixed culture. They adopt the culture of the host nation since the locals there make fun of their rituals, habits, and way of life. It is the ability of the "occident" to make the "orient" regard themselves as the "others," as Said indicated in his book *Orientalism* (11). Nowadays, it's quite common to study diaspora, and a number of new diaspora authors, including Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, Sashi Deshpande, Sashi Tharoor, and Upamanyu Chatterjee, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra, and Vikram Seth, have made notable strides in this field through their writing. Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London, England, on July 11, 1967, and later moved to Rhode Island with her parents. Her parents were Bengalis, hence she is a second generation immigrant. Lahiri's debut book, *The Namesake*, was released in 2003. *Unaccustomed Earth*, is Lahiri's second collection of short stories (2008). Lahiri wrote a nonfiction essay titled "Teach Yourself Italian" about her experience studying the language in *The New Yorker* in December 2015.

The Namesake

The life of an Indian couple named Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, who moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1968, is depicted in the novel. It describes the cultural difficulties the

protagonist encounters as she tries to fit into a new Western society. Gogol, the child, rejects Indian cultural icons early on in the book, and he later rejects his parents' way of life. Finally, and after the passing of his father, Gogol's development as a person is correlated with his acceptance of both cultures, which is a prime example of cultural fusion.

The novel relates the tale of two generations: the older generation, comprised of an Indian couple who moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1968 (Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli), and the younger generation, comprised of the Ganguli family's American-born children Gogol and Sonia. It presents a variety of the Gangulis' experiences as they look to America for a better life. More than any other generation, the elderly experience estrangement, loneliness, cultural conflict, and a sense of relocation. The lives of an ethnic family in a place that values individual liberty and independence serves as the narrative's focal point. Each character tries to strike a balance between Western and Indian values.

It appears more challenging for their children to understand their native culture and roots as the parents are successful in achieving such balance by controlling cultural hybridity. Gogol and his sister found the parents' efforts to instill in their children a love of India, respect for Indian ideals, and adherence to Hindu customs absurd despite the parents' best efforts. India is a rustic environment where Gogol and his sister will be cut off from all forms of civilisation they have become accustomed to. Gogol's family's trip to Calcutta when he was a teenager is dismal. Gogol and Sonia do not feel as connected to their family when they meet them at the Dum Dum Airport as they do to their parents. He notices the ebony four-poster bed in the Ganguli residence, where they would have all slept if his parents had stayed in India. For Gogol, the idea of having no privacy is horrifying. He never demonstrates empathy for the region of his origin. He never feels that he belongs there. Ironically speaking, Gogol is a foreigner in India.

The biggest controversy surrounding Gogol's name highlights his battle with Indian culture. In a letter to the United States, Ashima's grandmother chose his Indian birth name and posted it there. Sadly, the letter is misplaced in the mail, and the recipient's identity is still unknown. The name Gogol, which Ashoke chose, suggests a tale of inspiration and survival. However, Gogol needs a good reputation for when he enrolls in kindergarten. His parents gave him the good name "Nikhil," and people outside the family also use it. The family members' pet name for the dog is "Gogol," nevertheless. Gogol is terrified as a young child to change his name: "He is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know. Who doesn't know him?" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 56).

Gogol acknowledges his Indianness but does not completely reject his Western civilization. Even though he finally comes to love his culture, he understands that he is more than just a Bengali. His exposure to the Western world has had an impact on him mentally and unconsciously. Gogol fuses his native culture with American culture by redefining what it means to be a Bengali family member in a society where white people hold the majority of positions. He now recognises how his life has been enriched by the values of the two cultures. He truly represents the new hybrid generation symbolically. According to Asha Choubey (2013), Gogol, an Indian-American, "lives like a pendulum till he finally attains maturity to self-realization" (p.4). He ends his conflict in this way when he permits the two cultures to mix in a single zone of cultural contact.

Through Ashima, Lahiri explores the issue of acculturation and the fine line between assimilating into a new culture as an immigrant and entirely changing, which puts a heroine at

risk of losing her identity. Ashima quickly understands that maintaining a balance between two disparate cultures is essential for survival in this Western civilization. However, Ashima's attempts to have a more hybrid identity at first result in a cultural misunderstanding. She won't give up her native way of life in favour of American cultural norms. She speaks Indian with her kids most of the time, despite having a heavy accent that has allowed her to become linguistically hybrid. She won't stop participating in pujos and ritualistic rites, remove her traditional Sari, or give up her religious convictions. She will always recall the directions given to her by her family and other loved ones who came to see her off at Dum Dum Airport: "not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair and forget the family the moment she landed in Boston" (p. 37). Ashima's attachment to her Indian culture is motivated by the early emphasis on native identity in the book, which is once more reinforced by her excessive number of Indian friends living in the United States.

Ashima decides to construct her own "third space" in order to build her hybrid identity. Ashima permits the coexistence of feelings of homecoming with cultural acculturation in that area. She worries how she differs from the prevailing Western society as an immigrant. She initially fights the various roles and identities assigned to her, only to come to terms with the complexity of her circumstances and the diversity of her identities later on. She enjoys a plural cultural engagement with the new world while in a transitional condition. Being the mother of children who were born in the United States and the wife of an educated Indian immigrant who is respected as a distinguished professor in the American academic community, Ashima learns that hybridity is the result of a crossbreeding. Family members of Ashima, especially her kids, had little trouble assimilating into this culture. Therefore, within the contact zone formed by the dominant culture, hybridity produces a "transcultural identity".

Interpreter of Maladies

It is Jhumpa Lahiri's first collection of short stories. It is filled with the identity difficulties of Indian (Bengali) immigrants to America and won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction as well as the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award in the same year. "A literature whose cross-cultural themes give a natural chance to compare the presence of contrasting cultural values" is *Interpreter of Maladies* (Shea 1). Lahiri's personal experiences as a second generation immigrant are detailed in the book, much as she did in an interview;

The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously ... The older I get, the more I am aware that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents. (Lahiri, Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri)

The cultural barriers Lahiri encountered in America led her to write *Interpreter of Maladies* since she was unable to identify as an Indian or American citizen. While living in America, she also wanted to teach her children Indian traditions. The characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's books are frequently immigrants from India and their American-raised children, exiles who straddle two cultures and countries but do not truly belong in either. They are too accustomed to freedom to accept the customs and traditions of their native country, but are also too steeped in tradition to fully embrace American values. (Densingh, 4)

She has discussed the peoples' struggles with their native cultural identities and their suffering identities under American accepted ideals in the book. Lahiri "imagines an American world

through eyes that have seen other civilizations and a mind that has grasped other modes of thought, not only through American eyes" (Caesar 52). Their personal behaviours, eating habits, married lives, extramarital affairs, age and class inequalities, communication, adultery, and child psychology all incorporate diasporic elements. She also pays close attention to how the characters are dressed and how each story is told differently by giving her characters a fresh perspective on the world beyond their own country's borders and a fresh perspective on their own lives.

Lahiri chronicles the lives of Indians and Indian Americans who are torn between the culture they inherited and the society they now inhabit in *Interpreter of Maladies*. (Shea 1) The title of the book again evokes the idea of interpretation, conveying the characters' suffering, and the author herself takes on the role of "interpreter" of the "maladies" experienced by persons struggling with identity crises. Many of the stories are set abroad, while others are set in India, which highlights the author's mixed heritage. The stories share a number of characteristics with the characters' cultural identities.

When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine presents the contact between the diaspora in America who have become embroiled in political issues, suffering as a result for their identity. The narrative is told from the perspective of a second diaspora kid, Lilia, who is depicted in all of her innocence to show the internal struggle she experiences as she wonders who Mr. Pirzada is. "Mr. Pirzada is Bengali, but he is a Muslim" (Lahiri 21). Her father further explains, "That too. One moment we were free and then we were sliced up ... like a pie. Hindus here, Muslims there. Dacca no longer belongs to us" (Lahiri 22). This discussion leaves a lasting impression on Lilia and prompts her to wonder why people seem to differ after the political division of their own continent. Lilia tries to distinguish between the two while also observing that Mr. Pirzada and her parents appeared to be somewhat similar, spoke the same language, and laughed at the same jokes.

One of the recurring themes in stories is hybridity, which depicts how characters' lives are impacted by mixing American culture with their own values and practises to create a new kind of way of life. "Cultural identity is a matter of being and becoming who we truly are," says the author. what we've evolved into (Hall 115). The stories about the identities of the characters exhibit a certain "doubleness." Nearly all of the stories exhibit some degree of hybridity. It is clear from "A Temporary Matter" that Shobha and Shukumar live a mixed lifestyle. They are Americans who are Bengalis, but they integrate the two cultures in their daily lives. In the story, a few things illustrate this concept. The Indian customs are described as including preparing rice, eating "shrimp malai" and "rogan josh," wiping a half lemon on one's fingertips to get rid of the smell of garlic, using garlic cloves and cardamom pods, and Shukumar's affection for "Bengali poets." The mother of Shukumar represents Indian culture through her religious attitude. Living according to an American lifestyle that includes cooking Italian food in, using bottles of "vinho verde", According to the American Pregnancy Association, drinking ginger ale from a martini glass can help with morning sickness. The friendship between Shobha and Gillian comprises drinking and smoking, which is a true representation of the American way of life.

CONCLUSION

Immigrants who were born at the nexus of two dominating cultures find themselves in a transitional space where they can distinguish themselves from both fixed identities while still navigating both environments with ease and assimilating elements from both -apparently opposing- cultures. Jhumpa Lahiri celebrates cultural diversity, which fosters cultural fusion. She

gives her characters a place to exist "in-between." As a result, she enables people to settle into a "third space" where they can converse in a cordial manner about "Ourselves" and "Others." Lahiri is able to break out from the rigidity of the binary opposition of the Self and the Other thanks to this "third space." The three central protagonists in Lahiri's novel finally achieve transcultural identity without renouncing their own culture. As a result, literary characters who reflect the different ways that a hybrid identity can manifest itself are created that are hybrid, non-dyadic, and inclusive. Shukumar emphasises the adaptable nature of hybridity when he only rediscovers his Indian side as part of a grief mechanism, and Twinkle even goes as far as reappropriating colonial patterns in her treatment of Christian devotional objects. Lilia and Shoba's characters seem to take on the role of the intermediary or the guide between the domestic and the social spheres. They would have run the risk of losing their Indian heritage if they had fully merged into the new Western environment. Instead, they decide to use a purposeful process of cultural hybridity to construct their "third space."

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