



## EXILE, ALIENATION, DIASPORA AND CULTURAL CONFLICTS IN THE WORKS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

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### ABSTRACT

A modern writer, Jhumpa Lahiri is not only a short story writer but also a novelist of recognized ability, commendable technique of narration, and an expert in the delineation of the problems of immigrants and the Indian diaspora. She has been able to take the world by surprise by her startling stories and therefore richly deserves awards.

Jagadish Batra points out that, "The Library Journal Critic finds her novels to be a "rich stimulating fusion of authentic emotion, ironic observation, and revealing details." Lahiri's forte is her lovable characters. In most of her works, the characters conform to a pattern. Subhash can be seen as a repetition of Ashoke of *The Namesake*, in so far as innocence, geniality and good nature are concerned. We have such characters in many of her stories too confirming her faith in the goodness of human beings."

Her works deal with the problems of migration, the pros and cons of alien settlements, including displacement and relocation, alienation and belonging, acculturation and assimilation. She deals with the displaced lot negotiating all along with the new world. She also deals with loss of roots, the expatriate experience, linguistic diversity and social dislocation.

**Keywords:** *Exile, Displacement, Alienation, Assimilation.*

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Jhumpa Lahiri (1967), born of Bengal parents, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000 for her debut collection of short stories entitled *"Interpreter of Maladies"*, (1999). Her very first novel *"The Namesake"* (2003) earned her popularity. Her second short story collection *"Unaccustomed Earth"* (2008) has again established her as one of the most excellent and commendable writers of fiction of the world. Not only is she a Diasporic writer of Indian origin, but she can also be called an American writer, because of her constant obsession with the American way of life. Her narrative world shuttles between India and the U.S.A. The imbibing of influences of various past or contemporary authors and her excellent narrative technique establish her as one of the towering figures in the World Literature. Jhumpa Lahiri is the kind of writer who makes one want to grab the next person one see and say *"Read this!"* She is a dazzling story teller with a distinct voice, an eye for nuance and an ear for irony. She is one of the finest short story writers, who is able to draw her readers into the story not only through her details and descriptions but also by making them feel the emotional, physical and mental needs of the characters. She has a rare gift for tucking away memories and observations in the back of her literary mind and churning them into a mixture of sensitive and thought-provoking stories.

Jhumpa Lahiri has become internationally famous. Her works portray the lives of Indians in exile, of people navigating and negotiating between ethnic culture and traditional culture they have inherited. They have to encounter everyday a baffling new world without any bias. Her thematic concerns include physical and emotional displacement, assimilation, loneliness, rootlessness, linguistic barriers, failed relationships, marital difficulties and misunderstandings. With a remarkable perception and insight, she delves deep into the psychological depths of her characters and reveals the inner world.

A transposition of a subjective experience, Lahiri's *The Namesake* is a narrative which evaluates the nuances of American social life and the attempts made by the migrants to replace the same to be on par with their native or 'root' culture. Within the framework of familial lives of Bengali immigrants in the U.S, the novel explores and exposes the deep schisms behind the veneer of equality and uniformity in America, marked by its shopping malls, suburban housing, to more poignant and startling cultural depths – a hiatus too wide to bridge. However, it is in *The Namesake*, her first novel that a sustained

attempt is made to deal with these concerns of two generations of an immigrant Indian family. What emerges at the end of this deeply psychological study is the hybridity and luminal existence of the diasporic community, with the ubiquitous conflict between strong ethnic ties and a matching resolve to settle down in the New World. In the process, the feeling of 'neither there nor here' spills over into the lives of the second generation also. It is a deeply moving and finely wrought family drama centred around the Ganguli couple, who are first generation Indian immigrants. Their experiences in the U.S. are pitted against those of their children, complicated further by the choice of name for their son-all of which leads to the clash of cultures resolving into a sense of hybridity and in-betweenness.

The novel describes the story of an individual named Gogol who detests and fails in accepting his peculiar name. He endeavours to be detached from the ultimate reality, a fact of his life. Jhumpa Lahiri takes a complete new approach to present the identity clash of that character and manages to trap the person in his own name. Gogol realizes that his name is not Indian, where his parents belonged, nor American, where he was born. When he finds that he was named after a Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, who was an eccentric genius, deeply paranoid, frustrated man. The detail of his namesake disturbs him a lot and suddenly he starts hating his name more than anything else. The more he knows about Gogol the more he feels betrayed by his parents. Here the parents act according to Bengali tradition where their pet names had a function to play. Jhumpa Lahiri writes: "Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood, a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated. They are a reminder too, that one is not at all things to all people." (26) This clearly shows that an individual's identity changes from person to person and one is not the same individual to everyone.

The parents feel that their son Gogol leads a bohemian life. Ashima regrets that her concern is not understood by her son. Maxim's attitude affects Ashima's sentiment seriously and this violates the cultural ethics of the Gangulis. She apprehends that this violation would affect the ethics of family life and marriage between and Indian and an American. This illustrates the egoistic nature of Indian immigrant Bengalis. They have a deep sense of pride in their socio-cultural concepts and practices. In celebration of their culture, the first generation Bengalis seem to be more honest, sincere and loyal to their cultural past. But for the second generation things fall apart



and the centre cannot hold them as they have been more contaminated/accultured in the cultural practices of America. They become habituated to Christian customs. Smita Mohanty points out: "In love and marriage they think (the young lovers) their parents are more tabooed and demonstrate physical affection publicly in 'uncelebrated' and 'depressing' manner. Gogol's affairs with Ruth a hippie girl and Maxims the Manhattan girl, is not liked by his parents on moral grounds since in Indian context love and marriage are taken as a sacred bond... Maxim confesses her affairs with her ex-boyfriends before Gogol." (The Namesake: An exegesis of Ethical consciousness- by Smita Mohanty – from "Dynamics of culture and Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri" P58 Adhyayan-New Delhi).

Speaking about Lahiri's novels, Shilpi Ahuja says: "The stories are on-the-face direct and embrace you in their warm folds without you even being aware of it. She has helped in throwing clearer light on the Indian's perspective of life in an alien land. However, the book does not reek of ethnocentricity-it has a universal flavor and appeal that an immigrant from any corner of the world would be able to relate to".(148)

In *A Temporary Matter* the relationship between the Indian couple Shoba and Shukumar is portrayed by Lahiri. The novel begins with the break up after Shoba delivered a stillborn child. There is incompatibility between the couple and they try to avoid each other. Shoba is very busy with her work while Shukumar neglects his Ph.D work sleeping most of the day. They discuss and debate on certain serious events in their life. They find or seek to find consolation in the dark when the scheduled power cuts occur between 8 to 9 PM. "He wondered what Shoba would tell him in the dark. The worst possibilities had an affair. That she did not respect him for being thirty-five and still a student.... I cheated on my Oriental Civilization exam in college.... It had happened over fifteen years ago. He felt relief now, having told her." The couple wept together, for the things they now knew. It was indeed a small temporary matter that brought about the crisis and the resolution.

Lahiri as a Diaspora writer, deals with the multicultural society both from *inside* and *outside*, seeking to find her native identity, as well as, the new identity in the adopted country. This brings in a clash of cultures and dislocation and displacement. It is the predicament of people in the diaspora that the novelist attempts to analyze through her oeuvre.

A.J. Sebastian points out: "Lahiri as the omniscient observer applies the predicament of her characters to interpret the maladies gnawing into their immigrant life. She also attempts to cope with the dynamics of culture as well as Diaspora in each situation. Her stories, thereby, provide a powerful healing touch to immigrants caught in alienation, exile and isolation." (Jhumpa Lahiri "Interpreting Maladies" – an article by A.J. Sebastian, published in the book entitled "Dynamics of Culture and Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri – edited by Nigmanada Das, Adhyayan Publishers, New Delhi, 2010, P8)

In Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*, the first generation migrants remain clustered together, showing their collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland. Though they left it for the possibility of distinction in life in a tolerant host country, they know that they are not accepted by their host society and therefore feel insulated from it. For this insecurity they are constantly on the lookout for people belonging to their own community, searching for epidermic and cultural similarities. In order to avoid undesirable conflict with the norms of the host country, the Diaspora, especially the men who are compelled to enter the mainstream through their jobs try to camouflage it. In "*Unaccustomed Earth*" Ruma's father manages to look like an American.

We realize that in their emotional displacement, the border between home and world becomes confused Lahiri's first collection of stories; "*Interpreter of Maladies*" is subtitled as "*Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*". The present collection of study *Unaccustomed Earth* portrays the beyond. It goes beyond physical and psychological borders. These stories describe life as a whole and various relationships which are part and parcel of one's life. Lahiri has shown clearly that these bondages and vicissitudes one comes across in life makes the person a complete social being. The protagonists and other characters in these stories represent the diasporic struggle as well as journey of the self in quest of the lost identity. The meaning of one's existence lies not only within him but also related to the world and the fellow beings. This awareness makes one "*strike roots into Unaccustomed Earth*"

Many of her short stories are about exile and movement-people leaving and returning. They are people caught between two cultures, two countries two worlds. In her writing Lahiri is interested in transition. She explores the shifting of people from one location to another, examining the reasons why people leave-for jobs, for educational



opportunities, because of health or family dynamics. Most of her characters struggle in adapting to these new environments, not knowing what part of their home culture to embrace. Thus Lahiri is a writer par excellence.

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