

Tale Of Hyphenated Identities In The Namesake & Interpreter Of Maladies By Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is a well-known and widely read diasporic author who has gained much credibility in her exploration and presentation of diasporic sensibilities through her works. Diasporic sensibilities continue to give us insights into the role of home and belonging as far as identity is concerned. Globally Diaspora has become a hotbed for many debates. Jhumpa Lahiri continues to explore what it means to be an alien in a country you migrate to. She feels an incessant need to locate her roots, to search for a sense of self, a place which she can call her own. It is through her writings that one uncovers and understands newer meanings of home and identity. We also get a glimpse into the life of people who live in such Diasporas. The connection with home is maintained through language, food, clothes, music and artifacts. The idea is to create a 'home' away from home. For Lahiri, identity is always in a flux; thus it is better to call it hyphenated identity. This paper intends to establish this based on the study of two major works of Lahiri viz. The Namesake and Interpreter of Maladies.

Keywords: Hyphenated Identity, Diasporic Sensibilities, Home.

Introduction

People living in the Diaspora navigate multiple spaces in terms of home and identity. This has given rise to a vast body of literature which examines their anguish of not belonging anywhere. As far as the Indian Diaspora is concerned, the contribution of Bengali writers is foremost in giving voice to the anguish felt by Indians living abroad. Writers like Upamayu Chatterjee, Chitra Divakaruni, Ruchira Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and others have formed a substantial body of literature pertaining to the issues surrounding the Diaspora. Their writings are also reflective of the entire idea of being a Bengali. References to Bengali music, food, clothes and politics indicate

how closely connected they feel to their roots. Since they come from the city of Calcutta, one cannot ignore the innate closeness they feel towards the Bengali culture. References to Calcutta are frequent and one can sense how the city comes alive in their descriptions of the city page after page. Jhumpa Lahiri is a second generation immigrant who dwells on the difficulty of being dislocated. Caught between competing/conflicting cultures she gives voice to the challenges and dilemmas faced by Indians living abroad.

As an author she tries to do justice to the portrayal of those living in these interstitial spaces. Born to Indian parents Jhumpa Lahiri's family migrated to America when she was young. Lahiri spent most of her life at Rhode Island. Her writing reflects the inner turmoil she herself has faced in navigating two cultures. Her works are reflective of the conflicts faced by Indians living in diasporas. The autobiographical inscription in Lahiri's work cannot be denied. Born to Bengali parents in London in 1967 she was named Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri. One can immediately see the parallels between Lahiri's own life and her fictional work. This is also the reason why her biography must be read alongside her fiction. Lahiri's parents were first generation immigrants and she dwells on the complexities of navigating multiple hyphenated spaces in terms of home and identity. Lahiri is married to Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush and has two children Octavio and Noor. In many of her stories the protagonists marry outside their community. This complicates matters even more as far as identity is concerned. India is home to many ethnicities but when people travel abroad they get subsumed under the title Indians. However for Lahiri being a Bengali brings her close to what she might refer to as home. Her writings constantly refer to the way Bengalis live both in India and abroad. It may be inferred that being a Bengali is central to her idea of a 'self'. Many of the characters in her fiction are displaced Bengalis and the longing for home is synonymous with going back to Calcutta. Though she also explores universal themes, the essence of being a Bengali comes through. Since she belongs to the diaspora themes of identity, loss, alienation, hybridity and nostalgia are common in her works.

In her first novel *The Namesake* she depicts the complicated lives of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, a Bengali couple who live in America. They have hopes of living a better life after settling in America. While Ashoke becomes engrossed with his work it is Ashima who feels the pangs of loneliness and alienation in a

foreign land. She is confined to the house and kitchen. When she becomes pregnant she has no support system. She longs to go back to India. She is so lonely that she becomes a victim of depression. Even after living in America for thirty years she is not able to assimilate with the culture of the host country, something which is common with first generation immigrants. She continues to pine for her lost 'home' which she cannot recover or recreate. The theme of nostalgia is inherent in the way Indians in America behave, dress and even decorate their homes. Ashima hangs a painting of camels in her house because it was painted by her father and she is emotionally attached to it. Indian artwork finds its way in the homes of many Indians living abroad whether it is Kashmiri woven mats or cast iron statues of Natraj. Not only this festivals like Durga Puja are celebrated with full pomp and show. Bengali cuisine is cooked at home and children are taught the Bengali way of life. Ashoke is well known in academic circles and he assimilates with the office culture however at home he is a Bengali husband and father. All these little things depict how Indian immigrants try to create a home away from home. The Ganguli's also become victims of a racial attack when their surname on the mailbox is distorted. Gogol is also referred to as an Indian though he was born in America.

Becoming a mother in an alien culture is full of difficulties for Ashima. According to Bengali culture children are named by their grandparents and the act of naming a child happens in a grand ceremony. However in America they have to name their son immediately. In confusion their first born son is named Gogol after the famous author Nikolai Gogol. Later Ashima gets a job in her son's school library. Still her memories continue to oscillate between India and America and she cannot stop herself from comparing the two. She continues to wear beautiful saris which are referred to again and again in the text. It is a shock when Ashoke suddenly dies of a heart attack. Ashima's life becomes more complicated. As a couple they had thought of settling down in America but now Ashima is not so sure that she wants to stay. Finally she decides to stay in both India and America for six months each. She also realizes that she has changed a lot over the years. She is not what she was thirty years back. Ashima's plight brings to life the challenges faced by Indian immigrants living abroad.

Navigating multiple spaces and hyphenated identities is a part of being an immigrant. Their feelings of being isolated and alienated is finding an outlet through literature. Ashima's son

Gogol too faces cultural alienation though as a mother she tries to strike a balance between the two cultures. As a child Gogol visits a graveyard and is traumatised by the fact that he will never have a headstone. Gogol is also sent to classes where he learns about Bengali culture. Ashima teaches him a poem by Rabindranath Tagore. Gogol's sister Sonia rebels against the Indian traditions followed by her mother in order to assimilate with the American way of life. She attends parties with boys and threatens her mother that she will get body piercings and colour her hair. Sonia plays the part of a rebellious teenager trying to come to terms with her roots. Gogol and Sonia also visit Calcutta along with their parents. While Ashoke and Ashima are happy visiting the city their children do not feel comfortable in Calcutta.

Living in America has a deep psychological impact on the Ganguli family. Gogol being a second generation immigrant has no real recollections of India, still he feels alienated from the mainstream culture. He has many failed relationships with women. His relationship with his wife too is complicated. Maxine is not able to participate in Bengali customs. Gogol performs the last rites of his father as per Hindu traditions in which his wife plays no part. Sonia on the other hand assimilates with the American way of life more easily. She is happily married to an American named Ben. One can trace the difference in first and second generation immigrants in *The Namesake*. For Ashima and Ashoke the longing for the Bengali way of life is acute. Their children however have no first hand contact with India. They learn Bengali culture through friends and family located in America. They are also exposed to the American way of life right from childhood. Thus they develop what is called 'hybrid' identities in theory. Yet being a hybrid is fraught with its own complexities. They can neither fully belong to America nor can they come to terms with their Indian identity. They continue to oscillate between the two cultures, neither of which they can fully belong to.

As the Ganguli children are born and brought up in America they have adapted themselves to the American culture. Their way of thinking clashes with that of their parents. Their views on relationships, food and dress clash with the traditional Bengali culture. Being first generation Bengali immigrants Ashima and Ashoke want their children to follow Bengali customs and culture. However their children like other second generation immigrants rebel against this. Sonia and Gogol form relationships with partners who are not Bengali. For Ashima

the death of Ashoke is a blow. They had come to America with hopes of living a better life but she feels that they have been cheated. The life that they had hoped for does not materialize. Even their children move away from them. In Bengali culture it is assumed that the children will live with them forever taking care of their parents in old age. In America children have their independent life. For Gogol life becomes very confusing. Right from the name he is given his life is marked by inner turmoil. The relationship he forms with women indicate how difficult it is for him to find stability. His identity remains an elusive factor always beyond reach. Though he tries to anchor himself through his relationships he is not able to do so and at the age of thirty two he is mature beyond his years. In the end he can only find solace in a philosophical view of life. Like the name he inherits he becomes a citizen of the world inhabiting many homes.

Thus, in her novel Lahiri exposes the complexities faced by Indians living abroad. Each generation has its own set of problems. She also highlights the fact that the problems faced by first and second generation immigrants are not the same. One wonders how these issues can be resolved. With each passing generation the ties to the homeland become weak and yet they simply cannot be erased or wished away. There is always a feeling of nostalgia surrounding what could have been and what is. The identity of a diasporic subject is marked by hybridity. The longing for a home is acute because it is associated with belongingness. Yet for most writers home ends up as an illusionary space. Even when one visits the homeland one cannot get rid of the feeling of not belonging. It is through writing about their life that one tries to locate a home for oneself.

Interpreter of Maladies is the first short story collection by Jhumpa Lahiri for which she won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. Anupama Kaushal writes:

The writings of Jhumpa Lahiri are all about such diasporic Bengali migrants settled in USA. She is fortunately among those writers who have become aware of the relativity of the concept of diaspora, its contradiction, numerous possibilities of alienation and assimilation, going back to various patterns of memory, the marginal and the central- which all we observe in her Pulitzer Prize-winning fiction Interpreter of Maladies (2010:92)

The story 'A Temporary Matter' exposes the inner life of a Bengali couple Shukumar and Shobha in an alien land. The story begins by telling the readers that there will be a power cut for one hour for five consecutive days. Shukumar and Shobha decide to play a game during this one hour where each reveals secrets from his or her life. Shukumar feels that they have come closer than ever before in their marriage but on the fifth day Shobha tells him that she wants to live away from him. Shukumar is upset and tells her that she had given birth to a dead baby boy but he had kept the truth from her. Shobha is shocked and both weep together in the end. Their shared loss brings them closer than ever before. Lahiri brings to light the pressures of marriage in an alien land. Both Sukumar and Shobha have grown apart in their marriage and Shobha is on the verge of leaving her husband. This would be something unheard of back home in India. Yet in an alien culture she feels that she cannot continue the relationship any further. As an expatriate Bengali couple their marriage comes under so much strain that they start avoiding each other. Being second generation immigrants they also represent the Americanized version of a couple. The title itself is an indication of how the writer views marriages in America. In the end they are able to salvage their marriage by communicating honestly with each other.

'Interpreter of Maladies' on which the title of the book is based around the character Mrs Das. She lives a fulfilling life outwardly as a devoted wife and the mother of three children. However inwardly she struggles with the feelings of loneliness and isolation. On a family trip to Puri in India she meets a guide Mr Kapasi who is also an interpreter for a doctor. Mr Kapasi begins to harbour romantic feelings towards Mrs Das. She too comes closer to him and reveals how she had slept with her husband's friend. He is also the father of one of her children. She has kept this secret for eight years and needed to get it off her chest. In India such an act would be considered a sin but in America it would be treated as a trivial matter. Mrs Das feels psychologically alienated from her husband and her family.

Mr Kapasi questions her feelings of pain and guilt over what had occurred. In an alien environment the support structure around marriages is absent. Often women suffer alone when they become mothers. They have no one to confide in. It is perhaps a moment of weakness that Mrs Das indulges in but later regrets. It is also a moral dilemma. In India even thinking about a man other than your husband would be blasphemous.

She suffers internally thinking about what she has done. Lahiri again displays her skill as a writer in bringing to light the mental anguish that women face in an alien land. She exposes how difficult it is to live in exile and uphold traditional Indian values. What is more complex is the fact that they are unable to assimilate with the culture of the host country even if they try. Life becomes extremely cumbersome and most of the time they have no one to turn to. According to Bedprasad Giri:

The non-resident Indian writers have explored their sense of displacement—a perennial theme in all exile literature. They have given more poignancy to the exploration by dealing not only with a geographical dislocation but also a socio-cultural sense of displacement. Their concerns are global concerns as today's world is afflicted with the problems of immigrants, refugees, and all other exiles. These exilic states give birth to the sense of displacement and rootlessness. (2007: 243)

All of Lahiri's characters Ashima, Ashoke, Gogol, Mrs Das, Sukumar and Shobha are complex characters. They are representatives of diasporic sensibilities in their own way. They reveal the complex lives of expatriate Indians. Caught between competing cultures they navigate between what can be called hyphenated identities. At times they feel like traitors to their own culture but living in exile can be very complex. Feelings of despair and loneliness are central to Lahiri's characters. Assimilating with the host country is also seen as an act of betrayal. As second generation immigrants are exposed to an alien culture right from birth they have much less difficulty in adopting the culture of the host country. However their parents feel that they are moving away from their roots. Lahiri raises questions regarding issues of marriage, motherhood and family in her works.

Feelings of nostalgia surface whenever one is challenged by a dilemma. Back home in India everything would have a simple solution but in an alien land friends are few. Lahiri also raises the question of marital discord. Almost all her works have characters who mull over the idea of getting a divorce. Marriage does not provide the completeness one is looking for. While men are busy working in the office women are often left alone at home. They have no family or friends to turn to. Marriage becomes a charade behind which women hide the incompleteness and hollowness of their lives. Their husbands

are like strangers with whom they cannot connect. The validity of traditional gender roles is questioned by Lahiri. In India marriage is a sanctimonious institution. Getting a divorce is unheard of in middle class Indian families. There are many relatives who form the support system of the family. Abroad life is individualistic. Children have their own life from a very young age. Marriage becomes very unconventional when women try to assert themselves. Lahiri exposes the incomplete and unfulfilling lives that women lead when they live in an alien culture.

Lahiri's works also bring into focus the different parenting styles. Rearing children becomes a challenge in an alien culture. No matter how much one tries to inculcate Indian values in them the imprint of the foreign hand cannot be erased. Each generation of expatriates has its own set of problems. However one cannot wish away the feelings of belongingness. The diasporic subject is always in a state of inner conflict. Where do I belong is a question which is as poignant as who am I. It is very difficult for a diasporic subject to answer this question as his idea of identity resonates from multiple vantage points. Moreover identity itself is something which is in a state of flux. There is no touchstone against which one can assess oneself. However voices from these liminal spaces cannot be crushed. They expose the everyday dilemmas that expatriate Indians living abroad face on a daily basis. Memory plays a key role in the lives of Indian expatriates. For first generation immigrants this memory is real and the feeling of nostalgia is very strong. Living in exile they feel not only feel dislocated but also disconnected. Lahiri as a writer touches on various aspects of a diasporic life. In the globalized world the diasporic experience is here to stay. The search for a self becomes an ongoing process. It is from the margins that those living in the diasporas voice their sense of loss. It is important to hear about their experiences as they shed light on so many aspects of life. If not in life then at least through writing they can begin to piece the scattered scraps of their identity.

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