

## ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSNATIONAL AND TRANS-CULTURAL SPACE IN THE SELECT WORKS OF DIASPORIC WRITERS

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### ABSTRACT

*The writers of Indian origin inhabiting overseas and taking up creative writings in the countries of their domicile, a theoretical problem transpires in the essential parameters by which their works have to be judged. Various studies based on research in the field of literature are indicative of the fact that varying styles are brought into play in the literature of the diaspora, which frequently have an effect on the migrant's status in the host country with focus or linkage to Indian culture. The high quality of Indian writing has been acknowledged by the world's most demanding critics for almost a century now. There are hardly few readers of English literature who are unfamiliar with the names and best works of writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Ameena Meer, Heema Nair and others. Even the books written by Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have been prescribed as course text in academia. These authors have to decide in favor of residing in America, at times out of choice (work or study), and at other times either they or their families are required to leave the Indian sub-continent for economic or political reasons. In their works they covered the issues like arranged marriage, cultural shocks, racial discrimination, and identity crisis. Varied issues get generated in the lives of the characters, especially because they live in an alien culture.*

**Keywords:** *Diaspora, Immigrant, Dislocation, Hyphenated Identity, Globalization, Consumerism, Trans-Nationalism, Cultural Hybridism, Alienation and Inbetweeness*

### INTRODUCTION

Authors and critics enthralingly prioritize the Indian English writers of the diaspora for their fecundity in portraying the lived reality of their adopted country. Here it is pointed out that in the beginning these writers have to become accustomed to the new country of immigration and next, they have to balance their senses of their self-identity and ethno-cultural community contrary to the demands for penning objective writings, while nostalgia for

homeland always remains an evocatively distracting force for them to be reckoned with. Thus, it can be said that various factors such as the taste of western readers, impact of neo-imperialism, demands of western publishers, provisions of marketability, limitations of diasporic people, and nostalgia of writers about their motherland, should be kept in mind while analyzing the Diaspora writings. In all writings whether they are fiction or criticism their writings are replete with emotions of longing and nostalgia, in the singular manner when they speak of

perplexity and tribulation particularly emerging out of displacement. There is a need to establish a rapport with others who have similar experiences. They seek communities and individuals with whom they can share their experiences and feel comfortable, though they retain their differences while assimilating in the community of their adopted country.

## JHUMPA LAHIRI'S HYPHENATED IDENTITY AS ARTICULATED THROUGH HER WRITINGS

Jhumpa Lahiri, the daughter of Indian immigrants from the state of West Bengal was born in London in July 1967. Her family moved to America when she was two years of age. Therefore, Lahiri considers herself an American, stating, "I wasn't born here, but I might as well have been." ([www.usatoday.com](http://www.usatoday.com)) Encountering difficulty in pronouncing the name she was born under, "NilanjanaSudeshna", her teacher decided to call Lahiri by her pet name 'Jhumpa' rather than her proper name. Lahiri recalled, "I always felt so embarrassed by my name... You feel like you're causing someone pain just by being who you are." (Benjamin Anastas, *Mens Vogue*: 2007). Lahiri's debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* after facing initial rejections from publishers "for years" (An Interview with JhumpaLahiri by ArunAguiar) was finally released in 1999. In this collection Lahiri attend to the sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indian immigrants, tackling themes such as marital difficulties, miscarriages and the detachment between first- and second-generation U.S. immigrants. She wrote, "When I first started writing I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life." (Lahiri, 'My Two Lives' *Newsweek*) Lahiri received 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction for her debut collection. In 2003 Lahiri published her first novel *The Namesake* in which Lahiri portrays the constant generational and cultural gap experienced by two children Gogol

and Sonia and the story spans over thirty years in the life of Ganguli family. Lahiri's second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* was released on April, 2008 this collection achieved the rare distinction of debuting at number 1 on 'The New York Times' best seller list. With this collection, Lahiri departs from her earlier original ethos. Earlier her focus of attention was the first generation of Indian American immigrants and their effort to nurture a family in a foreign land keeping the next generation abreast of Indian culture and traditions. In the new collection her characters embark on new stages of development. She examines the fate of second and third generations as these become increasingly amalgamated into American culture. They are at ease and comfortable in constructing their perspectives outside their country of origin. Lahiri shows a shift from responsibility towards immigrant community to the needs of an individual.

Jhumpa Lahiri represents that school of postmodern feminism where the focus is on understanding the role of women in the society and thus striving for their betterment as a whole, which is in sharp contrast to the rebellious modern feminism which was very popular in 60's and 70s. Hence not very surprisingly, her stories are woven around women characters with myriad temperaments which are as varied as the collection of spices in any Indian kitchen.

The people of Indian origin predominantly, those with links or ancestors in Bengal, encounter different impressions while adapting to the Western culture and the ethos in neo-imperialist or colonizing countries like the U. S and the United Kingdom. Her own experiences, considerably affected her creating those memorable and mostly — female characters that lend to the readability of her novel and short story collections. While *Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of nine short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* is a collection of five stories. The former, maiden venture won her O'Henry Award for the short story "Interpreter of Maladies" (1999) and P.E.N./Hemingway Award for Best Fiction Debut of the Year for the anthology. It also bagged her Pulitzer Prize for fiction 2000. The latter fetched her,

the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award 2008 and Asian American Literary Award 2009. The only novel and two short-story collections of Lahiri reveal the presence of all the factors as discussed regarding challenges faced by the diasporic writers, but yet, in the twenty-first century, they are being applauded as being among the more important contributions to the fast and ever-expanding realms of Indian writings.

It is the first story of the book, *The Interpreter of Maladies* (IOM) in this story the author has depicted a U.S. emigrant Bengali couple, Sobha and Shukumar in Boston. They are having serious problems with their marriage - which is not realized by the husband himself. Their still born son has further alienated the couple, and whereas Sobha gets more self-absorbed and inattentive to her household chores, Shukumar indicts her without making an effort to understand her emotion. Meanwhile the electric supply department of their U.S. town decides to repair the fledging lines, shutting off supply for one hour between eight and nine in evening for five consecutive days. The story is confined to these five days when there will be no electricity for an hour. Shukumar welcomes this power cut for an hour as he is optimistic that darkness could bring them closer notwithstanding differences infused in their relationship: "His heart quickened. All day Shukumar had looked forward to the lights going out." (IOM: 15)

The husband and wife decide to pass the time confessing their dark secrets to each other. During these five days Shukumar and Shoba come closer after the day's busy schedule; in darkness they could verbalize their minds to each other. This game that they play in the darkness revealing to each other a story from his or her life manage to bring them together, but temporarily. Even if the past may be bitter to any extent, it appears romantic and beautiful when perceived through the window of the present. But in the morning of the fifth night, the electric company announced that there would be no power cut on that evening as the line had been repaired ahead of its scheduled time. It

disenchanted Shukumar, but he kept the room dark from eight p.m. and waited for the game. After their dinner Shoba switched on the light and ultimately manages to tell her husband that she has had found a separate apartment on Becan Hills, "I've been looking for an apartment and I've found one."

In this story an emigrant Indian family settled in New-Jersey comes to India, especially to Orissa as tourists. The interpreter is Mr. Kapasi who acts as the tourist guide cum car driver to Mr. and Mrs. Das with their three children, Tina, Mina and Bobby, who visit Puri, Konark and Khandagiri. Every year they visit their parents who are now living in Asansol. The story is more concerned about Mr. Kapasi than the tourists. He is an educated man who knows a little bit of French and other languages. From his very young days, he used to act as an interpreter to the foreign tourists and this time he is with an emigrant Indian family. Mina Das finds Mr. Kapasi's job as an interpreter of Gujarati patients' problem at a physician's chamber 'romantic' and one of a 'big responsibility' (IOM: 50-1). This appreciation of his work as an interpreter which his own wife looked down upon brought Mr. Kapasi closer to Mrs. Das and he compared her with his wife, and even begins to take a romantic interest in the young woman. At Konark, they moved together and engaged themselves in seeing erotic sculptures while Mr. Das was busy with the children in taking snaps.

At Khandagiri, Mr. Das and the children went to the top of the mountain but Mrs. Das felt tired and so remained in the car and sat in the front seat beside Mr. Kapasi. Owing to the closeness, which she had developed with Mr. Kapasi she reveals to him the secret that her third child, Bobby is not of Raj Das but born out of an adulterous affair, not with an English man or an American but with an Indian, a Punjabi friend of Raj who came to stay with them for a week (IOM: 64). She told him of her relationship with her husband before and after marriage which very often left her lonely. Mina Das had expected no comments or judgment from Mr. Kapasi, she told him all this because she wanted an answer, a remedy for her: "I was hoping you would

help me feel better, say right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy.” (IOM: 65) But Mr. Kapasi did not have any remedy with him for her but he soon reveals his disappointment to her and points out her guilt. The only remedy that came to his mind was that she should be honest and tell the secret to Mr. Das. That also he did not suggest, he only asked her, “Is it only pain you feel, Mrs. Das or is it guilt?” (IOM: 66). It angers her, she only looked at him and without uttering a word, opened the car door and went to meet her family and so this abruptly ends the guide’s fancied bond of attachment. She wanted a readymade answer, a cure for her malady. But the interpreter Mr. Kapasi is no doctor to cure her of the malady, which is seated deep within her. Most of the Indian emigrants suffer from maladies of different kinds as they as Indians are unable to purge themselves of their Indian consciousness, that they should be honest and true to their married life. The concept of chastity (without understanding) haunts them like a ghost at noon. Thus, they cannot be completely westernized in their thoughts and feelings. This dichotomy is the dilemma of the Indians settled abroad.

A Real Darwan is a story concerning with how Boori Maa, an emaciated sexagenarian from Kolkata, is thrown out from an old brick building under whose staircase she had been granted temporary residence by the occupants in exchange for ‘floor-sweep and surveillance’. It is probably the most piteous and distressing of all the collections in *Interpreter of Maladies*. The woman is initially taken care of by the Dalals, who leave for a visit to Shimla promising to bring a real woolen blanket for destitute (IOM: 79). When in their absence, one of the building’s sinks installed by them is stolen, Boori Maa is alleged of forewarning the ‘robbers’ and accused of neglecting surveillance duties. On this charge she is expelled from the house and instead a search for a salaried caretaker is initiated. Nayar Aruti writes about how the notions of belonging or home and the resulting dilemmas of dislocation or preoccupations present themselves in a subtle manner in “A Real Durwan”.

The Treatment of Bibi Halder is a poignant story that tells us the predicament of Bibi Halder who suffered from an enigmatic disease which made her family members exasperated and ultimately, she was left to suffer by herself. Bibi Halder was staying with her relatives in a flat in Calcutta. She was arranged a storage room on the roof, “a space in which one could sit but not comfortably stand, featuring an adjoining bathroom, curtained entrance, one window without a grille, and shelves made from the panels of the old doors.” (IOM: 159). She recorded inventory for the cosmetic shop that her cousin Halder possessed and managed at the mouth of the courtyard. For her service she was given food, shelter and “sufficient meters of cotton at every October holiday to replenish her wardrobe and act as an expensive tailor.” (IOM: 159). Bibi Halder’s only obsession in life was to get a husband for her. Each day she expected a man to come and offer his hand to her in marriage, but it never materialized. She cherished to hear from other women the details of their marriage and would sigh after seeing their marriage albums. After having the details from other woman, she would say, “when it happens to me, you will all be present.” (IOM: 160) However after much of fruitless waiting she would say. “My

face would never be painted with sandalwood paste, who will rub me with turmeric? My name will never be printed with scarlet ink on a card.” (IOM: 160-61) Bibi’s relatives, Mr. and Mrs. Halder not at all cared to give any thought to this. Mr. Halder gave an advertisement to this effect, only after he was pestered by the inmates of the flat. Mrs. Halder who was in family way, dread Bibi as an evil portent and longed to get rid of her shadow least it brought harm to her child. She gave birth to a female child and got immobilized with fear when her daughter suffered for five days. Eventually Mr. Halder winded up his cosmetic shop and left the place with his wife and the daughter. Bibi was left alone with Rs. 300 that Mr. Halder left with her. But the story takes a turn when the inmates find, after Mr. and Mrs. Halder’s departure, that Bibi Halder was pregnant. The search for the real culprit ended

in futility. She delivered a male child and took care of him.

## BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S NOSTALGIA FOR HOMELAND AND UPROOTEDNESS IN ADOPTED COUNTRY

Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian-born American writer who was born at Kolkata, West Bengal. But later, after independence she travelled with her parents to Europe, only returning to Kolkata in the early 1950's. She next travelled to the United States to study at the University of Iowa. Later she moved to Canada in 1968 with her husband Clark Blaise. After more than a decade of living in Montreal and Toronto in Canada, Mukherjee with her husband returned to the United States. Mukherjee has gone on record that she considers herself an American writer and not an Indian expatriate writer.

Bharati Mukherjee intends to be a perfect immigrant and she discloses it by saying that she is transforming herself. It also becomes manifested in many of her stories. she states in one of her interviews:

**We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries... when we up-root ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb two hundred years of American History and learn to adapt to American society... I attempted to illustrate this in my novels and short stories. My aim is to expose to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country.**

A Wife's Story is about Panna, a married woman from India who is pursuing Ph.D. in special education in the United States of America. She was not at all contented with her Indian husband and her strong dictating mother-in-law and therefore migrates abroad under the pretext of pursuing her research work. She is scared even with the thought of Indian

husbands who burn their wives for dowry: "I've made it; I'm making something of my life. I've left home, my husband to get a Ph.D. In America Panna is in high spirits as she feels liberated, far away from all the bonds that had incarcerated her. The scrutiny of different American attitudes by Bharati Mukherjee reveals her notion of Americanization: "It's the tyranny of the American dream that scares me. First you don't exist. Then you're invisible. Then you're funny. Then you're disgusting." (MOS: 26) Panna meets Imre, a Hungarian and feels at ease with his friendship and to his utter surprise she hugs him on the road. According to her such a relationship boosts up her confidence. In India, Panna would not have dared to hug even her husband on the road or make friends with other men. The protagonist is happy with her transformation: "That part of my life is over, the way lorry has been replaced by truck in my vocabulary, the way Charity Chin and her lurid love life have replaced inherited notions of marital duty" (MOS: 32). But on the other hand, Panna's own husband is unaware of the changes in his wife.

The World According to Hsu is a story that focuses on marital relationship. It conspicuously describes to what degree relationships are to be founded on equality in partnership and mutual empathy. Ratna, a Eurasian woman of Indian descent is the protagonist of the story. She with her white Canadian husband Graeme Clayton, who is a professor of Psychology at McGill University, Montreal is vacationing on an island nation in the Indian Ocean off the American coast. Graeme has expected the job in Toronto so he tries to persuade Ratna to move from what she describes as the "French dominated-Montreal" to the "English-dominated-Toronto." Ratna prefers Montreal because she is full of apprehensions about Toronto. She fears that in Toronto she would lose her identity and would not be an Indian. "In Toronto she was not a Canadian, not even Indian. She was something called, after the imported idiom of London, a Paki. And for Pakis, Toronto was Hell." (^WAH': 41) Three incidents of violence against Indians were reported in Toronto

which further supported her fear. But Graeme pays no heed to Ratna's fears and informs her about his job. He heads off for Toronto, leaving Ratna behind.

## CONCLUSION

The issues of diaspora, globalization, consumerism, trans-nationalism, cultural hybridism, alienation and identity have become the leitmotif of most postcolonial literatures. The self, dislocated in space and time from its roots has a homing instinct — the desire is to discover its “inbetweenness” in a transnational and trans-cultural space. Problems of identity figure more prominently in the novels of Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Carl Phillips, Anita Desai, JhumpaLahiri and Bharati Mukherjee. In these writers the quest for identity is not tagged to the self alone. It goes beyond the self to issues of culture and linguistics. All these factors give rise to emergent trends and tendencies like hybrid cultural forms among the migrants. In the above mentioned two short stories of Bharati Mukherjee — “Tenant” and “The World According to Hsu.” we find two divergent characters Maya and Ratna. In the former story we see, an immigrant, Maya trying to integrate herself into the western ambience. But in the latter an expatriate, Ratna laments over the ex-status of her past. She falls short of being an immigrant and clings on to her past, traditions and culture. Thus we find Mukherjee's characterization of the Indian state of mind, depicted through the female characters, while the characters of Indian men are brought to life through the satiric narratives of immigrant women.

The immigrant's dedication to the institution of marriage remains strong and it is deemed as a lifelong commitment. Since the husband and wife come to the U.S. as adults, it is only to be expected that their attitudes would not change after migration. Thus, it is observed that Indians even in an alien world are accustomed to Indian culture, notwithstanding their struggle between the strict old traditions and the challenges posed by their new life. According to these writers most Indian men in the Diaspora generally maintain the same demeanor. There is insignificant change in

their attitudes or behavior. Not many women enjoy freedom after marriage in a foreign country; their husbands try to dominate their wives in most cases. Even the fast-paced culture around them fails in modifying the approach of men towards their wives. The practice of husband and wife spending some time together remains a vision even today.

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