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CROSS-CULTURAL DILEMMAS OF WOMEN IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

The representation of Indian women in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction is manifold and conflicted. The author shows a considerable degree of cross-cultural sensitivity and a kind of ironic modernity, because of which she serves to separate the traditional from the westernized characters in her fiction. In this paper, I would like to examine the image of the Indian women in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction in the context of expatriation and East-West cultural negotiations.

Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to second generation immigrant writers. In her writings, one can see the interpretation of the immigrant situations in which her characters, especially women are caught. Lahiri has portrayed some of the problems engendered by the experience of migration and diaspora such as displacement, rootlessness, fragmentation, discrimination, marginalization and crisis of identity. She writes from her own experience of hanging between two identities, non-Indian and Indian. Born in London to parents who emigrated from India, and living in America, Jhumpa Lahiri has been regularly visiting India with her parents. Infact Calcutta, now Kolkata recurs in her stories time and again.

In her fiction, she raises the basic issues of their immigrant sensibility. While the first generation immigrant feels proud of their cultural past, the second generation expresses its aberrations and deviations. In the process of self actualization the former do not like to violate the cultural dignity of their past while the latter neither demand it nor demonstrate it, living as they do in the American plenitude of cultural availability. Her protagonist explores the world around her, tries to come to terms with that alien land (physical or mental) and in the process changes and sometimes grows. The experiences may be mundane and ordinary but yet of great significance as far as the individual is concerned. It portrays every facet of their upbringing in the transnational cross-cultural space- their acculturation, borderland inhabitation, formation of hybridized reality and most significantly, creation of a new amalgamated culture.

The works of Lahiri makes it clear that it is always better for the immigrants not to forget their roots rather they can receive the best of both the worlds. This means facing the best as well as the worst of both the locations and being too Indian or too global is a disadvantage to them. It is



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better for them to be global when it is needed, and to be Indian when required. Thus it is needed to harmonize themselves in these two situations.

Almost all her stories end on a positive note, with the hope for a "tomorrow" which suggests that with little effort we can discard our cultural problems and move towards a society where the traditional and the modern world meet in the inherent goodness, asserting the worth of life. She has conveyed a message through one of her major protagonist that not to fully abandon or attempt to diminish either culture, but to mesh the two together.

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Jhumpa Lahiri is an excellent storyteller with a strong flair of sweet smelling touch in her writing. Her Indian origin and background is dominant all through her stories. Her stories tell the lives of Indians in foreign lands, especially in America. Her novel *The Namesake* (2003) also reflects the same perfection. Lahiri visited her parent's home city Kolkata several times during her childhood, during which she felt "every visit was an emotional see-saw across continents and cultures.". The influence of frequent childhood visits to Indian and parents who are still a part of the Indian world despite their immigration to America thirty years ago have shaped her writings. To Roy Choudhary, Jhumpa Lahiri Confesses :

I've inherited my parent's preoccupations. It's hard to have parents who consider another place 'home' even after living abroad for thirty years. India is home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here. There is nobody in this whole country that we're related to. India was different - our extended family offered real connections. To see my parents as children, as siblings, was rare.¹

A second generation Indian in America that Jhumpa Lahiri is, she is a product of vast cross-cultural fertilization without 'negative feelings' where she was born and raised. Born and brought up in alien lands, the second generation Indian, nevertheless, carries his India with him by virtue of being born to Indian parents. She belongs to the emerging generation of Indian in whose memory merge the codes of the two cultures and produce a discourse that goes beyond the post colonial angst about nationality. The second generation NRI, stand apart in so far as their representations of experience consist of hybridization of the two cultures inhabited. Parmanand Jha writes :

The trauma of dislocation, an acute sense of loneliness and the pangs of estrangement suffered by the millions of 'exiled Indians' who try unsuccessfully to balance themselves between 'home' and 'abroad' are the major maladies Lahiri attempts to interpret.²

In this paper, I would like to examine the image of Indian women in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction in the context of expatriation and East-West cultural negotiations. Jhumpa Lahiri's nine stories in her collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* and her novel *The Namesake*, by and large deal with Indians settled abroad negotiating between two cultures with varying degrees of success, their attitudes, their concerns and their life styles set in Bengal and Boston, the stories concern themselves predominantly with social preoccupations like cultural multiplicity, identity crisis, love marriage, breaking of marriage, extra marital affairs, old age etc. Khushwant Singh is full of praise for her. He says :

Without striving to impress, without a witty twin of phrase, Jhumpa manages to hold the readers' interest. She reminded me of Somerset Maugham.³

A Temporary Matter is a story of a young couple, Shoba and Shukumar. Shoba gives birth to a dead child, this tragic incident dramatically changes the lives of Shoba and Shukumar. Suddenly love and warmth evaporates from their lives. They become 'experts in avoiding each other in their three bed room house, spending as much times as possible on separate floors" (4) Shukumar no longer looks forward to the weekends as Shoba

sits 'for hours on sofa with her colored pencils and her files' (5) Shukumar would fear to break the silence. It had been a very long time since she had "looked into his eyes and smiled, or whispered his name" (5). She stops taking interest in the house under such state of affairs, crisis in their married life continued when a temporary matter in the form of a notice of electricity cut, informed about five days' power cut for one hour from 8 P.M. This unexpected announcement provided them a chance to come closer.

Unable to think anything in particular about spending an hour in darkness. Shoba turned nostalgic and her immigrant sensibility overpowered her when she said, "It is like India, sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch. I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark. The baby just cried and cried. It must have been so hot" (11) Shoba further added being more nostalgic, "I remember during power failures at my grandmother's house, we all had to say something like a little poem, a joke or a fact about the world." (12) For them five nights turned into nights of confession. Shukumar told her that he has cheated in an exam and had forgotten to tip a waiter, admitting that he had been 'distracted' (14) by the thought of marrying her one day. He confessed he had exchanged the sweater, a wedding gift by Shoba, for cash and had 'gotten drunk alone in the middle of the day' (18) and had once torn a picture of a woman from a magazine and had an "intensive desire" (19) for her. Shoba too, made her confessions, she told him of peeping into his address book to see if her name had been entered and how she had let him speak to the "chairman of his department without telling him that he had a dab of pate on his chin" (19) She also confesses that she had Martini with Gillian, when his mother had come visiting and had found his only published poem 'Sentimental'. (19)

Four nights in darkness turned into "an exchange of confessions... the little ways they'd hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves" (18) The darkness somehow helped them to communicate with each other. In fact, they were also able to make love. On the third night Shukumar "began kissing her awkwardly" (18) and on the fourth night they made "love with a desperation they had forgotten" (19) On the fifth night the electricity has been repaired, Shukumar is disappointed, because it was only in darkness they were able to communicate, and share their lives together. In a quick move, Shoba blows out the flickering candle and switches on the light, and tells Shukumar about her plans to shift to another apartment as they had, "been through enough". (21) It was clear to Shukumar that "this was the point of her game" (21) He feels "relieved" and "Sickened" (21) The game is not yet over. It's his turn to confess. Shoba did not know the sex of her baby and this "enabled her to seek refuse in a mystery" (21) She thought it was a mystery for Shukumar as well. But now he tells her "our baby was a boy ...(22) Shoba turned the lights off. She came back to the table and sat down, and after a moment Shukumar joined her. The story ends with the words, "they wept together for the things they now knew" (22)

The story reflects the alienation and loneliness that the emigrants face in a foreign land. The decline of their mutual attachment in Boston prepares them for the problems of self exile. Memories of India come again into their intimate conversation.

The title story '*Interpreter of maladies*' is one of the much acclaimed stories in the anthology which highlights the psycho-analytical study of the female protagonist, Mrs. Das. Mr. & Mrs. Das family of five members came to Orissa for sightseeing from America. They engaged Mr. Kapasi as their guide, a learned man who due to some bad fortune ends up taking the profession of an interpreter with a doctor for Gujarati patients. Mrs. Das from the very beginning seemed to be an egocentric character, which hardly showed any affection towards her children and any love or soft feelings towards her husband, Mr. Das. They came to see Konark temple. They had complexes about their Indian origin and tried to look as much American as possible. Mrs. Das develops a deep interest in Mr. Kapasi's job as an interpreter of maladies. She even takes his address to send the photographs in which both of them are together. Mrs. Das gets attracted towards his professional acumen and she seeks a remedy from him for her secret pain as she was illegitimately impregnated by her husband's friend, a Punjabi who had come to stay with them for a few days. The guilt she committed in a moment's passion made her obsessed with it. For this she requested Kapasi : Don't you see ? For eight years I haven't been able to express this to anybody, not to friends, certainly not to Raj. He doesn't even suspect it. He thinks I am still in love with him. Well, don't you have anything to say ? About my secret and about how terrible

looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible, I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away one day I had the urge to throw everything. Don't you think it's unhealthy? (65)

Mrs. Das's seeking of Kapasi's help to interpret her malady is only to get redemption from her sins and to purify her soul. But Mr. Kapasi's sympathy for Mrs. Das ends with a hesitation and detachment as an obvious question gets to the heart of the matter and he asks "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das or is it guilt?" (65) Mr. Kapasi, the interpreter of people's maladies, fails to offer any remedy to Mrs. Das's malady. A multiple identity may be a reason for Mrs. Das's queer behavior this shows her cultural up rootedness. Most of the emigrant Indians suffers from different type of maladies and as Indians they are unable to get rid of their Indian consciousness that they should be honest and true in their married life. At the same time they cannot be completely westernized in their thoughts and feelings. This dichotomy is the predicament of the Indians settled in abroad.

'Mrs. Sen's' is the sixth story of this collection in which Lahiri has portrayed efficiently and effectively the problems of immigrants such as displacement, rootlessness discrimination and marginalization in the migrated country, even after having found a place to settle in. This story projects the difficulties faced by an Indian wife in a foreign culture. Mrs. Sen who works as a baby sitter for Eliot, an eleven year old son of an American working woman who lives alone and wants someone to be at home with Eliot. Mrs. Sen is a housewife and the wife of a university professor of Mathematics Mrs. Sen develops an intimacy with Eliot. Sen has no friends in America. Her husband has no time for her. Feeling isolated and displaced in America, Mrs. Sen longs to return home, misses her family there, reads letter from them time and again and listens to the cassettes of Ravishankar. Mrs. Sen starts practicing driving, finding it difficult gives it up, prefers going by bus, resumes the practice, meets with an accident and finally leaves the job accepting defeat as well as asserting her will which shows ambivalence in her final action. Shutting herself up in her room and crying there. Thus, Mrs. Sen's thoughts and attempts at self Americanization end in tears and silence. She left the job of baby sitting as well. As sense of alienation preoccupies the hearts of these people culturally as well as geographically cut off from their homeland. A sense of loss runs all through the story.

Jhumpa Lahiri elegant stories tell the lives of Indian in exile, of people navigating between the strict tradition they have inherited and the baffling new world they must encounter everyday.⁴

The Namesake is a novel about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta. The cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their American born children in different ways, the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle 'home' in the new land. The New York Times writes: " This is a novel as affecting in its Chekhovian, exploration of fathers and sons, parents and children as it is resonant in its exploration of what is acquired and lost by immigrants and their children in pursuit of the American dream". (pg 115) Like many professional Indians Ashoke Ganguli too leaves his homeland and comes to America in pursuit of higher studies. After two years stay in the USA he comes back to India, marries a 19 year old Bengali girl from Calcutta named Ashima who has no dream of going to a place called Boston so far off from her parents. Like immigrants of other communities, Ashima and Ashoke too make their circle of Bengali acquaintances, get known through one another. The migrant Bengali's gather on different occasions like the rice and name ceremonies and celebrate all the festivals trying to preserve their culture in a new land. But their existential dilemma in this new country is, as pointed out by Lahiri, "For hours they argue about politics of America, a country, in which none of them is eligible to vote." (38) Thus the immigrants face political displacement too. While making efforts to preserve their home culture in their new homes, the first generation immigrants train their children in Bengali language, literature and history at home through special Bengali classes. How these immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign systems is also shown through problems like they find it difficult to make understand their cultural practice of having two names.

Moushmi who earlier had relations with men in Paris and America, breaks her marital ties with Gogol, goes to live with Dimitri, a German and her plans to leave for Paris immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, she infact does not want to remain bound with any cultural roots. Sonia's decision to marry Ben and

Moushmi's attitude of not sticking to any one culture or country show how the second generation migrants are going global and becoming multi cultural and are exploring new identities through transnational contingencies of routes.

Most immigrants are confused about their identity, whether first generation or second. Lahiri has presumably gone through both but has proved to be surprisingly resilient. Her portrayal of the immigrant trauma in without the tinge of hopelessness. She seems to suggest an antidote for the warped personality that results due to the cultural discrepancies. Thus, she finds her identity through her female protagonists to who do look back but pick and choose the best of both the cultures, that of their homeland and their host country Lahiri herself as an interpreter of maladies, able to touch the pulse point of immigrant angst, the story of people who are caught between two worlds and belong to neither. As she says:

The older I get, the more aware am I that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways superficial ones largely. I am so much more American than they are. In fact it is still very hard to think of myself as an American.⁵

Her fiction reflects the multiple identity of Jhumpa Lahiri. Her yearning for the Indian sensibility bears the stamp of a vagrant searching for her lost home. She is as if in self exile.

Thus collection of stories by Jhumpa are based on the predicaments and inner turmoils of Indian immigrants in the United States. These characters have been uprooted from the secure life mode of a traditional set up and are struggling to cope with the new environment by learning new strategies and cope up methods, but in order to provide an alternate life mode, such learning has to be lived and experienced at first hand.

Her fiction establishes a certain Indo-American cultural link, in the post colonial context. She had made a search for identity with an emotional empathy through her female protagonists. The greatness of her writings his in making the tale of human idiosyncrasies thought-provoking and soul searching. Jhumpa Lahiri does not explicitly points out the remedy. She has presented all women characters as they are in real life, but these characters, in one way for the other, teach the lesson of humility and equality, and motivate us to retain the good of the past in the face of the challenge of life with the head held high almost all the stories end on a positive note, with the hope of a tomorrow.

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