

# A Postcolonial Perspective on the Short Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri

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**Abstract**—Referring to the main concept of the post colonialism indicates an extension of a nation's rule over territory beyond its borders and a population that is subjected to the political domination of another population. As one of the genres in Jhumpa Lahiri's literary works is postcolonial, so this study tries to have a severe perspective on her short stories. The study will use post colonialism as the primary theoretical framework to engage in textual and discourse analysis as the different elements of the study require. The study will also partially employ cultural materialism to consider the capitalist society inhabited by the depicted subjectivities. An effort will be made to understand how the Bengali subject, once displaced will react to and be acted upon by the new culture and how will his conditioning be affected or will he be reconditioned to internalize a different set of values. The diaspora retains elements of the culture of origin, but remakes them entirely. Whether the result is syncretic or not.

**Keywords**—Post colonialism, Jhumpa Lahiri, Homi K. Bhabha, Diasporic Literature.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories depict the formation and evolution of identities. The characters in the stories challenge the notion of fixity and inhabit a sort of fluidity in newly forged cultural patterns that are redrawn on the palimpsest of the previous cultural bearings. The stories challenge the ideas of a coherent unity though these shifting identities and subject positions are formed in what appears to be a linear historical development. Jhumpa Lahiri's stories deal with expatriate Bengali families living in the United States. The focus is on second generation Bengalis raised in the United States who find a new sense of belonging, search for it or learn to live without it as is shown in the fiction in *Unaccustomed Earth*. The stories usually begin with the mention of the first generation immigrants with their identities and cultural orientations firmly grounded in the Indian ethos and the next generation struggling with their inherited cultural heritage forking out new identities while being unable to discard their inheritance, hence the notion of a palimpsest. The texts enact an ambivalence that the protagonists or other characters choose to or come to inhabit. They explore subject positions acting in two apparently binary discourses of the orient and the occident. The hybridity that results from the

ensuing synthesis redefines the subject positions. The texts explore human relationships that exist in the complex network of ethnicity, nationality, identity, cultural assimilation and rejection as well as hybridity in the Bengali community in the United States. The current study proposes a postcolonial examination of the diastolic literature of Jhumpa Lahiri through the theories of Homi Bhabha. Two books of Jhumpa Lahiri will be examined, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. Both books may be deemed as short story cycles, where despite the apparent independent stories the themes and characters exhibit coherence. The intricate use of patterns and motifs to bind the stories together; including the recurring themes of the barriers to and opportunities for human communication; community, including marital, extra-marital, and parent-child relationships; and the dichotomy of care and neglect.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Not much critical literature is available on Jhumpa Lahiri. However, *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies* is a collection of essays edited by Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung. This text provides novel insights into Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction by engaging the ways she creates spaces where identities shift and coalesce in unexpected but surprisingly true ways. This critical writing on Lahiri's fiction addresses accepted, conflicting, and evolving definitions about family, nationality, home, ethnic-global movement, and canonicity that her work and literary popularity raise. Therefore, this volume forms an important document in understanding the issues of subjectivity in her works and the discourses that create it.

Eric Sanders's *The Essential Writer's Guide: Spotlight on Jhumpa Lahiri, Including her Education, Analysis of her Best Sellers such as The Namesake, Unaccustomed Earth, Adaptations, Awards, Other Interests, and More* gives a useful autobiography of the author and analyses her works in that perspective. This book provides detailed information on the author, her glorification as well as the marketing of her books. However, it provides some interesting interpretation of the texts. Suman Bala's *Jhumpa Lahiri: The Master Storyteller: a Critical Response to Interpreter of Maladies* offers varied in-depth critical response to Lahiri's fiction examining the various elements of her writings from different viewpoints. The authorial intention is examined as well as Lahiri's art of storytelling.

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### III. DISCUSSION

This study focus on understanding and investigating the notion of identity that is formed around the liminal spaces inhabited by the 'in-between' subjectivity and to locate it within the larger discourse of cultural negotiation. The formation and rejection of identity forms an important theme in Lahiri. Subjects in the texts are finally made to exist in a liminal space, a suspension between two cultures that creates un-homeliness. As Lois Tyson explains:

Being "un-homed" is not the same as being homeless. To be un-homed is not to feel at home even when you are in your own home because you are not at home in yourself; your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak.

The characters that exist in this space have internalized the ethos of the culture they were raised in, yet they have to deal with the palimpsest of their culture of origin. This gives rise to interest questioned about identity and the condition of a postcolonial subject in a neo-colonial world.

In examining these questions two of Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collections would be considered, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. *Interpreter of Maladies* is Lahiri's first major attempt at fiction. It consists of nine short stories dealing with the condition of Bengali immigrants in the United States in different capacities. It explores a myriad of emotions and the condition of the individual within the larger context of the alien evolving public space as well as the intimate private space. *Unaccustomed Earth* deals with the state of eternal un-homeliness. However, the psychological refugee appears to be most comfortable in his or her un-homed condition, the lack or existence of a home makes no difference to this subject whose identity is fluid and who has a double consciousness.

A postcolonial assessment of Diaspora literature may seem problematic for the subject positions they deal with are different from the discursive rewritings that post colonialism attempts to accomplish. Jhumpa Lahiri's stories are set in United States and India; therefore they must be considered in the context of neo-colonialism, Americanism and the capitalist discourse of cultural homogenisation. In addition one must take into account the positions of the author and the theorist. In 1967, Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London to Bengali parents. As a child, Lahiri moved with her family to Rhode Island where Jhumpa Lahiri spent her adolescence. Lahiri went on to attend Barnard College, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in English and later attending Boston University. It was here Lahiri attained Master's Degrees in English, Creative Writing, and Comparative Studies in Literature and the Arts as well as a Ph. D. in Renaissance Studies. Lahiri also worked for a short time teaching creative writing at Boston University. Lahiri has travelled extensively to India and has experienced the effects of colonialism there as well as experienced the issues of the diaspora as it exists. She feels strong ties to her parents' homeland as well as the United States and England. Growing up with ties to all three countries created in Lahiri a sense of homelessness and an inability to feel accepted. Lahiri explains

this as an inheritance of her parents' ties to India, "It's hard to have parents who consider another place "home"- even after living abroad for 30 years, India is home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here. There's nobody in this whole country that we're related to. India was different-our extended family offered real connections." Yet her familial ties to India were not enough to make India "home" for Lahiri, "I didn't grow up there, I wasn't a part of things. We visited often but we didn't have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never fully with us" (Interview with Vibhuti Patel in *Newsweek International*, 9-20-99). Thus Lahiri inhabits a sort of "in-between-ness", an ambivalence that makes one belong somewhere and nowhere, a feeling of ambivalence that leaves one without an attachment to any space that can be deigned home. Thus such figures stand between two cultures experiencing and embodying hybridity. The concept is embodied in Bhabha's own life (as in the lives of many intellectuals from colonial nations who have been raised in Western institutions): born into a Parsi community in Bombay, India, he was educated both in his native country and at Oxford University; he subsequently taught at universities in England and America, and now teaches at Harvard. This discursive ambivalence is public as well as political. The result is a negotiation on part of the subject that engages with two diverse cultures without absorbing either. Jhumpa Lahiri's stories enact this condition. For instance, the character Kaushik in "Hema and Kaushik" from *Unaccustomed Earth* is marked by two migrations: the first one where he is born in the United States and he migrates to India with his parents and the second one where he returns with his parents to the United States leaving Kaushik an eternal wanderer who most comfortable in his un-homeliness. It is interesting that despite Kaushik's cosmopolitanism, everywhere he went, he was regarded as an Indian first. Thus the idea of the identity of the postcolonial subject in a neo-colonial world opens new areas of investigation. In this case the idea of the postcolonial subject is suspect. The subject bears the markings of a particular culture, yet the subject was conditioned in another; the point is sort of the cultural imperialism has the subject experienced.

### IV. CONCLUSION

Jhumpa Lahiri's novels deal with issues that appear banal and everyday but raise questions about culture, identity, the position and condition of the subject in an Americanized neocolonial world. Bhabha has explored this condition existing between two cultures and yet inhabiting a space that belongs to neither. Jhumpa Lahiri, though being American forms part of the diaspora of writers who may be identified with and analyzed in postcolonial framework. Nevertheless, the questions of identity in her fiction invite compelling and critical scholarly enquiry.

### APPENDIX

Jhumpa Lahiri: She is an Indian American author. Lahiri's

debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), was adapted into the popular film of the same name. She was born Nilanjana Sudeshna, which she says are both "good names", but goes by her nickname Jhumpa. Lahiri is a member of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, appointed by U.S. President Barack Obama.

Postcolonialism: Post colonialism (also Post - colonial theory, Post-colonial studies, and Post-colonialism) comprises methods of intellectual discourse that present analyses of, and responses to, the cultural legacies of colonialism and of imperialism, which draw from different post-modern schools of thought, such as critical theory. In the field of anthropology, post-colonial studies record the human relations among the colonial nations and the peoples of the colonies they had ruled and exploited. To present the ideology and the praxis of (neo) colonialism, post-colonial critical theory draws from, illustrates, and explains with examples from the humanities.

Post-colonial literature (also Postcolonial literature, New English Literature, and New English literatures): is a body of literary writing that responds to the intellectual discourse of European colonization of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Post-colonial literature addresses the problems and consequences of the de-colonization of a country and of a nation, especially the political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated colonial peoples; and it also is a literary critique of and about post-colonial literature, the undertones of which carry, communicate, and justify racialism and colonialism.<sup>[1]</sup> The contemporary forms of post-colonial literature present literary and intellectual critiques of the post-colonial discourse, by endeavoring to assimilate post-colonialism and its literary expressions.

Diaspora Literature: involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys undertaken on account of economic compulsions. Basically Diaspora is a minority community living in exile.

Palimpsest :A palimpsest is a manuscript page from a scroll or book from which the text has been scraped off and which can be used again.

Homi K. Bhabha: (born 1949) is the Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of English and American Literature and Language, and the Director of the Humanities Center at Harvard University. He is one of the most important figures in contemporary post-colonial studies, and has coined a number of the field's neologisms and key concepts, such as hybridity, mimicry, difference, and ambivalence.

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