

Jhumpa Lahiri : Beyond the Frontiers of Immigrant Literature

Seema Prasad

Immigrant literature meets the demand of merging geographical and cultural borders. Jhumpa Lahiri provides a useful foundation for understanding the cultivation of hybrid identities and weaves stories around women who dislocate themselves from their country and their culture. Sometimes women utilise this immigrant occasion as a roadway to the much aspired freedom; sometimes it comes across as a slowly acquired American identity, and sometimes it is a means to create a new identity which is negotiated. Postcolonial pasts are translated and immigrant literature gives way to ethnic literature.

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction, which spans a period of fourteen years (1999-2013), embarks on a changing form of immigrant values. Lahiri examines her characters' struggles, anxieties, and biases to chronicle the nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behaviour. In her first anthology of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, she portrays immigrants who are disconnected to American life and seek to preserve their postcolonial identity. Even though America is, metaphorically, a melting pot for assimilation, cultural dissonances are experienced by immigrants caught between the culture of their Indian birthplace and the unfamiliar ways of their adopted homes. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, a collection of eight short stories, Lahiri continues to explore this theme, this time with a focus on the lives of second-generation immigrants who must navigate both the traditional values of their immigrant parents and the mainstream American values of their peers. The recently published novel, *The Lowland*, alternates between India and the United States, between historical changes and modernity. The writer does not seem to repudiate or question the system of personal relationships as it exists in both the countries of India and America. The book is marked by Jhumpa Lahiri's refusal to present assumptions regarding Indian women, their felicity of marriage and its satisfactions. Despite the clear Bengali frame of reference on which each story is hung, Lahiri moves beyond the frontiers of immigrant literature towards multicultural existence in a postcolonial age.

Immigrant literature meets the demand of merging geographical, cultural borders. It plays a pivotal role in analysing and understanding

concerns of dislocation, formation of hybrid identities, feminism on a national and transnational level. Jhumpa Lahiri is a second generation Bengali immigrant in America who has travelled across Bengal, Britain and Boston. Like Bharati Mukherjee and even Pearl S Buck, Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to a group of women writers who, live in one geographical land, and write of another. In the writings of Jhumpa Lahiri, there is a conscious American literary sensibility and the Indian cultural sensitivity at work in her fiction. She navigates between the various demands placed upon women immigrants, particularly in the United States. Most often their position is contradictory to what they have experienced in their homeland cultures. In her first work of fiction – the Pulitzer winning anthology of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, the preservation of a post-colonial nation ultimately gives way to the establishment of a new identity. Jhumpa Lahiri's stories show a disconnection to American life. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, a collection of eight short stories, Lahiri continues to explore this theme, this time with a focus on the lives of second-generation immigrants who must navigate both the traditional values of their immigrant parents and the mainstream American values of their peers. The recently published book, *The Lowland* moves away from her previous preoccupation of the cultural dissonances experienced by immigrants caught between the culture of their Indian birthplace and the unfamiliar ways of their adopted home. *The Lowland* is set in the backdrop of the Communist activity in Bengal of the 1960s and moves to the new age America. It captures simultaneously two small towns in two different parts of the world — Tollygunge in Bengal and Rhode Island in America. The books have been published between 1999 to 2013. The span of fourteen years has seen a mobility in the theme of immigrant literature. From her first contribution to significant literature (*The Interpreter of Maladies* which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction 2000) to being one of the nominees for The Booker (*The Lowland* 2013), there is a movement in the thought process of the female characters which corresponds to the time challenged changes. In terms of the feminism, she creates a beautiful literal journey which illustrates her sense of community, her power to create as well as to strive. Sometimes women utilise this immigrant occasion as a roadway to the much aspired freedom; sometimes it comes across as a slowly acquired American identity, and sometimes it means to create a new identity which is negotiated :

...the female imagination cannot be
treated by literary historians as a

romantic or Freudian abstraction. It is the product of a delicate network of influences operating in time, and it must be analysed as it expresses itself, in language and in a fixed arrangement of words on a page, a form that itself is subject to a network of influences and conventions... the self awareness of the woman writer has translated itself into a literary form in a specific place and time-span, how the self awareness has changed and developed and where it might lead.

(Interview)

Until *Unaccustomed Earth*, as in *The Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri focused mostly on first-generation Indian – American immigrants and their struggle to raise a family in a country very different from theirs. Her stories describe their efforts to keep their children acquainted with Indian culture and tradition even after they have grown up and hang on to the Indian tradition of a joint family system, in which the parents, their children and the children's families live under the same roof.

Each story creates a unique, self-contained world. Yet, there is always the metaphor of disconnection, disengagement with life in America. And, despite the clear Bengali frame of reference on which each story is hung, there are universal themes: the loss of a parent or spouse, the sense of not fitting in, being ill at ease in a strange society. Lahiri's short stories are autobiographical and frequently draw upon her own experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar.

Unaccustomed Earth departs from this earlier original ethos as Lahiri's characters embark on new stages of development. These stories scrutinise the fate of the second and the third generations. Jhumpa Lahiri says:

... I spend more time with characters who are not immigrants themselves but rather the offspring of immigrants. I find that interesting because when you grow up as the child of an immigrant you are always—or at least I was—very conscious of what it means or might

mean to be uprooted or to uproot yourself. One is conscious of that without even having ever done it. I knew what my parents had gone through—not feeling rooted. (Showalter 12)

As succeeding generations become increasingly assimilated into American culture and are comfortable in constructing perspectives outside their country of origin, Lahiri's fiction shifts to the needs of the individual. She shows how later generations depart from the constraints of their immigrant parents, who are often devoted to their community and their responsibility to other immigrants. Here it is important to distinguish her women characters. The title story is about Ruma, a woman who feels deeply for the loss of her mother and subconsciously expects her father to fill in the role. In each interaction with her father, she reminisces how her mother would have reacted, if she were to be alive. The relation between an aged father and a daughter now married (and her mother) takes a meaningful turn when he comes over to America and spends a few days with her family :

That loss was in store for Ruma, too; her children would become strangers, avoiding her. And because she was his child... he wanted to shield her from the deterioration that inevitably took place... (Internet)

It brings the realisation that people change and so does the relationship between individuals, as their own experiences mould them into different beings. It reveals how a man thinks differently as a husband and as a father. The child almost rules priority. He believed that by giving her the best of education and opportunities, Ruma's life would be different from what his wife's fate had been. Yet, children and household are her priorities now. He sees how much Ruma, in an American background, resembled her Indian mother, not just in appearance but also in her way of life. The subtle difference oblivious to her father is that, his wife may not have chosen this kind of life, whereas Ruma was not forced into her current life. This freedom of choice may justify but does not however, lessen the dreariness of being a lonely bored housewife. 'Only Goodness' is about a sister who feels responsible for her brother's alcoholism. Parents overlook their son's fallouts and hope that everything would be normal soon. 'Hell-heaven' is seen from a young girl's eyes and is a story about her mother's

deep feelings for a person who comes, almost out of the blue, into their lives. He is no stranger to them in that foreign land. What transcends boundaries, is how an Indian married woman falls in love, secretly and how she comes out of it, and lives on, denying her feelings throughout. It is only in adulthood that she realises her mother's grief and the pain those years had entailed. Alienation, isolation of Ruma, a father's concern for the daughter, a parent's prayer for an alcoholic son, brother-sister relationship, a woman's return to her family after an outside marital relationship — all are typically Indian in theme, American in context. In other words, these examples of postcolonial immigrant literature demonstrate that these subjects have internalised relationships (to both their native and adopted homelands) that persist in the way they attempt to fashion an ethnic American identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri bears semblance to Jane Austen in the simplicity of the character portraits as far as *The Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* are concerned. Like Austen she too, writes "within two inches of ivory." But in *The Lowland* she opts for a bigger canvas and a wider frame. *The Lowland* is marked by Jhumpa Lahiri's refusal to present assumptions regarding Indian women, their felicity of marriage and their satisfactions. It's a story of family and nation, of choice and sacrifice. The writer does not talk about cultural displacement of Gauri, the central female character in the novel. In fact, if ever a displacement took place in her life, it was in her own native country where she witnessed the execution of her husband, and became a widow, unaccepted in the family. America is the place which provides the 'ability to live'. Gauri comes into the story after the political background of the story is created. The period is the 1960s when immediately after independence Calcutta is caught by the Communist movements and the Naxalite revolutions. Gauri comes to stay in Tollygunge after marrying Udayan who is the second son in a simple Bengali family, the first being Subhash. Udayan is a revolutionary who is executed by the British officers, in front of his wife and parents. He dies leaving behind a pregnant Gauri. Subhash has chosen for himself to pursue a Ph.D in Rhode Island. The political starts to fade away into the apolitical. If the first part of the novel is framed by the ideologies of Marx and Mao, the second part is shaped by the philosophies of life and learning given by Descartes. Hearing the news of his brother's death, Subhash returns to India and marries Gauri to protect the legacy of his brother and promises a new life to Gauri :

They (Udayan's parents) want you out
of this house, Gauri...he went on

explaining that the child needed a father.

... He told her not to think about what people might say... If she went with him to America, he promised her, it would all cease to matter. (Bhabha 355)

A marriage where the son chooses his bride is not easily accepted by the parents. When the second son decides to marry his brother's widow, the parents are shattered. Social reactions put constrain on women's freedom. And, America is a land distanced from such constrictions. Gauri accepts the opportunity extended by Subhash. But in America, she cannot forget the past and Gauri builds a life which is emotionally unattached to Subhash and her daughter, Bela.

Geography can create space between nations. It cannot distance the mind from a past. Gauri's inescapable awareness with loss never ceases. The fog in Rhode Island is the same as that in the Lowland of Tollygunge. It's a constant reminder of the inextinguishable past. She abandons Subhash and Bela because they contain memories of the past—the past that has haunted her for decades. The personal loss, accompanied with her complicity in the revolution, her failure to protect Udayan dwarfs the political achievements of India. It goes on to suggest that personal loss, the private world of a woman is much more painful than historical narratives. Gauri becomes a Professor of Philosophy but marriage does not offer a reconciliation with life :

What was stored in memory was distinct from what was deliberately remembered,
Augustine said (*Unaccustomed Earth* 55)

Though their marriage had not been a solution, it had taken her away from Tollygunge. He had brought her to America and then, like an animal briefly observed, briefly caged, released her. (*The Lowland* 119)

Like Udayan, Bela is nowhere. Her name in the search engine leads to nothing ... Gauri finds no image, no trace of her. (153)

The Lowland advances in terms of the choice a woman makes and the routes she takes. Gauri is a pivotal character in the book and the choices that she makes as a widow, wife and mother are central to the latter part

of the book. She destroys her own family, alienates herself from her daughter. Jhumpa Lahiri has moved ahead. She does not seem to repudiate or question the system of personal relationships as it exists in both the countries of India and America. Gauri's is an isolated walk, difficult and full of guilt. She tries to compensate the failure to handle personal loss by striving for success in professional life. Throughout the novel, the mood around her is somber. Her experiences across time and place negotiate a new identity for Gauri where she struggles with the past while facing the present. There is no clash of culture or gender or religion. It is the human distance which is intimidating. Jhumpa Lahiri does not reassure the reader of the universality of institutional relationships of love or marriage. Rather, marriage is "a shared conclusion to lives separately built, separately lived" – a thought far removed from Indian values. Gauri comes to terms with the internal agonies only when forgiven by Bela.

Gauri reminds us of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989). *Jasmine* is the mixing of the East and West through the story telling of a seventeen-year-old Hindu woman who leaves India for the U.S. after her husband's murder. Her husband dies due to a religious attack in India. She faces many problems including rape and eventually returns to the position of a health professional through a series of jobs. Here in this context the unity between the First and Third world is shown to be in the treatment of women as subordinate in both countries. *Jasmine* seemed fated to a life of quiet isolation in the small Indian village where she was born. But the force of *Jasmine*'s desires propels her explosively into a larger, more dangerous, and ultimately more life-giving world. She uproots herself from her life in India and re-roots herself in search of a new life and the image of America as well. The story of *Jasmine* is the story of an identity in motion. The heroine's problems do not culminate in the resolution of tying a knot of marriage or walking out of it; now the emphasis is on the passion for life and an establishment of a woman's right to live and love. The narrative treatment is also an attempt to 'defamiliarise' the traditionally accepted image of an Indian woman. It is a story of dislocation and relocation as the protagonist continually sheds lives to move into other roles, moving further westward. In just a few years, *Jasmine* becomes Jase and later, Jane Ripplemeyer, happily pregnant by a middle-aged Iowa banker and the adoptive mother of a Vietnamese refugee. Bharati Mukherjee, an American of Indian origin, settled in Canada speaks:

I am in fact writing about America more
than about dark-complexioned
immigrants. My focus is on the country

on how it is changing minute by minute. My stories explore the encounter between the mainstream American culture and the new one formed by the migrant stream. I'm really writing about the seams joining two cultures. Many expatriate writers are destroyed by their duality, I personally feel nourished by it.(242)

Gauri and Jasmine are faced with the potential conflict of emotions. Both conform to the knowledge that the identity of the woman is not homogeneous and need not be confined to a nation. In postcolonial age, she is the colonised who "...may be described now as passive feminine, now as wild and masculine, depending on the requirements of the colonial situation, or on how the authority is configured." (247) The identity which they create does not belong to one specific nation. It is built beyond geographical frontiers. Lahiri has come a long way from the early writings where she tried to focus on the formation of the American identity. Fiction surrounding Indian immigrants contributes to American culture and American ethnic studies as does American study mould immigrant identities. The model writings of Jhumpa Lahiri suggest that the evolution of multiculturalism gained traction towards the end of the twentieth century. The emphasis is on the fact that the good of common culture is privileged over any ethnic group. Very skilfully Jhumpa Lahiri delineates from the American immigrant theme towards the intersection of the transient and the permanent. Postcolonial pasts are translated and immigrant literature gives way to ethnic literature.

Works Cited

Showalter, Elaine. A Literature of Their Own, in Mary Eagleton(ed.), *Feminist Literary Theory, A Reader*, 2nd ed.Oxford University Press, 1986.
http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistspages/lahiri_jhumpa.php

Bhabha, Homi. Leading twentieth century postcolonial thinkers in Patricia Waugh (ed.), *An Oxford Guide: Literary Theory and Criticism*, 3rd ed.Oxford University Press, 2007.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Unaccustomed Earth*. New Delhi : Random House, 2008.
_____. *The Lowland*. New Delhi : Random House, 2013.

*Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, A. N. College, Patna,
Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya.*