

Portrayal of Woman in Diaspora: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction

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Abstract: Woman has always been matter of concern in literature. Through various shades of life the authors try to present her true picture. Diasporic writings are no exception of it. Jhumpa Lahiri authentically depicts not only predicaments of immigrants in adopted land but also presents, though unconsciously, pitiable situation of diasporic woman. Through this paper, I attempt to analyze position of woman in diaspora. Her female characters are the worst sufferers. This paper throws light how woman suffers from identity loss in a land which is adopted by her husband? How she struggles to assimilate in a foreign land? How she remembers her relatives and pines for her motherland's meal and cling to Indian attire and tradition? Most of the female characters are housewives who always remain at home performing household works. Though they migrated in another country but their role is the same: to give birth, to sweep floor, to cook, to serve her husband and children. They are still subjugated, dependent neglected and silent sufferer.

Keywords: Adopted land, identity loss, worst sufferer, subjugated, neglected.

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the foremost diasporic writers who documents feelings and experiences of immigrants. She constantly focuses on the contrasting experiences of two generations of expatriates-who try their best to assimilate with new culture but at the same time they remain clinging with their Bengali culture. She vividly shows the isolation that often afflicts first- and even second-generation immigrants. Although the immigrant experience is central to her work, it is not her exclusive concern. Through her writings the writer, consciously or unconsciously voices the mute history and experience of female immigrants. Her female characters are all trapped in a world where they do not belong to. In her writings she depicts different kind of dilemmas in the lives of Indian female immigrants dealing with different themes as miscarriages, marital difficulties, extra marital relationship and generation gap etc. In "The Problem of Immigrants in an alien land: Interpreter of Maladies," Satish Barbuddhe opines "Lahiri's stories are the voices of millions of exiled females who are torn within but outward cannot express their feeling successfully" (142). In this paper, I attempt to focus on some of her female characters, who highlight the condition of women in diaspora.

First worth mentioning feature of Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction is that women migrate not out of desire or curiosity but due to obligation or duty towards their husbands. Husbands move to another country for their profession or to seek good fortune. Now wives have no option but to follow their husband silently. In the story "The third and Final Continent," Mala's husband voices the stark reality when he asserts, "Like me, Mala had travelled far from home, not knowing where she was going, or

what she would find, for no other reason than to be my wife" (*IM* 195). Most of the characters in Lahiri's fiction are, as told in *The Namesake* "The husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers. The wives, homesick and bewildered" (Lahiri, *Namesake* 38; ch. 2).

These Bengali women, who get married to men doing some research work or job there, are unable to adjust to the US lifestyle and stick to their Bengali roots. They are always homesick and visit India occasionally but yet they ask no questions, they make no demands. Instead they try to adjust even if it is at the cost of total self-negation. They suffer strongly with the feeling of homelessness and loneliness. To minimise their pains they find out different ways. They develop friendship with other Bengali women and share their feelings. In the story "Mrs Sen," Mrs. Sen is a docile housewife who is bored to death because her husband is busy with his job and she is missing her Calcutta family, her neighbourhood and above all the community feeling that is totally absent in the American culture. Though she is economically sound as her husband is a professor in university even then she decides to be a babysitter to pass her time. Ashima, in the novel *The Namesake* is another such character who does not feel comfortable in US. She always reminds her relatives whom she has left behind. Though physically she is in US but psychologically she remains connected with her native land. "We have no relative in this country, Ashima informs the guidance counselor that is why we are going to India in the First place" (*NS* 79). These lines aptly voices sense of alienation of a diaspora.

One more thing which catches our attention is that these female migrants do not effort to create their own status in adopted land. They try to find their identity through their husbands. That's why sometimes Lahiri does not name some of her female characters and simply introduces them as Mrs. Sen, Mrs Das, Boori Maa etc. They have internalised the fact that they are housewives and no matter they are in India or in other land, their work is to serve others and perform household duties. They strive for Indian food, wear saris and never forget to put vermilion on their forehead. In America also Mrs Sen wants to be like those Indian Bengali ladies who work and share her experience with her women friends while her husband is working. Unlike her husband who is pursuing his profession she does not follow an American dream. Unlike American women she is unable to learn driving and become independent. Instead she is interested in cooking like an Indian Woman. She fears that if she learns driving it will lose her identity as- nurturer, homemaker and wife of Mrs. Sen. Ashima in *The Namesake* Ashima is also a homemaker who spends the majority of her life trying to recreate Bengali culture in her new homeland.

More heart rendering fact that Lahiri points is that these husbands involve in their official works and hardly give ears to moaning of their wives. In all stories and even in the novel the husbands are always slightly unromantic, introvert and the couples are hardly shown in conversation. In the story "Mrs Sen," Mr Sen hardly have time to hear her wife's sufferings. Mr Sen has not understood her feelings of isolation and simply expects her to be able to cope alone. Love and intimacy is seldom seen in Lahiri's stories. Ruma, in title story "Unaccustomed Earth," wonders if her father ever loved her mother. Ruma's father has recently lost his wife but in spite of mourning he has become a world totter. Moreover he has cultivated a life of his own by establishing relation with a Bengali woman Meenakshi Bagchi. In "Hell- Heaven," a short story in *Unaccustomed Earth*, it is the daughter who learns her mother was once in love with one of her father's Indian friends and came close to committing suicide; her father never finds out. She describes plight of her mother as:

I began to pity my mother; the older I got, the more I saw what a desolate life she led.

...Her only job, every day, was to clean and cook for my father and me. . . .When my mother complained to him about how much she hated life in the suburbs and how lonely she felt, he had nothing to placate her. 'If you are so unhappy, go back to Calcutta,' he would offer, making it clear that their separation would not affect him one way or the other. (UE 76)

These lines depict the cruelty of a husband towards his wife. To leave their roots for the sake of

husbands do not affect them. They behave as if they have done favour to their wives after marrying them and bringing them in other land. Sometimes this indifference of husband towards his wife clears the entry of other person in her life. In search of love and affection she moves to other person. In the story "Hell- Heaven," we have Aparna, Usha's mother who finds solace in the company of Pranab, a graduate student as her own husband pays no attention to her feelings and longings. In the story "Interpreter of Maladies," Mrs. Das confesses before Mr. Kapasi that she has an illicit love affair and have a son from that affair.

The Indians even when they emigrate to America retain their inhibitions: they are not demonstrative of their affections, remain conscious of surroundings and social norms. At many occasions parents make stunned their children with their orthodoxy. Children find themselves in limbo, crippled between their inherited traditional values and modern environment. Nila Das in her paper "Crossing Cultural Borders: New Voices in Indian American Literature," observes: "man have submerged themselves in the host land yet some stereotypical Indian notion and inhibitions color their outlook." Once when Mr. Sen, Mrs. Sen and Eliot went on sea side and Eliot takes photo, he notices that when he asks them to get closer for the photo, they don't. The story "Unaccustomed Earth," reveals choosing a life partner by girl herself is not considered appropriate by middle class parents in adopted land also. Ruma and Adam, her husband, started to date, she kept it in secret until the day the engagement was officially announced. Her parents interpreted her choice as shame of her own roots, as a refusal of her origins. Even before her marriage, her relationship with her parents had been difficult.

Children, whom these Bengali women brought up, efforts to teach them Bengali customs, like their father do not soothe their mothers' feelings. They become more close to foreign land than their mothers. Often enough, it is the female child who has some understanding of the intense loneliness of their mother. The male children simply chaff against the expectations of their stern father and the suffocating concerns of their mothers. Gogol in *the Namesake* shows little interest in Indian heritage which her mother forced him to learn. He likes to listen to the Beatles instead of classical Indian music, and he begins to address his parents in English, while they speak to him in Bengali. The story "Only Goodness," also reflects indifference of children as:

While Sudha regarded her parents separation from India as an ailment that ebbed and flowed like a cancer, Rahul was impermeable to that aspect of their life as well. 'No one dragged them here,' he would say. 'Baba left India to

get rich, and Ma married him because she had nothing else to do.' (UE 138)

Thus Lahiri is quite successful in depicting the sense of alienation among her female characters. Her writings are, undoubtedly mouthpiece of all the exiled women who feel suffocated in adopted land. She presents a true

picture of diasporic women who remain ideal wives of their husbands, creating Bengali culture in their new homes, meekly surrendering their identity for the sake of their husbands' good fortune. They silently bear the pain of nostalgia and alienation and make an effort to be happy in the happiness of their family.

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