

## Cultural in-betweenness: A vehement perspective in select fictions of Jhumpa Lahiri

<sup>1</sup> Mir Imtiyaz, <sup>2</sup> Ashaq Hussain Nengroo

Research Scholar (Ph. D), Department of English, Jiwaji University, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India

### Abstract

Immigration and Diaspora have been the consideration of various critics as Homi K. Bhabha and John Stuart Hall who are of the opinion that hybridity and in-betweenness had a great impact on immigrant life where the people confront various predicaments frayed between the old and new homes. This immigration undertaken can be forced or self-set but in both cases, people savvy two culturally and emotionally different worlds. Jhumpa Lahiri's main focus lies not only in unraveling the problems faced by immigrants in their non-native life but who are making initiatives to undergo a major transformation in order to ameliorate their living sphere. Lahiri being an Indian-American makes use of her characters to provide a detailed analysis of both the societies and the cultural boundaries. The concern of the paper is to bring to surface cultural shock experienced by various characters who try to be in line with the newfound home and to acclimatize with the prevailing circumstances.

**Keywords:** cross cultural relationship, diaspora, unhomeliness and in-betweenness

### Introduction

Diaspora as described by Robert Cohen, "Communities of the people living together in one country who acknowledge that "old country" a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some chain on their loyalty and emotions". (ix) Etymologically Diaspora is a Greek word, which mingles the words *spiero* (meaning, "To sow") and *die* ("Over") (Smith 254). The paper takes into consideration the negative attitude towards immigration but instead this reflected something positive in her stories. Although her stories bring to surface some nostalgic feelings, unraveling sense of displacement, alienation, racism, discrimination and struggle for existence in their countries of residence but optimistic perspective is also evident in them. To drove this point she resort to investigate such cultural critics as Homi K. Bhabha and John Stuart Hall into the idea of homeland and Diaspora which held the notion that immigrants experience in-betweenness being obscured, peripheralized and marginalized in the world of conflicting values.

Born to a Bengali family from Calcutta, Jhumpa Lahiri moved to America when she was 3 years of age. Her father a librarian and mother a teacher. Being born to immigrant parents, she experienced a multicultural lifestyle. (Lyer 156). Frequent visits to Calcutta instigated her talent for fiction writing as she stated herself "Calcutta nourished my mind, my eyes as a writer and my interest in seeing things from my different point of view (Jhumpa Lahiri 139). Lahiri herself feels it difficult to understand Indian Culture. In an interview with Indian-west, she admits I am lucky that I am between two worlds. I do not really know what a distinct South Asia identity means. I do not think about that when I write, I just try to bring a person to life. (Tsering). Lahiri's life is "the very prototype of Diasporic culture" (Daiya 32), she tries to portray dismay aspects of immigrant life but unravels simultaneously that this perturbed experience might turn out to be some improvements in their

life. Her sentiments seem to be in line with cultural critics such as Homi K. Bhabha who commend the transitory nature of hybrid identity. Thus tries to focus on active and productive characters and do not stick to old beliefs and who have wide horizon of vision and thus makes an effort to ameliorate their life.

Through "Interpreter of Maladies" Lahiri narrate the lives of Indians and Indian Americans stuck between the two cultures, they inherited and the world in which they find themselves. Her portrayal of characters pertains either to first or second generation of Indian immigrants living in America. "Interpreter of Maladies" depicts predicaments faced by first generation Indian immigrants such as feeling of displacement and loss. It was awarded Pulitzer Prize in 2000. Lahiri believes that Indian immigrants face embarrassing experiences not only in America but also in every kind of dominant culture and other nations. In the story, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" The young Lilia who experiences "in-betweenness" enjoys the "third space" of her diasporic life. She considers it a privilege to learn about both Indian and American culture in comparison to other American youngsters acquainted only with their own cultures. The story is written in backdrop of Indo-Pak war 1971. In the story Pirzada suffers from the agony of partition from his family, wife and seven daughters who are in homeland Dacca. Lilia's diasporic life urges her to raise a query about inflexible definitions of nation and geographical borderlines that separated the people of world. One experience that gives her immense pleasure is that her parents and Mr. Pirzada who migrated from different countries to US. "Spoke the same language, laughed at the same Joke [and] looked more or less the same" [28].

"This Blessed House" portrays the adjustment of young immigrant to a new culture and belief. It focuses on the fact how mutual understanding and adjustment between couple Sanjeev and Twinkle make a happy marriage. It grabs our

attention by reflecting the cultural and emotional clash between a Hindu husband and his aversion for his wife's fascination for Christmas artifacts. However, in reality, it is nothing concerning religious divide but it is sneakiness of human feelings that make up everything. After Sanjeev discovers his melody of possessive love, he "pressed the massive silver face to his ribs, careful not to let the feather slip, and followed her" (157).

In collections closing story, "The Third and Final Continent", we are shown hegemonic control still exercised by European people over the third world people. In it, she tries to show how first generation immigrants do not stop contemplating over their past and try to acclimatize in an alien land. In it, we meet one of the few characters who are well adjusted and happy. He is the narrator of the story and remains unnamed throughout. In it, he recounts his tale of leaving India in 1964 with a commerce certificate and the equivalent of 10 dollars in his pocket. He describes his immigration first to Great Britain and then to U.S and 6 week period from his arrival in America, until arrival of his wife, who he married in an arranged ceremony in India. He left her behind in order to arrange for their future life in America although remaining stuck to his Indian Identity. The narrator also expresses his intention not to let his own son experience loss. "We drove to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die". (197) Lahiri points out to make a balance between two cultures as both are important, thus what they can do is doing a consensus between two cultures.

However, in-betweenness is grimly portrayed in "A Temporary Matter". Lahiri exposes its positive outcomes in some stories like "A Temporary Matter", "Boori Ma" and "Treatment of Bibi Halder". Lahiri tries to bring home the notion of unhomeliness, being physically at home, but not feeling at home (Homi K Bhabha). Lahiri's second collection of short stories "Unaccustomed Earth" (2008) reflects life with two separate cultures and their efforts to cope to one and other. Story about relationship between three generations: The father, his daughter and her son. Rama's father a diasporic character depicts a flexible attitude towards the "borderline work of culture". Therefore, Lahiri with her works tries to describe various dimensions of immigrant life and uses it as a tool to discuss their predicaments and problems due to cross-cultural encounter in migration.

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