

In the Name of

God



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M.A. Thesis

The Crisis of Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction:

Interpreter of Maladies and The Namesake

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Abstract

The formation of identity is an important issue in diasporic literature. Jhumpa Lahiri, the American Indian writer, has received much critical acclaim by her fiction in which she depicts the life of the immigrants and their challenge to locate themselves in an adopted culture. This experience is usually associated with the sense of nostalgia, alienation and estrangement. But Lahiri, who is herself an immigrant of the second generation, does not just focus on these problems; with her well-crafted realistic fiction, she shows that the situation of the characters produces ambiguity about their identities that leads to miscommunication.

This thesis examines the ways in which the identity of the characters are affected by the experience of immigration and shaped by the process of confrontation with a new culture different from the native one. The focus is on two fictional works by Lahiri: a short story collection and her novel. In her collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, she presents the reader with a variety of experiences of Indians in exile and their idiosyncrasies; and in her novel, *The Namesake*, she again deals with the theme of culture shock and difference between generations in their search for meaning in a foreign country. A variety of thinkers in the fields of cultural and postcolonial studies have been used for the project; among them are Homi K. Bhabha, Edward W. Said, Simon During, Gordon Mathews, and Carola Suárez-Orozco. Although their theories and discussions are different, they all confirm that identity is generally a complicated term, that in the world today, it is no longer related to a specific place, and that purity of cultures is a myth. They believe that for the migrants who live in the border-line of cultures identity is something that is enacted and negotiated in a continual process. In Lahiri's fiction the characters have an ambiguous position; they yearn for an original elementary self on the one hand, and for one in a contemporary foreign land on the other.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, diaspora, identity, immigration, *The Namesake*, *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Overview

1. 1. Thesis statement

South Asian American literature has recently acquired international popularity, and its writers have appeared on the bestseller lists and won prestigious awards. Like the other ethnic writers, they have always been concerned with exile; living in a foreign country far from their homelands provides them with a unique position to reflect their own experiences in their fiction:

The potential of ethnic autobiography is [...] the construction of links and bonds between past and present, between cultures and nations, between differences of gender, race and class. This in-betweenness can be liberating, allowing the freedom to experiment with alternative identities or to oppose and outmaneuver monolithic cultural codes. Yet it can also be debilitating, forcing the recognition that all identity is illusory or that mobility is the effect of a continual displacement. The

celebrity nature of modern ethnic autobiography must thus be balanced against its pathos: its sometime agonized sense of loss. (qtd. in Nagpal 4)

It is this “sense of loss” that enables these writers to picture characters who are in a continuous struggle to find themselves new lifestyles and worldviews. These characters are always in search of a way to cope with a double-sided life and to reconcile their inherited traditions with their everyday life. For them, future is what joins their “past and present”.

Therefore the immigrants’ identity becomes among the most important issues in cultural studies. They are in a third or “in-between” space that in Bhabha’s view “provide[s] the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood- singular or communal- that initiate[s] new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, in the act of finding the idea of society itself”(*The Location of Culture* 2). It is cultural difference that produces this kind of space and the new forms of identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri is an American author of Bengali Indian descent, who was born in London and raised in the USA. She has an experience of the second generation of immigrants who have a “double exile” (Nagpal 5). She is completely aware of this kind of split identity and her fiction is to some extent autobiographical. Her debut story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), won 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. In the ten stories of this collection she shows the intricacies of human relations and the effects of displacement and belonging. Each story has a different setting and point of view, but in all of them there are some moments in everyday life of the characters that bring them to a special state to define their identities.

Her talent is in a way that pictures the immigrants’ and natives’ world in miniature, allowing them to be immersed in detail, while at the same time placing them in universal perspectives. In these stories she puts her believable characters in both ordinary and extraordinary situations.

Her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), is a bestseller and circles around the emotional struggle of an Indian husband and wife, trying to make a new life in America. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Ashoke does his best to adapt while his wife pines for home. When their son is born the task of naming him betrays the complicated results of bringing old ways to the new world. Gogol Ganguli knows only that he suffers the burden of his heritage as well as his odd, antic name. The novel portrays cultural and generational gap, and it is the task of this thesis to explore these gaps.

1. 2. Methodology

The present study consists of five chapters and attempts to examine the formation of identity in the fiction of the Indian American author, Jhumpa Lahiri. Among her works which have been published – *The Namesake*, *Interpreter of Maladies*, *Unaccustomed Earth*, and a number of other short stories – the first two have been selected because of their critical acclaim. The main purpose of this thesis is to examine the theme of ‘identity crisis’ in the above-mentioned works and its theoretical framework is a combination of cultural and postcolonial studies. Although the main focus has been on Homi K. Bhabha’s theories, a variety of other thinkers have also been used: Edward W. Said with his discussion of the life of exiles, Gordon Mathews with his idea of ‘cultural supermarket’, Chris Barker with his emphasis on creolization and fragmentation of culture, Simon During with his views about cultural identity, Carola Suárez-Orozco with her psycho-social views on immigration.

The present chapter is a general introduction to the project. The second chapter is a study of the issue of identity related to migration. In the third chapter five stories of *Interpreter of Maladies*, in which the theme of identity crisis is more tangible, have been examined. Chapter four is devoted to *The Namesake*; and finally the last chapter is the conclusion of the previous discussions.

1. 3. Definition of Key Terms

Ethnicity “is a term that has been used increasingly since the 1960s to account for human variation in terms of culture, tradition, language, social patterns and ancestry, rather than the discredited generalizations of race with its assumptions of a humanity divided into fixed, genetically determined biological types. Ethnicity refers to the fusion of many traits that belong to the nature of any ethnic group: a composite of shared values, beliefs, norms, tests, behaviours, experiences, consciousness of kind, memories and loyalties [...]. Indeed the word ethnic comes from the Greek *ethos*, meaning ‘nation’. In its earliest English use the word ‘ethnic’ referred to culturally different ‘heathen’ nations, a sense that has lingered as connotation[...]. The first use of ethnic group in terms of national origin developed in the period of heavy migration from Southern and Eastern European nations to the USA in the early twentieth century. The *name* by which an ethnic group understands itself is still most often the name of an originating nation, whether that nation still exists or not (e.g. Armenia). The term ‘ethnicity’ however, really only achieves wide currency when these ‘national’ groups find themselves as minorities within a larger national grouping, as occurs in the aftermath of colonization, either through immigration to settled colonies such as USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, or by the migration of colonized people to the colonizing centre” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies, The Key Concepts* 75).

Diaspora is a term that comes from the Greek, meaning ‘to disperse’. Colonialism created diasporas by forcing people to leave their homelands and to settle elsewhere, sometimes through slavery and most often through economic necessity. Colonialism by practices of slavery and indenture to provide labor for a plantation and trading economy resulted in worldwide diasporas. Postcolonial people also have migrated to the US and the UK, from the margins to the so called centres, and have formed groups in those ex-imperial powers or in other ex-colonies: Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. According to Vijay Mishra:

All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport. Diasporas are people who want to explore the meaning of the hyphen [...]. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile. (1)

Diasporic existence for those who have immigrated to another country means feeling displaced, different, operating within a double personality and cultural identity. People feel that they are caught between two stools, unable to find a sense of identity for a self created and built in a new home, alongside a self related to the homeland, enriched by perspectives afforded by distance.

Hybridity is “one of the most widely employed and most disputed terms in postcolonial theory [...which] commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. As used in horticulture, the term refers to the cross-breeding of two species by grafting or cross-pollination to form a third, hybrid species. Hybridization takes many forms: linguistic, cultural, political, racial, etc” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies, The Key Concepts* 108).

This term has, especially, been emphasized by Homi K.Bhabha who believes that all cultural systems are constructed in a ‘Third Space of enunciation’:

it is that third space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew” (“Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences” 208).

He believes that cultures are not in fixed or pure forms, rather they are dynamic and always in contact with one another. This contact leads to hybrid cultural identities. In his view, the real location of culture is this liminal space and in fact

there may not exist specific and clearly-defined cultures. They are always in a process of hybridization. He advocates “an international culture, based not on the exoticism or multi-culturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (209).

Liminality is a term which is originally used in psychology and indicates a degree below which certain sensation ceases to be perceptible. It is a kind of in-between or threshold state and is distinguished from the more definite word, ‘limit’. Liminality is especially useful for describing the “in-between” spaces in theories of cultural identity. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha states that:

These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (2)

He further uses Renee Green’s characterization of a stairwell as a “symbolic interaction”: “The stairwell became a liminal space, a pathway between the upper and lower areas, each of which was annotated with plaques referring to blackness and whiteness” (5). In this way liminality is an “interstitial passage between fixed identifications [that] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (5).

Exile is the condition of separation and distancing from either a literal homeland or from a cultural and ethnic origin. The large number of diasporic peoples throughout the world is under this condition. According to Edward W. Said, “exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted [...]. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind” (173).

The Cultural Supermarket is a term used by Gordon Mathews in his theory of cultural shaping of the self and cultural identity. Mathews believes that there are

three levels of shaping of the self. He mentions that, “a third, most shallow and most fully conscious level of the self’s cultural shaping involves ‘the cultural supermarket’. This is the level at which selves sense that they freely pick and choose the ideas they want to live by” (15).

Traditionally, the individual is conceived as belonging to his/her nation, and national identity is a great factor – even in today’s world – in constructing that person’s whole identity. But national identity or the sense of belonging to a specific place in the world is eroded by more contemporary issues in cultural studies that claim cultural identity to belong to global scope – what Mathews terms the cultural supermarket. Therefore, he defines cultural identity as one’s sense of culturally belonging to a society and beyond that to the global cultural supermarket (17).

Social Mirroring is a concept developed by Carola Suárez-Orozco to illustrate how the host society’s attitudes toward the immigrants affect their identity formation. She contends that:

We are all highly dependent upon the reflection of ourselves mirrored by others. When the image reflected back to us is generally positive, we are able to feel that we are worthwhile and competent. When the reflections are consistently of sloth, irresponsibility, low intelligence, and danger and these images are received in a number of mirrors including the media, the classroom, and the street, it is nearly impossible to maintain an untarnished sense of self. (“Afterword” 113)

Therefore the social mirror or the ethos of reception is the key factor that “plays a critical role in allowing young people to forge a sense of belonging and adapt to their new land” (112).

1. 4. Review of Literature

Contemporary Indian Writing in English: Critical Perceptions. Vol. II (2005), edited by N. D. R. Chandra, is a compendium of informed critical studies that

covers selected authors of contemporary Indian literature. In Chapter 24, *Bond Without Bondage: Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri*, Jaydeep Sarangi investigates the nature of cross-cultural conflicts, confrontation and alliances portrayed in the works of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri in terms of available socio-psychological and culture-shock theories. Madhoo Kamra and Sumiparna Maiti in their essay in the 25th chapter, *The Namesake: The Psychology of unruly emotions*, believe that *The Namesake* “is exhaustively charged with emotional overtones and Lahiri’s deft touch for the perfect details, the fleeting moments, and the throb of phrases open the whole worlds of emotion”(295-296).

In *New perspectives on Indian English Writing* (2007), a collection of essays edited by Malti Agarwal, three chapters are about Jhumpa Lahiri’s fiction. Ramesh K. Srivastava in chapter 3, *Comic touches in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies, Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*, talks about occasional flashes of comic touches in characterizations, descriptions, witty remarks, strange perceptions of children, and also through depiction of cultural dissimilarities (18). In chapter 4, *Generational Differences in Diasporic Writings: Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake*, Sunita Agarwal, talks in detail about differences in the meaning of culture for the two generations in the novel. Chapter 5 is *Immigrant Experience in Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake*, by Anju Bhatt.

The Location of Culture (1994) is a collection of twelve essays by Homi K. Bhabha which includes most of his older and well-known writings on the formation of anti-colonial subjectivity. Bhabha’s central preoccupation is the manner in which the European practice of cultural analysis hitherto has glossed over the ambivalence of the location of culture. His efforts are aimed at exploring how to articulate this liminal space of marginality in cultural production. He argues for a theoretical position which escapes the polarities of East and West, Self and Other, Master and Slave, and demonstrates the cultural and social necessity of striving for a discursive difference in politics – a negotiation not a

negation – which opens up the possibility of articulating the antagonistic and contradictory elements of hybrid sites. This book rightly situates race and national identity in the foreground of contemporary debate.

Multicultural States (1998), edited by David Bennett, investigates in a series of essays, “contemporary theories, policies and practices of cultural pluralism across eight countries with historical links to British colonialism: the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa, Ireland and Britain[...]. It combines general theoretical discussions of the principles of cultural pluralism, nationalism and minority identities with informative studies of specific local histories and political conflicts” (i).

Between Heaven and Hell- perceptions of Home and Homeland in Jhumpa Lahiri's Works (2009), a master thesis by Dominique Nagpal, concentrates on the narrative production of home and identity and investigates where these two notions are intertwined in the three works of Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth*, *Interpreter of Maladies*, and *The Namesake*. It contends that “accepting with excitement and anxiety the necessity of leaving behind the constrictions and comforts of distant customs” is an underlying theme in all of Lahiri’s works. According to this, Lahiri indicates that “the place to which one feels the strongest attachment to, is not necessarily one was tied to by blood or birth; it is the place that allows one to become oneself. This place may not lie on the purview of any map” (2). It also explores the different trajectories that manifest out of Lahiri’s characters concerning their evolving states of hybridity. The methodological framework of this thesis is mainly based on postcolonial studies.

Racialization and the formation of Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies (2006), is another MA thesis, written by Tommie Adrienne Sears from North Carolina State University. It examines how a history of racialization in the United States impacts the identity formation of South Asian American characters in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*. It also includes an examination of the ways in which South Asian Americans are often inaccurately labeled as ‘foreign’

and ‘other’ in relation to white Americans and the ways race often functions as an ineffective signifier of group homogeneity.

Mapping Subjectivities: the Cultural Poetics of Mobility and Identity in South Asian Diasporic Literature is a dissertation for Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature, written by Aparajita De at West Virginia University. It examines fiction and autobiography by diasporic South Asian women writers to analyze the processes of subject formation in the diaspora. It argues that subjectivity in the diaspora develops in response to the individual’s experience of location. By location it refers to both Physical and ideological spaces the individual occupies over time. Chapter 1 is devoted to Jhumpa Lahiri’s fiction: “What’s In a Name? Tropes of Belonging & Identity in *The Namesake*.”

Children of Immigration, written by Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, presents the writers’ twenty years of experience working in the field with immigrant children. The Suárez-Orozcos report important findings from their first-year data, and use immigrant memoirs, plays and films to demonstrate the variety of the experiences of children of immigrants. In chapter four, the authors focus on the “remaking of identities” for second-generation children – how they negotiate different identities in the U.S cultural setting. They point out that the traditional “straight-line assimilation” theory – as immigrants become more assimilated into the mainstream society and lose their own cultural traits – no longer holds in the new context of immigration. The Suárez-Orozcos develop the concept of “social mirroring” to illustrate how the host society’s attitudes toward immigrant children can affect their identity formation. They provide a conceptual framework to understand important factors in the construction of ethnic identity for immigrant youth, such as ethnic community, opportunity structure, family factors, individual factors, and “social mirroring”.

Natalie Friedman in her article, “From Hybrids to Tourists: Children of immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*”, believes that “Lahiri’s *The Namesake* is an example of the contemporary immigrant narrative, which does not place the idea of an ‘American Dream’ at the center of the story, but rather

positions the immigrant ethnic family within a community of cosmopolitan travelers. Examining the experience of upper-class South Asian immigration through the eyes of American-born children, Lahiri's novel contains moments and tropes that resemble those of travel narrative genre, particularly in its detached tone and digressive pluralist narration" (111).

By drawing on ideas of Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, Bahareh Bahmanpour in her article, "Female Subjects and Negotiating Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*", discusses four stories of the cycle, namely "Mrs Sen's", "This Blessed House", "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" and "Sexy". She contends that "the process of transition and formation of new cultural identities, blatantly engages itself with notions of 'hybridity' and 'liminality' [...and] by allowing the female subaltern to be voiced, Lahiri's stories prepare a space through which the subaltern can speak" (43). The article presents the problems involved in negotiating new identities, through an exploration of the inevitable Self/Other confrontation which takes place in the process of identity-formation.