



## THE CROSS-CULTURAL DUALITY IN WRITINGS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

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### ABSTRACT :

*Jhumpa Lahiri is a young writer of Indian background who belongs to the second generation of the non-immigrant Americans. Her novels and stories are set at the large submerged territory of 'cross-culturalism'. Lahiri's characters are not at a loss of the cultural identity, but rather relieved when they adjust to their new world with help of the power of relationships and the personal connections though they regret for the cultural displacement due to separation from their original cultures. The references to rich Indian food mark difference between the American culture and the Indian culture, the former to be embraced and later must be savored. The 'force' of relationships and religion seems to be doomed to failure because of the powerful 'sentiment' and the tears of protest.*

**KEYWORDS :** *Diaspora, migration, immigrants, non-immigrant, identity, culture, cross-cultural, subordinate, force, conflicts and struggles.*

### INTRODUCTION

The cross-culturalism does not allow understanding fully the meaning of straddling the line between two cultures. Jaydeep Sarangi comments: *"Jhumpa Lahiri's stories are the gateways into the large submerged territory of 'cross-culturalism'. It is a metaphor to share cultures... something that will allow them/us to share, instead of dividing, what is on either side."* (Sarangi, 2002) Jhumpa Lahiri emphasizes the Indians for whom India is a strange land. Her personality is shaped by her still Indian parents and frequent childhood visits to India. Her works present the complicated individuals who express their emotions and experiences. Nalini Iyer examines: *"Lahiri's strength as a story teller is characterization. The people she creates are real, alive, complicated, and individual. She never descends into stereotypes nor does she engage in grand generalizations about social and political relationships. Instead, she sweeps her reader through a range of emotions and experiences and lets her characters speak for themselves."* (Iyer, 1999)

Lahiri presents the conflicts and struggles that the immigrants face in interpersonal relationships and the stress of daily existence. Avoiding direct explanations, she merely mentions the issues and leaves for the reader to get a chance to finish or contribute to the story. Another impressive aspect is her ability to write in the voices of both the genders. On writing from the male perspective, in an interview in the Houghton Mifflin Books online "Reader's Guide" for *The Namesake*, Lahiri declares: *"It was an exhilarating and liberating thing to do . . . It's a challenge, as well. I always have to ask myself, would a man think this? Do this?"* (Lahiri) This method of narration from both the perspectives facilitates her ability to balance the gender representation in her books.



Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* focuses on inabilities of characters to communicate with important people in their lives and the lack of communication pushes them in exclusion, loneliness and in the search for fulfillment. These stories focus also on the complex and conflicted world of Indian immigrants caught between two cultures in the United States. She uses the themes of conflict in relationships between couples, families and friends to explore ideas of isolation and personal and cultural identities. Her characters frequently encounter unresolved identity crises because of their inabilities to reconcile their American identity with their Indian identity. Her characters' cultural isolation causes their extreme personal isolation. The sense of isolation governs the events in each story.

Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* has the themes of immigration and conflicting collision of cultures with highly distinct in religious, social, and ideological differences. The Ganguli family struggles to find the places in society, while respecting their roots during adapting to the American culture. Ashima focuses the privacy of Bengali culture. The struggle between two cultures begins when the Gangulis wish to raise children with Bengali culture and values in the surrounding culture of the United States. Much later in their lives the second generation immigrants truly begin to value their Bengali heritage.

Lahiri's next collection of stories *Unaccustomed Earth* reflects how people cope with two separate cultures in the new places free of one's ancestors and the past. It repeats a maternal womanism, but for quite opposite effects and again the physical and cultural maternities become a duty to share for the female and male protagonists. It tells the stories like a mother caught between career and obligation to children and a father explores issues of the difficult gender roles in America. It explores complex immigrants' emotions such as loneliness, love, jealousy, homesickness and loneliness which compel to empathize with others. It also presents the stories about immigrant couples who share the common experience of a new culture and discover a strong connection with one another; about a mother's death affects relationships among son, father, stepmother and two young stepsisters and about a woman's complex affair with a married man.

Lahiri writes about second generation Indian-Americans while using her personal experiences as raw material. She draws all stories upon different aspects of her Indian background, as some stories take place in India; others involve the lives of Indian immigrants in the United States. Lahiri explains her own lack of self-understanding through the relationships between the American-born Indian characters and India, characters defined by isolation of some form or another, feeling of missing something vital to the identity and the question identity and their future. She uses the unnamed narrator to tell about her own immigration and she does not let herself lose her Indian identity in the efforts to become an American. In an interview with India-West, Lahiri admits: "*I'm lucky that I'm between two worlds . . . I don't really know what a distinct South Asian identity means. I don't think about that when I write, I just try to bring a person to life.*" (Lahiri, 2003) Lahiri suggests that the loss of Indian identity is at the root of the isolation that well-adjusted and happy immigrant characters experience. These characters work to keep intact their connection with India. Though they have become the Americans, they have not ceased to be the Indians. But in some ways, Lahiri herself struggles to understand Indian culture. One may agree with Chakrabarty who observes: "*Lahiri's works reveal how such a dream of homogeneity is subverted by the absent presence / present absence of the country of origin in the case of the diasporic Bengalis / Indians.*" (Chakrabarty; 26)

Both *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies* contain themes of the conflict in relationships between couples, families and friends. Lahiri explores the ideas of personal and cultural isolations and identities through these relationships. The characters in both works frequently encounter crises of identity which are tied to their inabilities to reconcile their American identity with their Indian identity. Particularly, in the short stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* Lahiri often leaves these crises unresolved. As a result, her works give the readers a rather bleak outlook on the future of her characters. One might imagine that this aspect reflects some of Lahiri's concerns about character's real-life analogues. She often correlates her characters' cultural isolation with extreme personal isolation, suggesting that the cultural isolation causes the personal. The instances in which this cultural isolation is resolved or avoided are generally accompanied by a similar resolution or avoidance of personal isolation.

Lahiri's fiction focuses on the struggle of Indian-American women. These women create and nurture individual and collective identities. Their identities are as the Americans, the Bengalis and the mixture of both the identities in their new American landscape. She manifests a curious way of attributing power to the women in her fiction. By placing her female characters in traditional roles such as nearly silent, often jobless housewives and/or mothers, Lahiri displays, through the inner monologue and narrative of her female characters, their impact on other characters' consciousnesses and their communal bonding. In short, she displays their great power. These women use constant re-evaluation of the cross-cultural Indian-Americans to improve their lives and the lives of those around them. In short, though situated as outwardly powerless in Western society, Lahiri reveals her female characters' inner adaptability. Such is the case of Ashima and Gogol in *The Namesake*.

The second generation immigrants are undoubtedly a self-named, self-definer and family-centered. They seek to be a role model and are committed to struggle, to retain their original identity elements and to create positive intercultural exchanges. Gogol's whole identity as a flexible role player is that of respectful of women and elders, moral and female compatible. He is supportive, ambitious, fathering and, of course, loving. But his elements as a strong protector do not stand out. Additionally, some of the womanistic characteristics he displays are very subtle. Indeed, Lahiri's presentation of male characters leads to the question that how the Indian-American woman might envision her relationships with men.

Ashima presents bonding of a cross-cultural woman. The white women help Ashima but they harm Gogol. Lydia lets Gogol assimilate to a point only because she loses the sight of his ethnic and cultural identity. But Mrs. Buxton at the library helps Ashima to gain career independence and to share her Bengaliness with the American co-workers. This causes a real intercultural bonding that characterizes the international cooperation of women.

The narrative implies that cultural retention is important but that equally important is the revision of cultural elements so that they are useful and realistic. For example, Gogol sees no use for Bengali religious ceremony. But when faced with the death of his father, he finds solace in the Bengali religious tradition of mourning. Gogol reveals usefulness of his Bengali identity that he can revise and retain to pass on to his children. Ashima and Ashoke not only pass on the maternity they received from their parents, but in exchange they too learn from Gogol and Sonia, that suggests a woman's maternal instinct which moves from the older generation to the younger and vice-versa.

The stories of Jhumpa Lahiri in *Interpreter of Maladies and Other Short Stories* whisper and scream traces of India in the life of immigrants existing simultaneously in two cultures: the American reality and the sphere of Indian tradition. Lahiri's experiences in Calcutta nourish interest in seeing things from different points of view. Her perspectives range from a cab driver/tour guide to that of an adult recounting her child-like fascination. The character details make assertions about the sense of isolation that governs each events of the story. To conclude, one may agree with Somdatta Mandal who states: "*We go on basking in Lahiri's glory and feel proud that apart from the beauty queens who put India on the world map, we have appropriated a literary figure, who though born in England, brought up in Connecticut and now living in New York, can be claimed as a desi writer too, though her own idea of India is "of the mind" only. In the definition and re-definition of the Diaspora, for the time being at least, Jhumpa Lahiri is a writer who can hold own way in any grouping—among Indian writers in English, among story specialists, and among American literary stars.*" (Mandal, 31) While focusing on marriage, Lahiri presents disconnected feelings, feelings of disorientation associated with immigration, the cross-cultural differences and people who feel like foreigners at home or abroad. The difference is in the manner in which characters struggle to relate to one another and their changing positions in life.

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