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Research Article



Mapping the Exploration of Identity and Diasporic Belonging: A Literary Study of the Discourse in Jhumpa Lahiri's Whereabouts

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Abstract

Diaspora is studied in the historical and ethical background of migration of human beings. It is well known for its dislocation, disorientation, uprooted culture, fractured identity, multilingual or multicultural aspects of learning in the history of human migration. It has been studied in the different fields of knowledge and theory, having significant causes and effects of new exploration. In literature, it is studied with the straddle culture of human beings. Most of the diasporas are found unexplainable in the matter of identity formation. The literary and social term 'diaspora' is derived from Greek word 'diaspeiro' which means 'to scatter' or 'to spread

about'. It comprises of the Greek preposition 'dia' and verb 'speiro'. Dia means 'through' or 'between' and 'speiro' means 'to sow' or 'to scatter'. In this way, the word 'diaspora' means the scattering of population or the spreading of population across the region they are originated. The conceptual study of diaspora goes back to the human history and was initially used by the ancient Greeks to describe their scattering population all over the world. For the ancient Greeks, it was signified for migration and colonization. In the present context, 'diaspora' is read with the taste of modernity in the conceptualization of human migration, having actual feeling or feeling of others in the foreign landscapes. The present paper aims at the diasporic identity as well as the whereabouts of the narrator in the exploration of Jhumpa Lahiri in her latest novel, *Whereabouts* published in the Italian language in (2018) and translated by herself in (2021). By examining the characters' quest for a sense of place, negotiation of cultural hybridity, and their grappling with multifaceted identities, this research aims to elucidate the nuanced tapestry of diasporic experiences evident in Lahiri's literary corpus.

Keywords: Migration, Emigration, Immigration, Multicultural, Multilingual, Seeking identity, Dualism, Identification, Dislocation, Disorientation

The literary studies of the diasporic identity compress the complexities and dynamic conditions of human migration: emigration or immigration. The real features of Diaspora can be studied with Robert Cohen into the nine points while the same features have been combined into the six by William Safran, known as the six principles of understanding the diasporic features. The first [diaspora] is the moment of classic capitalism, "before the world was thoroughly consolidated, as transnational" (Spivak 245). Avtar Brah is of the view that "The diasporic experience is a composite one made up of collectiveness, multiple journeys, still points and border crossings. Experiences are shaped by economic positions, personal skills and political relationships between country of adoption and origin" (Brah 82). Homi Bhabha states that: "diaspora are gatherings of exiles, emerges and refuges; gatherings in the ghettos or cafes of city centres; gathering in the half-light of foreign tongues or in the uncanny fluency of author's language, gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment of other world lived restoratively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival" (Bhabha, 16).

In connection with, the present study centres on one of the great Indian diasporic writers, British born, London brought up, American-fiction writer, Jhumpa Lahiri who was born to a Bengali immigrant family from the state of West Bengal, (India) in London (England) on the 11th of July, 1967. Her literary world is well received with her *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), *The Lowland* (2013), *In Other Words* (2016), *Teach Yourself Italian* (2017), *The Boundary* (2018) and her latest novel *Whereabouts* (2018) in Italian, translated into English by herself in 2021. She won numerous awards including the Pulitzer Prize, the PEN/Hemingway Award, the PEN/Malamud Award, the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, the Premio Gregor von Rezzori, the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, a 2014 National Humanities Medal awarded by former U.S.

President, Barack Obama, and Premio International Viareggio-Versilia for *In Altre Parole* or *In Other Words*. Her literary world can be read in the search of identity crisis and up-rooting culture which brings into light of Indian Diaspora by crossing the barriers of India. Within the confines of this literary oeuvre, the pivotal protagonist is an unidentified female individual, grappling with her existential positioning within the contemporaneous cosmos, perpetually oscillating between inertia and progression, the possession of tangible entities and the disconnection of the irrecoverable. The metropolis's architectural structures proffer an illusion of domestic tranquillity, serving as her constant collaborator and conversational partner, thereby providing a captivating tableau against which her daily activities unfold. She interacts with the urban environ, specifically, the pedestrian thoroughfares proximal to her domicile, public green spaces, architectural bridges, market squares, commercial outlets, and cafes, resulting in a diminished sense of solitude.

Her frequented destinations include a communal aquatic facility and a railway depot, the latter serving as the conduit to her maternal figure, who finds herself ensnared within the confinements of seclusion following the premature demise of both the narrator's progenitor and her conjugal partner. Individuals who manifest within the narration are predominantly professional affiliates, within whose company she experiences unease, incidental acquaintances, and an enigmatic male figure, ambiguously referred to as 'him'. This shadowy entity alternately provides solace and incites unease within her psyche. She seems awaited for getting some changes but in the arc of years, seasons change while she remains the same awaiting personality in her surroundings on the foreign landscape of the falsified concepts of pleasing her. One day in the heat of the sun, her perspective of life changes, but how, it is the exploration of the current research paper that would be presented in the company of the renowned scholars. An exquisitely nuanced portrait of the urban solitude, the present novel shimmers with beauty and possibility of literary exposition of the artist. It is also the thrilling departure of the novelist from one language to another and by translating the work again into the language, she writes much, shows her coming back into the same position of the lingual achievement. In the context of Diaspora, one can also take this novel in the exploration of the multilingual crisis as well as multilingual identity of the diasporic personalities through the aimless wanderer of the narrator in the novel.

The novel can be pursued on the sidewalk, on the street, in the office, at the trattoria, in the piazza, in the waiting room, in the bookstore, at the museum, on the couch, on the balcony, in the pool, at the beauticians, in the hotel, at the ticket counter, at the cash register, at the supermarket, at the coffee bar, at the villa, in the sun, in the shade, in winter and finally finds herself existing nowhere. It introduces us about "the man who died two days after his birthday in February... he was forty-four when it happened" (*Whereabouts*, 3). The narrator would like to thank personally those who dedicate a few minutes of their time to her son's memory, if that's not possible she thanks all anyway from the bottom of her heart. She bumps into a man she might have been involved with, her "relationship never goes beyond a longish chat on the sidewalk, a quick coffee together, perhaps a brief stroll in the same direction" (*Whereabouts*, 5). They have a chaste, fleeting bond with two kisses on the cheeks, a short walk along a stretch of road and then they too become "two shadows projected onto the wall: a routine spectacle

impossible to capture” (*Whereabouts*, 7). Her friend loved writing while at the trattoria, there are people whom the narrator does not know yet she meets frequently with a familiar face. She believes the mother died when the daughter was a young girl and the “father and daughter share a bond beyond their common blood... They are not from around here” (*Whereabouts*, 10). The narrator is afflicted by the light flowing skirts that the women in her neighborhood start to wear because “These things only remind me of loss, of betrayal, of disappointment” (*Whereabouts*, 14) in the diasporic sensibility.

In the piazza she meets the daughter of her friends, the painter and his wife who arrived there three years ago and used to come to her place for Italian lessons. “I still regret my squandered youth, the absence of rebellion. She got married again to a guy the narrator doesn’t like. She meets another girl who fits in anywhere. She is fond of this girl as her grit inspires the narrator who didn’t know love at her age. After forty-five she got illness in which there has been a strange sensation under the skin of her throat, something along the lines of an irregular palpitation. There was no one “who keeps this woman company: no caregiver, no friend, no husband... I won’t have anyone sitting beside me either” (*Whereabouts*, 21) indicating her diasporic identity. When she got well she visited her bookstore and met her ex the only significant who was involved for five years. In the beginning when they were together, all she did only to listening him which irritated her initially but finally she got adjusted with.

Further she meets a lady who shared her five years with the man who was promising her for a better company but her illusion was broken when she got another lady with him and she realized that she was only one of his lovers. They started to chat with each other by pulling out their agendas. They reviewed point by point on the details of their “parallel relationship: vacations and other memorable moments, herniated disks, bouts of the flue” (*Whereabouts*, 25). She visits her mother and finds that solitude became her only trade after being aware of the reality of her husband’s relationship with other ladies. Pulling herself down to the experience, the narrator was suspected whether she was the shield between her mother and her terror. She visited her favorite museum which is almost always empty and it may be the reason for her favorite. The features of the museum were “excavated, pried from their surroundings, removed, relocated, displayed to the public” (*Whereabouts*, 29) reminding her diasporic feminine identity which may be thinking of her house in some other part of the world that’s “how she manages to fully inhabit and possess this room, crossing a certain threshold” (*Whereabouts*, 31), she has always respected. When she was sitting in her sofa, she reminded her neighbor who was a therapist who was an attractive woman with dark eyes and a space between her front teeth. Her ceiling was high and books covered the wall from top to bottom which indicates her readers that she is the top-class scholar. She was fully dedicated to curing her patients.

On the balcony, one can find the narrator with her therapist friend with her suitcase always packed and ready which shows that “she’s always on the move” (*Whereabouts*, 35) like a diasporic personality. In this balcony, she gets relaxed otherwise “there’s always something that needs to be done” (*Whereabouts*, 36). Before her marriage, her friend was living like the narrator but at present “there was a little girl who always felt lonely, who cried every night before going to bed because her mother was almost never there to wish her good night”

(*Whereabouts*, 37). Her mother used to write something which she does not want to lose and even she does not want her husband to come across her written papers. Further, she visits the pool where there is an elderly woman uses the ladder to get in and always swims with her face above water. Everything is tolerable when she is protected by water and nothing touches her but reminding her mother. The narrator tells us that she wouldn't know how to survive while for the narrator can cover her without drowning her. Robin Cohen in his book, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, observes: "the concept implied more painful meanings of loss of a Homeland, violent deterritorialisation and longing for return" (Cohen, X).

The most powerful consideration of the cultural crisis of the novelist about such places can be seen herewith: "where women congregate, naked and wet, where they show each other the scars besides their breasts and on their bellies, the bruises on their thighs, the imperfections on their backs, they all talk about misfortunes. They complain about husbands, children and aging parents. They confess things without felling guilty" (*Whereabouts*, 42) while the Indian ladies have nothing to do like that that's why they have to suffer in such new identity. The western ladies are found protested against the misbehavior of their husbands or lovers "don't touch me you disgust" (*Whereabouts*, 44) and even "they are not ashamed of fighting in public" (*Whereabouts*, 45) but Indian Ladies like her mother has to live in the solitude without opposing their husbands. In this journey, she visits at the beautician where she meets various ladies who have come to be beautified and meets a beauty who distracts the narrator and disappoints her in the mirror that's why she tends to avoid them. The last thing she did is applying a pink polish nearly transparent on her nails which were lovelier than those of the narrator which created a gap between their feelings towards. When she visits the hotel she finds: "It's the kind of room that makes me hate the world" (*Whereabouts*, 52) but at the same hotel she meets an unknown scholar of some sort: "circumspect, detached from his surroundings, thin with a head of curly white hair" (*Whereabouts*, 53) who doesn't try to cheer her up but conveys a certain understanding, "He is well known philosopher who has written several books, a refugee from a country whose brutal regime persecuted him many years ago" (*Whereabouts*, 53). His company reassures her, though he didn't interest her sexually yet he was the quiet philosopher whose lively soul puts her obscurely at peace with the world, indicating her interest in the exiled personality.

Learning from this relation between her parents, the narrator wants to have a pure and sure relationship in her life. When the narrator was alone at her house, an old friend visits her with her husband and children. Her husband talks to her a lot while her friend was busy in caring her children so she wished, "she could have seen her friend without her husband" (*Whereabouts*, 65) who was willing to lend him a book from her shelf. She wanted to provide him but she was doubtful whether the man would return her the book or not. She was also not willing to have a record of such transformation into the register. The cash register always burdened her because it reminds her father's responsibility over the family which was recorded with the accounts of the expenses. She enjoys and confesses her personal relationship without any hesitation which shows the impact of the western culture on her: "My first boyfriend was cleaning his room the room where we would make love and where I lost my virginity before moving to a new place...in that moment when with a painful lucidity, our relationship would

have to end” (*Whereabouts*, 75). But the fear of being loved and lost is distracting her from the lively sense of relationship between her parents. She compares herself with her mother and finds herself economically free. By now, she earns a decent amount and spends money every day without thinking too much about it that’s why every now and again she picks the simplest sandwich or she doesn’t eat periodically. She eats breakfast without sitting down and enjoying it because she is restless in her thought of living or loving life. Her bachelor friend, an elegant and learned man in his sixties without having wife and children, likes hosting dinner at his house.

At the ticket counter she introduced her readers with her father who died suddenly when she was fifteen. Here, he worked behind the window of a post office who introduced her to the theatre. Her father loved this world while her mother never went to live with him. Once when they visited her father, he wanted to celebrate her birthday but her mother refused him saying, “It’s bad luck to celebrate a birthday before it comes” (*Whereabouts*, 57) and this shows that they have no bond of understanding relationship. The narrator also tells us about “the night before leaving my father didn’t feel well. He came down with high fever” (*Whereabouts*, 57). After that, her father got serious ill and was admitted in the hospital where he was fed up with bacteria and in this way this place was haunted by the mourning. For the first time, she learned the history of her father which reminds her again and again at the ticket counter whenever she visited it.

On the vacations, the narrator feels pressure to do what everyone else does because it has the tinge of her parentage culture. Like other children at present, she never went on vacation with her parents and ate together or sat around playing cards when she was little. Her father was wise or just stubborn who thinks, “it was better to relax at home without packing a suitcase, without the effort of getting used to a new place just for a few days” (*Whereabouts*, 84). Her father was a hermit whose peace was meant staying indoors staying put in a familiar place while her mother “would have enjoyed travelling, taking big trips. She always wanted to go to big cities, to visit museums and scared places, the temples of the Gods” (*Whereabouts*, 84). In this way, the narrator mourns her unhappy origins and feels sad for her mother, “a frustrated wife, disdainful now that she is a widow” (*Whereabouts*, 85). Her mother wanted to escape from the family but the narrator and her father was the cage to be broken before going abroad. The Chinese social and cultural critic Ien Ang writes “A critical diasporic cultural politics should privilege neither host countries nor (real or imaginary) home-land but precisely keep a creative tension between “where you’re from” and “where you’re at...” (Ang, 36)

When she visited the villa, she found some elderly women who were more alive than the narrator or her mother even in their age of seventies because they were living tension free life while the narrator lives in solitude which “demands a precise assessment of time” (*Whereabouts*, 102) as there was mother standing in front of her. Her beloved stationery store was there in the heart of the city, in a beautiful old building built on the corner of two busy streets. The family that ran the stationery store isn’t in the charge and the narrator wonder if they were evicted or humiliated to close their business which became another haunt for her. The present discussion can be closed with the citation of the novelist of the statement of an Italian writer, “I can’t think straight, everything seems futile, life itself seems extremely simple,

I don't care if nobody thinks of me anymore, if hardly anyone writes to me" (*Whereabouts*, 123). With this, the novelist writes into the mouth of her narrator, "I strode across, afraid each time that the empty space between the stumps would swallow me up, terrified each time that I would fall, even though I never did." (*Whereabouts*, 125) because when she visits her mother, "she lists her various aches and pains: a throbbing at the base of her spine, an intermittent pang in her wrist, insomnia, and the results of her latest blood test, which were more or less normal" (*Whereabouts*, 135) and she also thinks herself "a terrible daughter who ignores her mother whose fault is to be excessively alive" (*Whereabouts*, 136) while she finds no fault in her daughter. Such feeling of the mother towards the child haunts her. William Safran is of the view that, "diaspora was deployed as 'a metaphorical designation' describing the different categories of people as 'expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities....'" (Safran, 83-99)

When she revisits the place her father lived, the narrator is seen "still struggling even after your death, to eliminate the distance between you and my mother, the woman with whom you choose inexplicably to share a life and have a child" (*Whereabouts*, 145). Addressing her dead father, the narrator narrates him, "You still occupy a space in our family, even more than the space allotted to you now in your little cell" (*Whereabouts*, 146). She also explains that when her father was alive, he did not want to move from his house while at present he can't go for his solitary walks anymore and so she refused to pack her suitcase for a month to move from. As far as she is concerned, it makes no difference whether she is under a clear blue sky or caught in the rain or swimming in the transparent sea in summer, she always felt her abode or foothold as, "disoriented, lost, at sea, at odds, astray, adrift, bewildered, confused, uprooted, turned around" (*Whereabouts*, 153).

To conclude, one can be affirmed about diasporic whereabouts in the words of Vijay Mishra who writes: "All Diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way...lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by specters, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements" (Mishra, 1). In the present context, Diaspora Management is recorded by Harris Mylonas who has "re-conceptualized to describe both the policies that states follow in order to build links with their diaspora abroad and the policies designated to help with the incorporation and integration of diasporic communities when they return home" (Mylonas, 1).

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