

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

## Diasporic Consciousness in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction

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### Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri has faithfully converted her experiences as an expatriate Indian writer in her literary works- novels and short stories. Identity crisis, sense of displacement and alienation are some of the common experiences that have been shared by the first generation and the second-generation immigrants. But the identity crisis and the issues faced by both generation immigrants differ from each other. The former is still tied to its roots and is more or less baffled by the American experience. They still consider India as their homeland and are bound to its culture and traditions. The later faces a new crisis as the culture at their home widely differs from that of the society around them. They constantly have to negotiate and make adjustments between the two worlds. The present article attempts to analyse the dilemma and crisis faced by both generations of immigrants as well as their hopes and expectations in an alien land.

**Keywords-** Diaspora, Displacement, Identity Crisis, Rootlessness, Nostalgia, Cultural Crisis

The word Indian diaspora makes you go down the trail of history and brings to the mind the displacement of thousands of Indian workers who were taken to various English colonies by the British government to work as Agricultural labourers. The second kind of migration was voluntary and was undertaken for better material prospects. However, immigration either forced or voluntary inadvertently brings with it a feeling of displacement, nostalgia, rootlessness, alienation and longing for homeland. The expatriate Indian writers have explored this sense of displacement through their works. They have given more poignancy to the exploration by dealing not only with a geographical dislocation but also a socio-cultural sense of displacement. Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction is largely drawn from her own experiences as an immigrant as well as those of her parents, friends and acquaintances and others in the Bengali community. She explores the issues related to immigration and its discontents following the pursuit of

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the American Dream and the cultural shock felt by the immigrants and a sense of loss of identity by their children who are not able to identify with either their Indian heritage or the country of their birth.

In her maiden novel *The Namesake*, Lahiri quite deftly chronicles the struggles, anxieties, and the manners of immigrant psychology and behaviour. In her fiction, the parents struggle to keep their children acquainted with Indian culture, but the second-generation immigrants become increasingly assimilated into western culture. But in spite of departing from the constraints of their parents, they straddle between two cultures and belong to neither. They are too used to freedom to accept the rituals and conventions of home and yet too steeped in tradition to embrace American mores fully. Some children defy their parents' wishes but they remain haunted by the burden of their family's dreams and their awareness of their role in the generational process of Americanization. In her debut collection of stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, her novel *The Namesake*, she delineates the disorientation of first-generation immigrants, however, her second volume of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, focuses partly on the back stories of the previous generation, from the perspective of their children. This device allows us to see the distances that have been travelled, geographically and culturally in order for the characters to have arrived at the narrative present.

In "When Mr. Pirzada came to dine", The yearning for one's homeland finds expression. The story depicts the Bangladesh war of 1971 and the restlessness it causes in Mr. Pirzada as he is from East Pakistan. Lilia watches the disturbance at home but at school Lilia only learns about US declaration of Independence, East Pakistan's struggle to independence is ironically neglected completely. In library Lilia finds and begins to read a book containing a few pages on Dacca, when she is interrupted by her teacher who feels that she is not required to read that book as it is not a part of the syllabus. In yet another story "A Temporary Matter" Shukumar has no childhood reminiscences of India as it was mostly his parents who travelled to India. The time he had gone as an infant he had nearly died of amoebic dysentery. His father was afraid to take him again. These stories show how little experience of India these second-generation immigrants are subjected to. These children feel distanced from their parents as they feel more American. Even Americans themselves make a subtle yet pronounced distinction between their parents and them. In *The Namesake*, Gogol is aware of people at stores preferring to direct their conversation to Gogol. In *Hell-Heaven*, Usha is more comfortable with Dorothy than her parents and her party is even handed a glass of beer hidden from her parents.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, her mostly 30 something Bengali Americans feel half betrayed yet awed by their parents. Part of the burden they live with is the unspoken ambivalence about elders who against great odds managed to undertake a task which still daunts their offsprings. The parents have expectations, typically unrealistic ones, as they move to the west yet want to resist its inevitable influence on the next generation. They demand that their children excel and succeed in their new setting,

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but not become shaped by its values. In the short story. In “Once in A Life Time” Hema’s parents are shocked by the western lifestyle of their friends. Their fondness for Johnny walker is taken as a symbol of decadent westernizing, her make up, choice of clothes etc. are scrutinized and judged. Mother is an archetypal female immigrant in Lahiri’s world, anachronistic and disempowered. Usha's mother in Hell-Heaven is a traditional housewife who has resigned to her fate. Her husband is a scientist, always busy at work. Her only happiness in life comes in the form of Pranab, a Bengali student, more like a brotherly figure. Although Usha fights the authority of her mother as a teenager, but she is not oblivious to her mother's loneliness and suffering. “I began to pity my mother, the older I got the more I saw what a desolate life she led” (76). In “Once in a Lifetime”, Lahiri brings out the contradictions inherent in the lives of Indians living abroad. Hema's mother is a traditional Bengali housewife but her daughter recounts, “Cinema of a certain period was the one thing my mother loved whole heartedly about the west. She never wore a skirt, she considered it indecent but she could recall scene by scene Audrey Hepburn's outfits in any given movie” (231). This poignant detail hints at the unfulfilled life lived on the periphery of traditional old world and unreachable new world.

This disempowerment of mothers sometimes trickles down in the lives of their daughters as well. In, ‘Unaccustomed Earth’, Ruma whose mother has recently died quite unexpectedly as a reaction to anesthesia, has recently moved to the suburbs of Seattle with her workaholic husband and son Akash. “Growing up, her mother's example of moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household- had seemed as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma’s life now” (24). It is often women who find it difficult to adjust to the American way of life. In ‘Mrs. Sen's’, Mrs. Sen finds it difficult to adjust to the fast-paced life in the west, symbolized in her inability to master driving skills quickly enough and her propensity to use the curved knife to chop vegetables. Similarly in *The Namesake*, after spending all her life in the U.S. even after giving birth to her two children and bringing them up there, Ashima, the housewife retains completely Indian sentiments in such a manner that the USA never feels like her home, she continues to visit India in nostalgia, re-reading her dead parents letters from home. At 48, she is still unable to operate bank accounts, when she has to write a cheque, she waits for her husband to come and deposit it at the bank.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s characters move freely from country to country, continent to continent, job to job but the psychological ties of the family and culture are not so easy to leave behind. Each of her narratives is both firmly embedded in the Indian expatriate experience and also full of the resonance of the inescapable past.

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