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Multiethnic Perspectives in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Stories

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Abstract

Cultural studies deals with culture as a part of everyday life. Moreover, humans are cultural species and the cultural trio reveals every field associated with certain aspects. Every society has its own culture and way of life. As Globalisation is a multidimensional process, Cultural globalisation grows across the globe in the present era. It is the rapid movement of ideas, attitudes, meanings, values and cultural products across national borders. It is certainly the intermixing of people, cultures, economies and technologies. Moreover it involves the formation of shared norms and knowledge with which people associate their individual and collective cultural identities. Raymond Williams, a major exponent of multiculturalism, proposes that culture is the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life. He expands that culture covers all aspects of human life gained through right knowing and right doing. Jhumpa Lahiri, a skilled writer of cultural studies, pictured this cultural trio well in her writings.

Keyterms: Multiculturalism, Globalisation, Cultural studies.

Culture is the backbone of everyone as well as every nation. Everyman is a changing creature human like seasonal beings. He should change according to the season then only he can survive in this world. Like Shelley's saying, "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" (*Ode to the West wind*, 1.70), everyone must

change their culture according to their environment. Changing culture is different from changing identity. Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter (*Ode to a Nightingale*, l.11) as per Keats quote, this article is an attempt to express Lahore's perspectives on culture in a positive vision.

An American author of Indian origin, Lahiri was the child of Bengali Indian immigrants from the state of West Bengal; she portrays the characters both in the light of native and alien culture; She was born Nilanjana Sudeshna but goes by her nick name Jhumpa. Her life span moves across many countries and cultures. She was born in London, observed and learned Bengali heritage through her visits to Calcutta, grew up in Rhode Island, studied in New York and Massachusetts, married a journalist and extended a comfortable life in Brooklyn, New York, later shifted her residence to Italy's capital Rome for a year with her husband and their two children. She is currently a professor of creative writing at Princeton University, New Jersey.

As a writer in American English with Indian flavor, she presents both Indian and American cultures in her works. The American literary world celebrates her as an American author. She received many awards and honours for her works such as O. Henry Award, PEN/Hemingway Award, and Pulitzer Prize etc. At present, Lahiri is one of the most eminent Indo- American writers. Even though she is a woman of Indian origin, she can stand in a firm position as a prominent writer in America. Her stories comprise of Indian heritage, American dream, loneliness of dislocation, cultural displacement, sense of identity and belonging with one foot into two worlds at surface. But with deep insight into her works, a hidden point mentioned is that there's no success without hardship in everyone's life. The characters' suffering make them strong to survive anywhere like Lahiri. Through her stories, she circuitously exposes the importance of cultural awareness, cultural intelligence, cultural psychological aspects and cultural feminist ideas.

Her short stories in the collections of *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* focus on the same vision of Lahiri. Both collections present the themes of cultural aspects in a perfect manner. Everyone has an individuality, has his or her own culture and own identity. But he or she must possess the quality of adopting the other culture of the place like a Chameleon. Place should not be an obstacle for his or her development. Lahiri portrays how her immigrant characters struggle to adopt into the new culture at first and how they become developed themselves with hope later. Wherever they achieve, their identity couldn't be

changed. If an Indian man shines in America, all will praise him as an achiever from Indian only, because it is his or her born identity.

Her initial collection *Interpreter of Maladies* consists of nine dazzling short stories and these stories narrate the lives of Indians settled in America. Lahiri incorporates three worlds in her life- India, the land of her ancestors, England, the land that gave shelter to her parents, and America, the land of her present residence. These three worlds can easily be grouped into two worlds of the East and the West. Each and every story of this collection powerfully mirror the author's shifting frame of reference and spanning two worlds of the East and the West and intertwining a delightful touch of fictional art. The stories reveal immigrants' suffering in a new land as well as those sufferings made them stronger to survive there.

The first and foremost story *A Temporary Matter* is about a married couple, Shukumar and Shoba, suffers from the darkness that is the loss of their stillborn child. The darkness actually separates them lonely but later the power cut produces darkness, it helps them to share their grief, they console themselves and to be a more intimate couple. At the same time, their loss makes them to cry again and at the end they realised that their misery is the temporary sadness only and they hope for their happiness in their life.

In *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, Mr. Pirzada is a visiting professor of Pakistan; he becomes much closer with the little girl Lilia in her household in Dacca for a brief period. Mr.Pirzada spends his time in Lilia's house with her Indian parents. Lilia likes his company more and becomes very closer to him. Later, Mr.Pirzada returns to Pakistan and reunited with his family, however, Lilia feels isolate of his absence. Whenever she takes a candy, she remembers Mr.Pirzada and she is waiting for his arrival at the end. This story exposes the strong hope of the little girl Lilia. Even though she is a little one, who unable to understand what life is, but Lahiri shows her optimistic hope in an accurate manner.

In the third, eponymous story, *Interpreter of Maladies*, Mr. Kapasi, a tour guide guides Das family to visit the Sun Temple in India. Mr. Kapasi reveals about himself to Das that he has another job as an interpreter at a doctor's office. Mrs. Das suddenly shows her interest in Mr. Kapasi and seeks a favour from him. One day, at the tourist site, Mrs. Das has the chance to reveal her secret to Mr. Kapasi that her son Bobby is not Mr. Das's son. She admits her sin and wants Mr.Kapasi, as an interpreter, to convey this bitter thing to Mr.Das. But this news makes Mr. Kapasi lose respect for Mrs. Das completely, so he advises her violently

and asks her to be loyal to her husband. At the end, Mrs.Das shifts her attention on her children and protects her son from monkeys. Anyhow, she feels relaxing by expressing her inner thoughts to Mr.Kapasi. Her confidence is that she will look after her family as well she will be honest to her husband thereafter.

In the subsequent story *A Real Durwan*, Boori Ma, the protagonist, is a durwan, a gatekeeper in an apartment building in India. As a fabulist, she likes to tell stories to the apartment people that are supposedly true. After completing her tasks like sweeping, cleaning and other works, Boori Ma used to sleep at the gate. Mr and Mrs. Dalal, one of the couples in the apartment, helps her in some ways. But when the Dalals are away on vacation, Boori Ma spends her time with other families and visiting the markets. Unfortunately in her absence, someone steals the new basin from the building. When she backs to the apartment, the residents blame her for allowing the theft to occur. No one is ready to believe her words and as a result, she is thrown out onto the street. The residents started to search a real durwan than Boori Ma without knowing her value. Boori Ma feels for their complaint and walks towards in search of a job in another area. As she knows well about herself, she believes herself; she hopes that she can get a better job than the last one.

The fifth story *Sexy* is about Miranda, a young white woman who falls in love with a married Bengali man, Dev. When she has the chance to spend with a little boy, she realised her misbehavior. He insists her to wear a cocktail dress and praises her as she is sexy, and telling her what he thinks 'sexy' means, which makes a huge impression on her. When she heard the word sexy, she suddenly remembers Dev because he has praised her by using that word once. That boy feels upset for her parents separation and his father's love on the unknown woman. Miranda slowly splits from Dev and looks forward towards her future in a good manner.

The sixth story, *Mrs. Sen's* is about Mrs. Sen, the wife of a professor at the local university and a baby sitter. She has the responsibility to take care of Eliot, an eleven-year-old boy. Even though she feels homesick for her family in India, she has not made many friends here and she is glad to have Eliot. She is very kind and attentive towards Eliot. She cooks Indian spicy items to him; Eliot loves to have those items more. Though driving is essential in abroad, Mrs.Sen is afraid of learning to drive and she depends on Mr.Sen. But one day, Mrs. Sen decides to drive herself and Eliot to the market but inopportunately they get into a car accident. So Eliot's mother pulls Eliot from Mrs. Sen's care. Mrs. Sen consoles herself and recovers from

those unpleasant happenings. Though accident is a bitter incident, that would be the great chance to focus on Mrs.Sen's boldness.

In the seventh story, *This Blessed House*, Sanjeev and Twinkle, a young married couple moved into a new house in Connecticut. Sanjeev is a successful businessman and Twinkle is a student from Stanford. Even though they are made for each other, they have some controversial thoughts. Sanjeev is always practical and focuses on what others will think but Twinkle is sentimental and more religious as well. At party time, Twinkle behaves herself as a devotee of Christian that she reveals herself as a Christian, even though she is a Hindu. At first, Sanjeev pours his anger towards his wife but later he understands her, agrees her faith on God and carries the silver bust of Christ to the party for the sake of his wife.

The story *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* is about a strange malady, Bibi Haldar is suffering from. She lives with her cousin Haldar and his wife. Bibi is fanatical with finding a husband and even the doctor tells her that she needs to find a husband in order to be cured. But her heartless cousin refuses to spend time and money for her. Haldar's wife becomes pregnant and is suspicious about Bibi transmitting her illness to her baby. At his wife's persistence, Haldar kicks Bibi out to live in a storage room as well that situation becomes permanent once the baby is born and gets sick. Later, Haldar and his family packs up and leaving Bibi behind. One day, Bibi turns up pregnant and no one knows who made her pregnant. Bibi turns out to be stronger than before; she gives birth to a baby boy and turns Haldar's shop into her own and becomes successful as well cured of her illness.

The last story in this collection *The Third and Final Continent* is about a Bengali man immigrating to London and then moves to Boston in order to make a life for himself and, later on, for his wife of an arranged wedding. When he gets to Boston, he stays at a house owned by a Mrs. Croft, who's 103 years old. The narrator is the perfect occupant; he is polite and respectful to Mrs. Croft and checks on her regularly. Later, he realises that he needs a better apartment for him and his wife Mala to live in once she arrives from India. He and Mala live together at the new place, at first, they are not close to each other. But once, the narrator takes Mala to show her the house where he used to live with Mrs. Croft. Mrs. Croft meets Mala and proclaims her a lady, which gives the narrator and Mala something to know about together. It's a sweet moment that makes them begin to fall in love with each other. The narrator continues the story by summarising what happens

afterwards that is he and Mala live happily together in a town outside of Boston and have a son who now attends Harvard. So there's the happy ending in the book.

All the immigrants of these nine stories reveal their suffering to adopt the new country, sacrifices their miseries and stronger to survive there. They are not back to their native, they have the power to endure themselves and develop themselves. Keeping Indian heritage in their minds and following the American culture are the two strong sides of every immigrant just like a coin. These stories deal with life as a whole and various bonds that are part and parcel of one's life. Through her short stories, Lahiri has demonstrated that these bondages, ups and downs one comes across in life make the character a complete social and cultural being. Like *Interpreter of Maladies*, another short story collection *Unaccustomed earth* also deals with these influential aspects. The characters in these stories represent the diasporic struggle as well as journey of the self. The meaning of one's survival lies not only within himself but also related to the world and the fellow beings and this awareness makes one strike roots into unaccustomed earth.

Unaccustomed Earth is another short story collection of eight short stories, five stories comprise the first part; three stories, featuring the same central characters comprise the second part, follow a Bengali-American family through several cities across the world. All the stories are thematically related and probe the overarching themes and subjects of Lahiri's career- the adjustments made by Bengali immigrants as they try to adapt to American culture. The title reveals that a change of home can be good for a person if only they strike their roots into unaccustomed earth. As changes are inevitable in this mortal world, Lahiri beautifully shows the immigrants bond between the place they were born and the place where they have settled.

The collection opens with the title story, *Unaccustomed Earth*. An unnamed father visits his daughter, Ruma, and her young son, Akash, in Seattle after the death of his wife. The story extends to three generations of immigrants and their varying modes of acculturation. Ruma's parents, first generation immigrants, come to the U.S. in quest of better educational opportunities. After his wife's sudden death, Ruma's father feels more liberated and immerses himself completely in the American culture. Surprisingly, he wants Ruma to experience the kind of freedom that he now has, he feels that he is free from the strictures of traditional Bengali practices, and can live with his girlfriend. Meanwhile, Akash becomes fascinated with his grandfather's language; he is thoroughly American, and knows next to nothing about Bengalese culture. The story ends happily with the father leaving Ruma and a crying Akash to travel the world with his new girlfriend.

The second story, *Hell-Heaven*, explores a complicated parent-child relationship. The narrative perspective shifts to the more personal, first-person voice, Usha, a young girl living in Boston with her very traditional mother, Boudi. She recounts the piteous story of her mother as she glimpses through her childhood memories. One day, they meet a graduate student at MIT named Pranab Chakraborty. Though, Pranab is homesick, Usha bonds with him, and Boudi is love-stricken. But in the end, Pranab marries an American woman named Deborah. Unfortunately they divorced twenty-three years later. Later, Usha learns that her mother's love affair on Pranab after many decades only after a man, whom she wanted to marry, had rejected her.

The third story, *A Choice of Accommodations* follows Amit and his partner, Megan, arriving at the Chadwick Inn. They are at the hotel to attend the wedding of Pam, Amit's school mate. Amit remembers his time at this old boarding school, Langford Academy. At the reception, he drinks too much and speaks to a stranger about his unforgivable contempt of his marriage. A very drunk Amit drifts away from the party, intending to phone home to their female children, but ends up returning to the hotel to sleep. Megan gives him the cold shoulder the next morning. Later, they soon forget their angry and wander through the campus looking for something to eat, at last the story concludes happily.

The next story *Only Goodness* is about the relationship of blood relations, Sudha and her teen-aged brother Rahul, an addict to alcohol. When Sudha leaves her family after her marriage with Roger, Rahul lives with their parents, working a menial job. Later, Sudha gives birth to a boy, Neel in London. Rahul acts as a responsible uncle to Neel and they become more intimate. Once, Rahul suggests his sister Sudha and her husband, Roger goes out for a movie and leaves him at the apartment with Neel. They agreed and went but when they return, Neel was in the bath and Rahul passed out. This causes a quarrel between Sudha and Roger. After sometime, Rahul awakens and learns that he consumed some alcohol against his will power. When he realises that he has lost Sudha's trust forever, he has the hope that he will prove himself as a responsible brother to his sister, Sudha soon.

The final story of part I, *Nobody's Business* is the story of a girl, the unmarried Sangeeta Biswas. Her field is receiving telephone calls from Indian suitors who have acquired her number from the vast Cambridge

Bengali network. It is about the family of American Bengali family and their alcoholic son Rahul. A lonely Paul secretly charmed of beautiful Sang. She loves Farouk, an Egyptian man. When Sang went to London, Paul learns the relationship of Farouk and Deirdre. Later Paul tells Sang about this after her return, but she calls him a liar. As per the Indian Chant, 'Truth alone triumphs' Sang realises Farouk's real face very soon. She forgives Paul but she abandons all her suitors and goes to London. She takes Farouk's cheating as a lesson, couldn't accept the drunkard Paul as her soul mate, so she abandons them and hope for her bright future at the end.

Part II of this collection entitled as *Hema and Kaushik* are intimately connected, and make up a trilogy. These short stories stretch a chronological account of the lives of Hema and Kausik. They grow up together but end up living distinct lives and lose touch. When they have chance to meet again after some decades, they realise a strong and mutual bond with one another. Unfortunately before proposing their love, Kausik dies in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The whole plot of Hema and Kaushik is divided into three parts.

The primary part is *Once in a Lifetime*, It deals mostly with Hema and Kaushik and their childhood. This is an account of first person narrative from Hema to Kaushik. It expresses the story of two families who were intimate to each other because of shared culture and the common experience of adapting to a new culture.

In the middle part *Year's End*, is from Kaushik's point of view. It states about Kaushik's life after his mother's death. He deals with so many unwanted changes in his life and circumnavigates complicated relationships with his recently remarried father, stepmother, and two young stepsisters. This situation makes an influence on Kaushik to lead his life as a wanderer.

The concluding part, *Going Ashore* is related by an omniscient narrator as Hema and Kaushik meet by chance in Italy after two long eras. Hema is at present a college professor; she is anguished about her previous affair with a married man and plans to settle down by marrying Navin, someone she barely knows. At the same time, Kaushik is a world traveling and successful photojournalist now, he is preparing to accept a desk job in Hong Kong. They coincidentally reunite in Rome and remember their younger years together. Later Kaushik asks Hema to leave Navin and come and live with him in Hong Kong. But ultimately Kaushik goes for vacation to Khao Lak and dies there, when the 2004 tsunami occurs.

Thus Lahiri visualises the cultural aspects beautifully in these two short story collections. With deep dive on these two collections, each and every story reflects the Indian heritage as well as American culture amazingly. Though culture is essential to everyone and every nation, he or she must learn cultural awareness. It paves the way for cultural intelligence to the immigrants. Immigration is like school-going incident. Every immigrant has the struggle to adjust and adopt at first to a new environment, surrounding and culture, but later they can be strong and shine. So, Environment should not be an obstacle to anyone for his or her development. As per William Cowper's saying, God made the country, and man made the town, (*God made the country*, l.1) everyone must aware of his or her individuality at the same time he or she must learn the essential qualities such as adjustment, adoptability and flexibility to survive in another nation.

Though Lahiri is an American citizen, she still celebrates as an Indian diaspora writer. Her short stories not only express the two countries cultural aspects but they are the important instances to state that how essential cultural globalization is. Hence, literature has many branches such as Indian writing, American literature, Canadian literature, etc., every branch reflects its nation especially culture; it is a globalized one. Thus Lahiri exposes her multisided talent of highlighting Indian culture, presenting awareness about American Culture and how immigrants sufferings make them stronger and stimulate them to overcome and at last support to survive in another nation.

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