

Technical Aspects in the Fictional works of Jhumpa Lahiri

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most dynamic and enthusiastic writers among her contemporaries. She is definitely blessed with rare kind of art which she has achieved by virtue of her incessant labour and courage. Although she was born and brought up in the foreign countries, her attachment with India and the Indians became indispensable, which can easily be noticed all through her work. Lahiri subsequently developed her own technicalities, which she deployed in her fictional works. She is heartily associated with Indian culture and tradition, and this is the real cause for her huge popularity and fame.

Keywords: *Jhumpa Lahiri, Fictional works, Indian culture and traditions.*

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri was born and brought up in London and her parents were Bengali Indian immigrants. After spending three years in London, her family moved to United States. Lahiri considers herself an American. Lahiri grew up in Kingston Rhode Island, where her father Amar Lahiri works as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island. He is the basis for the protagonist in "The Third and Final Continent" the closing story from *Interpreter of Maladies*. Lahiri's mother wanted her children to grow up knowing their Bengali heritage and her family often visited relatives in Calcutta (now Kolkata). When she began kindergarten in Kingston Rhode Island, Lahiri's teacher decided to call her by her pet name, Jhumpa, because it was easier to pronounce than her proper names. Lahiri recalled, "I always felt so embarrassed by my name..... You feel like you're causing someone pain just by being who you are?" Lahiri's ambivalence over her identity was the inspiration for the ambivalence of Gogol, the protagonist of her novel *The Namesake*, over his unusual name. Lahiri graduated from South Kingstown High School and received her B.A. in English literature from Barnard College in 1989.

Lahiri then received multiple degrees from Boston University: an M.A. in English, M.F.A. in Creative Writing, M.A. in Comparative Literature, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. She took a fellowship at Provincetown's Fine Art Work Center, which lasted for the next two years (1997-1998). Lahiri has taught creative writing at Boston University and the Rhode Island School of Design. Lahiri lives in Fort Greene, Brooklyn with her husband and their two children, Octavio (2002) and Noor (2005).

RETROSPECTIVE

Lahiri's early short-stories faced rejection from publishers for years. Her debut short-story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was finally released in 1999. The stories address sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants, with themes such as marital difficulties, miscarriages, and the disconnection between first and second generation United States immigrants. The *Interpreter of Maladies*, the title piece in this anthology, really makes Lahiri the much acclaimed distinctive voice in American fiction. This is ample evidence for

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her remarkable maturity, though a novice in the art. Her fine uncommon sensitivity captures the pitiable plight of the human beings shuttling not merely physically but also psychologically between two worlds. There is a pungent satire on the unintentional little acts of vanity of the Indians settled in America. Mrs. Das, unreal as her character is, seems to have no touch with reality. Lahiri portrays her vividly: *She (Mrs. Das) was a short woman, with small hands like paws, her frosty pink finger-nails painted to match heart lips, and was slightly plump in her figure. Her hair, shorn only a little longer than her husband's was parted far to one side. She was wearing large dark brown sunglasses with a pinkish tint to them, and carried a big straw bag, almost as big as her torso, shaped like a bowl, with a water bottle poking out of it.*¹

Lahiri's later wrote, When I first started writing I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience, What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life. The collection was praised by American critics, but received mixed reviews in India, Where alternatively enthusiastic and upset Lahiri had not painted Indians in a more positive light. Interpreter of Maladies sold 600,000 copies and received the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (only the seventh time a story collection had won the award).

In 2003, Lahiri published *The Namesake*, her first novel. The story spans over thirty years in the life of the Ganguli family. The Calcutta-born parents immigrated as young adults to the United States, where their children Gogol and Sonia are experiencing the constant generational and cultural gap with their parents. A film adaptation of *The Namesake* was released in March 2007, directed by Mira Nair and starring Kal Penn as Gogol and Bollywood stars Tabu and Irfan Khan as his parents. Lahiri herself made a cameo as 'Aunt Jhumpa'. Lahiri's second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, was released on April 1, 2008. Upon its publication, *Unaccustomed Earth* achieved the rare distinction of debuting at number one on The New York Times best seller list. Lahiri has also had a distinguished relationship with The New Yorker magazine in which she has published a number of her short-stories, mostly fiction, and a few non-fiction including *The Long Way Home*; *Cooking Lessons* a story about the importance of food in Lahiri's relationship with her mother. Since 2005, Lahiri has been a Vice President of the PEN American Center, an organization designed to promote friendship and intellectual cooperation among writers.

In February 2010, she was appointed a member of the committee on the Arts and Humanities along with five others. Lahiri's writing is characterized by her plain language and her characters often Indian immigrants to America who must navigate between the cultural values of their homeland and their adopted home. Lahiri's fiction is autobiographical and frequently draws upon her own experience as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. Lahiri examines her characters' struggles, anxieties, and biases to chronicle and nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behavior. Until *Unaccustomed Earth*, she focused mostly on first-generation Indian American immigrants and their struggle to raise a family in a country very different from theirs. Her stories describe their efforts to keep their children acquainted with Indian culture and traditions and to keep them close even after they have grown up in order to hang on to the Indian tradition of a joint family in which the parents, their children and the children's families live under the same roof.

Lahiri's Indian heritage forms the basis for her short- stories, stories in which she deals with questions of identity, alienation and the plight of those who are culturally displaced. She vividly shows the estrangement and isolation that often afflict first and even second generation immigrants. Although the immigrant experience is central to her work, it is

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not her exclusive concern. In the title story, she suggests, through her characters, that there are ‘maladies’ that trouble all of us. This contributes to our understanding of other people and of ourselves.

Lahiri, like many Americans and Australians, is a second-generation immigrant who feels just as much at home in her parents’ homeland as she does in her own yet she felt she belonged nowhere when she was young. The psychological dislocation that immigrants often suffer can cause their children to feel a similar sense of alienation. Although Lahiri’s parents ultimately adjusted to living in America, they must have frequently longed for their mother country, giving Lahiri the opportunity to observe, at first hand, the often painful adjustment of immigrants to life in an adopted country. Her narratives weave together not only the stories of immigrants, but also those of their children, who feel that they belong neither in one place nor another. Lahiri uses her acute powers of observation, together with her personal experiences to create stories that transport readers to an imaginary landscape, exploring and exposing the frailties common to all of humanity.

DISCUSSIONS

As the short story genre uses a wide variety of plot types, several strategies must be employed to gain an overall picture of how different stories are connected. Although each of Lahiri’s stories has its own self-contained plot and characters, they are linked in ways that bind the collection together as a complete entity. To begin with, all Lahiri’s stories revolve around people who are either Indian in India, Indian in the United States or Americans of Indian descent. Further, the stories can be separated into distinct groupings and associations, based on their relation to Indian culture. The first and most obvious group of stories are the two that are set in India itself, and concern only Indians in India: *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* and *A Real Durwan*. Here, Lahiri explores the elements of Indian society that have not been muted or changed by association with the outside world. Both of the main characters, Bibi Haldar and Boori Ma have characteristics and experiences that are peculiar to Indian society, many of which could not exist elsewhere. These women are both subject to the repressive mores of an Indian society that appears to render them powerless. It is useful to link these two stories with the only other story set in India, which portrays an Indian man who comes into contact with an American family of Indian descent. The title story, ‘An Interpreter of Maladies’, not only illustrates the main theme uniting the stories, the ‘maladies’ that afflict Lahiri’s various characters, but also bridges the geographic divide between the subcontinent of India and continental North America. Mr Kapasi does not understand the tourists in his taxi, who look Indian despite their foreign mannerisms and behaviour. This immediate confusion points to one of Lahiri’s major themes that of disjunction between cultures. Through this story, Lahiri is able to deepen the connection between her narratives.

Another grouping concerns first-generation Indians who are inevitably alienated from American culture because they have left the land in which they were born and raised. Mrs Sen, while still quite young is made to seem old because she cannot adapt to life in America. She is a completely displaced person who yearns only for India and makes no attempt to assimilate. In a similar way. Mr Pirzada lives in America but is completely absorbed by what is happening in the war in his homeland, where his wife and children still reside.

According to Lahiri introduction of any piece of art must immediately draw the reader in and pique their interest by establishing the emotional tone of the narrative, setting the scene, creating the atmosphere and locating the characters in a specific time and place. One of the most prominent features of Lahiri’s stories is her short, to the point opening sentences, which immediately introduce information that is crucial to the rest of the narrative. Take the opening to ‘*A Temporary Matter*’ for example, ‘The notice informed them that it was a

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temporary matter' while this immediately prompts the question of what this 'temporary matter is' in this case, the electricity being cut off, it also clues us into the wider issue of the estrangement that exists between the married couple Shoba and Shukumar. The body of the story is where the 'plot' of the story unfolds. Short-stories require an organising principle, for example, all of Lahiri's characters are Indian, or of Indian extraction, and thus share similar concerns and values. Many of Lahiri's plot lines seem trivial, such as the story '*This Blessed House*', about Twinkle's pre-occupation with the Christian artefacts left behind by their house's previous owners - an interest which her husband Sanjeev finds annoying. More important, though, is the way that the discovery of each relic sheds new light on the marriage of these seemingly incompatible characters. Lahiri perceptively describes this trait of her characters: *nothing was pushing Shukumar. Instead he thought of how he and Shoba had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible. He thought of how he no longer looked forward to week-ends, when she sat for hours on the sofa with her coloured pencil..... He thought of how long it had been since she looked into his eyes and smiled, or whispered his name on those rare occasions they still reached for each other's bodies before sleeping.*²

A deft development of character and plot is central to the short story, and is focused on the conflict around which the story is based. This conflict could be between characters, between characters and their society, or within the psyche of the main character. 'Mrs Sen, for example, concerns an Indian woman who is unable to assimilate into her adopted country, in contrast to her more socially adapt husband. Her friendship with an American boy becomes an opportunity for each to experience the other's alternative culture. The climax results from the convergence of the separate elements in the story, and the ending generally comes from the falling action after the climax. S. Prasannarajan in his review calls this novel "an enlarged variation of the same existential trauma of the culturally displaced that animates her debut *Interpreter of Maladies*."³ Lahiri's endings are highly varied: they can often be abrupt, can be either positive or negative, and are often tangential or ambiguous. 'The Treatment of Bibi Haldar', for example, ends with a sense of the mystical because the main character has a baby without ever, to our knowledge, having any association with the opposite sex even though she desires marriage above all things. Equally magically the pregnancy cures her of epilepsy. In the story entitled *A Temporary Matter*, Lahiri, with masterly strokes of suggestive simplicity invites our attention to then detestable fact that in New England, marriage is a temporary matter. But the writer doesn't fail to imply that in India, from where the immigrants hail, it is not so. Shukumar and Shobha are in a permanent state of emotional frigidity though they try to brush it aside as a temporary matter. Russell King, John Connell and Paul White rightly argue that for "some groups, migration is not a mere interval between fixed points of departure and arrival, but a mode of being in the world-'migrancy'."⁴

CONCLUSION

Conclusively this may be added that Lahiri's endings do not necessarily round off the story neatly. Instead, they encourage us to contemplate the ordinary lives of others and, by doing so, provide us with a possible moment of insight or revelation about our own lives.

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