



FEMINISM, WOMANHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD IN THE WORKS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

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Abstract:

The present paper aims at identifying the aspects of Indian diasporic womanism in the selected works of Jhumpa Lahiri, a Bengali-American woman writer. It borrows the term "womanism" from Alice Walker and focuses on the three key aspects of womanism: feminism, womanhood and motherhood. The study analyses the three major works of Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of nine short stories, which got her the Pulitzer Prize, *The Namesake*, a novel, which was made into a film, and *The Unaccustomed Earth*, a collection of eight short stories, which won her the Frank O' Conner Prize, and identifies an impressive number of contexts to illustrate each aspect of Indian diasporic womanism.

The study defines Indian diasporic womanism as a composite of feminism, womanhood and motherhood of the immigrant Indian women. It highlights the shades of each key aspect such as double marginalization, patriarchal dominance, ideological pressures, gender inequality, gender discrimination, power relations, sexism, stereotyping, emancipation, sexuality, sacrifice, tolerance, acceptance, social and psychic pressures, forgiveness, courage, protection, possessiveness, love and care, understanding and tension, passive sufferings, displacement, discontinuity, migration, adaptation, transformation, reinvention, cultural resilience, and diasporic consumption, with reference to the selected works of Jhumpa Lahiri. It also defines the term "womanism" and describes its three key aspects: feminism, womanhood and motherhood. It lists and explains the shades of each key aspect and thereby creates a background.

The present paper explores the shades of Indian diasporic womanism with reference to *The Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake* and *The Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri. It borrows the term "womanism" from Alice Walker and focuses on the three key aspects of womanism: feminism, womanhood and motherhood. The study analyses the three major works of Jhumpa Lahiri and identifies an impressive number of contexts to illustrate each aspect of Indian diasporic womanism.

Lahiri is a second-generation immigrant giving a perfect voice to portray the feelings of Indian immigrants. Her history and background resonates in her stories with a sense of autobiography authenticating her characters' feelings and experiences. She shows how the immigrants in their enthusiasm to keep their cultural beliefs and customs alive, gradually imbibe all cultural ways of the host country. But they are unable to become part of the host country as they are identified with the migrant history of their parents and grandparents.

Lahiri makes an impressive exploration of the human mind in varied situations beset in an alien country. In the backdrop of India, America, Boston and Decca she makes her characters come alive creating a universal story of love and happiness teaching the lesson of humility, equality and motivating to preserve the good of the past to face the present challenges. The narrations suggest a positive note of a society where the traditional and the modern world meet asserting the worth of human life. Lahiri with her grace and elegance portrays a human race of maladies to which she does give a cure but she ends with a positive tomorrow.

Lahiri is different from other Indian writers writing in English. Most of the Indian fiction writers writing in English are born and brought up in India, although the writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Jhabvala, Vikram Seth and Salman Rushdie are living either in England or America naturally, her connection with India may be through her parents and grandparents. So her knowledge of India is bound to be confined to the stories from her grandparents, parents, books and newspapers.

Interpreter of Maladies:

Her *Interpreter of Maladies* attempts to interpret the maladies of the human mind. The stories focus on the intercultural miscommunication and conflicts all too often experienced by immigrants and the second generation Indian-Americans. She explores the themes of emotional struggle of love, communication barriers, incompatible relationships, the east-west cultural distinctions, isolation and dislocation and loss of identity. She shifts lines between gender, sexuality and social status within diasporic condition. Whether the character is a homeless woman from India or in the United States, all display the effects of displacement in diaspora.

Lahiri draws heavily on her Indian heritage. She views herself as an interpreter of emotional pain and affliction. She boldly and brilliantly maps the shores of her protagonists' inner worlds, often blurring the lines between the concepts of optimism and pessimism. The characters have been uprooted from the secure life-mode of a traditional set-up, and are struggling to cope with the new environment by learning new strategies and methods in order to provide an alternate life-mode. Such learning has to be lived and experienced at first hand.

Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies reflects the multiple identity of the author-narrator. Lahiri writes her stories with an Indian heart and mind. It is in this conflict where the strength and weakness of her stories lies. Out of nine stories included in the collection, two stories present Indian characters exclusively against the Indian backdrop, locale, characters, superstitions and taboos. The other seven stories are based on the inner landscape of Indians who have settled out of choice or compulsion in Boston or beyond. Most of the characters in her work are immigrant Bengali, living abroad unable to cut off the cord completely, rooted in India, despite their striving to be more than natives of their adopted land. In this process, they are alienated and lost in the wilderness. The trauma of cultural dislocation, an acute sense of loneliness and the pangs of estrangement suffered by Indian immigrants in America are the major maladies Jhumpa Lahiri tries to interpret.

Lahiri has created a niche for herself among the writers of the Indian diaspora through her deft handling of the problems of immigrants in an alien land, their aspirations to soar to great heights and their plans plunging. In her writings one finds the consciousness of the need for regaining the roots in the tradition of India and the nostalgia towards it. The traumatic life of immigrants is depicted with such authenticity because of her own longing to find her belonging in the maze of cultural alienation. She relies on the treasured memories of the homeland to draw symbols of deeper speculative meanings from them. In her stories, Lahiri transmutes the human situations and people to metaphorical meanings where the diaspora psyche unravels the truths of their lives which certainly are no epiphanies but a precisely orchestrated and understated social and cultural turmoil.

According to Brada Williams (451-464), Lahiri's collection offers a balanced representation that helps her reader to establish useful parallelisms and contrasts, and thus realizes the fallacy and danger of proclaiming that all South Asians are the same or that all Americans are the same. For example, the unfaithful husbands of the story entitled "Sexy" find their correlation in the disloyal of Mrs. Das in "The Interpreter of Maladies." Some South Asian kids, like Lilia in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" find it easy to adjust to the American society, while some other, like the Dixit children in "Sexy" feel totally isolated and stigmatized "when waiting for the school bus ... the other children would say 'The Dixits dig shit', under their breath, and then burst into laughter" (IM 95). Some wives, like Mrs. Sen, are unable to feel happy in America: "Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence" (IM 115). On the other hand, others, like Lilia's mother and Mala, in "The Third and Final Continent", eventually manage to adjust and find their place in the host land. Similarly, the collection makes it clear that the same community can be depicted in "A Real Durwan" is rather pejorative. The residents of the building do not hesitate to accuse Boori Ma, who has for years served them loyally and well, of having stolen the basin, and throw her away overnight:

So the residents tossed her bucket and rags, her baskets and reed broom, down the stairwell, past the letter boxes, through the collapsible gate, and into the alley. Then they tossed out Boori Ma. All were eager to begin their search for a real durwan" (IM 82).

However, the Indian village in "The Treatment of Bibi Halder" is given, on the whole, a rather more positive and complimentary treatment. The whole community scolds Bibi's relatives for their cruelty towards her: "To express our indignation we began to take our shopping elsewhere; this provided us with our only revenge" (IM 169); and they all look after Bibi: "At every opportunity we reminded her that we had surrounded her, that she could come to us if she ever needed advice or aid of any kind" (IM 171). Significantly enough, the whole short story is told in the first person plural, which highlights the villagers' unconditional general concern for Bibi. The collection can also be said to rely on circularity to add to this impression of wholeness. The first story in the collection, "A Temporary Matter", deals with the death of a son and the subsequent destruction of a marriage, whereas the final story, "The Third and Final Continent", narrates how a couple eventually manages to adjust to America and understand and love each other while caring for their son and providing for his better future.

The sense of displacement, immigrant experience, lack of communication, diasporic experiences and human maladies are the major themes found in the works of Lahiri. It is obvious that Lahiri's characters represent the embodiment or symbol of a fractured identity. Boori Ma does not have a name because she has lost her identity in order to become a functional durwan doing menial chores. She only earns the nickname 'Boori Ma', which could be said to refer to the whole of homeless women in a similar situation. The groups of women who take care of Bibi Halder have no names. This clearly suggests their helplessness and lack of individuality. Similarly, for Mr. Pirzada, his daughters are not individuals. All seven daughters have names starting with letter 'A', which explains why their father cannot relate their names to their identity and thus fails to distinguish them as individuals. Mrs. Sen does not seem to have an identity of her own either, no individuality other than that of her husband. Her first name is never mentioned, and her actual surname before marriage is no longer hers. She is powerless as an individual; she lives in an alien society and with a husband who is unable to understand her emotional needs and longings. Mrs. Sen, is therefore, a good example of the solitary life of an alienated immigrant. The fact that there is only one Sen in the Boston telephone book, whereas in Calcutta there are hundreds of them, only stresses her deep-rooted sense of loneliness and dislocation. Another protagonist, Miranda, was also torn apart by contradictions. She longs for freedom and affection but is limited by Dev's marital and emotional boundaries. Everybody partakes of these feelings of loneliness and alienation, immigrants and natives alike. Thus Lahiri attempts to interpret and cure the maladies of globalization and diasporic acculturation

by emphasizing the need for openness and care that gives cohesion and links all the stories in her work.

Lahiri explores the lives of the Indians in exile, which often vacillate between the culturally bound roots and the sweeping world they migrated to live in. Mrs. Sen has etched the pressure and stifling forces of modern life when compared to the relatively placid life back home. Lahiri manages to portray beautifully the confusion and despair a young wife feels, away from home, reflecting the pathos of an expatriate Indian. Lahiri poignantly records that there is meaninglessness in interpersonal relationships, sadly within the family; Bibi is able to find a meaningful affirmation within a society. Lahiri's story depicts the three continents and cultures varied in texture and essence. All the characters in her story, caught through the view of an expatriate, exhibit human beings who are gripping with the odds, drifting between two worlds, two cultures and two identities.

"A Temporary Matter" is an illustration of the shades classified under the key aspect "motherhood." Shoba is the mother who has lost her child. She undergoes greater psychic pressure, turns her anger towards her husband, accepts the loss, develops courage to live through the tragedy, forgives her husband, understands the need for a temporary separation from her husband and leaves him with the hint that she will come back. "When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine" brings out a mother in a child. Though the key aspects such as feminism and womanhood are not visible, the third aspect is vibrant in a few shades. Lila's love for Mr Pirzada, whom she is not able to think as a person belonging to a different country, and her understanding of Mr Pirzada's love for his family demonstrate the motherly qualities. "The Interpreter of Maladies" encompasses the shades of all three key aspects: feminism, womanhood and motherhood, which are all exemplified in the characterization of Mina Das.

Lahiri succeeds in bringing out these key aspects in Mina Das's sacrifice, tolerance, adultery, guilt, acceptance, care and understanding of her guilt, situation and people such as her husband, her children, her parents and her 'interpreter of maladies. The character of Boori Ma in "A Real Durwan" can be seen to have the shades of womanhood. She leaves her family back in the country where she feels she belongs to; she lives a life of seclusion. Her acceptance of her own situation and her hope for better future are proof of her maturity and understanding. Truly, she is a real durwan. The story "Sexy" explains the emotional, psychological and social impact of extramarital relationships on its characters. Lahiri focuses on the gender roles in this story, because Dev utilizes the western fetishization of Indian men to his own advantage.

Though cultural clash, broken marriages, culture, tradition and search for identity are the major themes in the story, Lahiri deals mostly with the sexuality of women. She upholds and opposes the stereotypical behaviour of women by bringing out various shades of womanhood in her characterization of women in the story. The experience of Mrs Sen's immigration is markedly different from Mr. Sen. This leads to the argument that, though all women are essentially displaced in the state of patriarchy, displacement itself is a kind of gendered experience. Mrs Sen exhibits the traits of motherhood. Her role as a babysitter attests her motherly qualities though she has no child of her own. Her sacrifice and tolerance for the sake of her husband are obvious from her loud thinking. Of all, she stands of the quality of acceptance and adaptation despite her strong moorings to her life in India, her home.

"This Blessed House" touches on the shades of feminism and womanhood. The tension between a husband and a wife in an alien context is well-presented. The power relations and ideological pressures have been brought upon both the central characters, Twinkle and Sanjeev. Twinkle faces the problems of a typical middle-class Indian woman such as marginalization, patriarchal anarchy, inequality and discrimination. Though there are instances of her emancipation, she is expected to sport a stereotypical feminine behaviour, especially, from her husband. "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" is one story in the collection, which treats all the key aspects in an equal proportion: feminism, womanhood and motherhood. The character of Bibi is fully-fledged in the sense that she struggles against marginalization, patriarchal anarchy, ideological pressures such as the necessity to get married and give birth to children, patiently handles all tough situations, develops unique tolerance and acceptance, overcomes all social and psychic forces and climbs the social ladder confidently. "The Third and the Final Continent" is the strongest expression of the two key aspects, womanhood and motherhood. The characters such as the narrator's mother, Mrs Croft and Mala, his wife, all project variations of the key aspects. The contrast among them is strikingly presented. Yet, the common thread that connects all these three characters is their acceptance of the situations they happen to live in or face, handling the ideological pressures as well as the social and psychic pressures.

Thus Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of stories in *The Interpreter of Maladies* present the different shades of one or more key aspects of feminism, womanhood and motherhood, all marking Indian diasporic womanism. Each story is set in different social situations dealing with different human relationships without the loss of the connectors among them.

Namesake:

Lahiri's *Namesake* is about the generational differences of diasporic community. She also talks about the problems of second generation diaspora after their assimilation in the host culture, discussing the dilemmas, conflicts and confusions which have cropped up in the minds of the young people about their adjustments, adaptations and assimilations in the new country.

In the novel, the mother of the protagonist is an interesting portrayal of transnational feminism. She met her husband, Ashoke, through an arrangement by her parents, but decided, on her own, to marry him and travel

with him to the United States. Before entering her living room to meet him and his parents, she follows an impulse to step into his shoes: “Ashima, unable to resist a sudden and overwhelming urge, stepped into the shoes at her feet” (NS 8). The juxtaposition of Ashima’s desire to explore the new and to extend beyond herself with the arrangement of marriage demonstrates the ability of cultural norms to coexist with freedom. The arranged marriage could be interpreted as entirely incompatible with feminism and freedom, but Lahiri depicts it as a path to freedom through an exploration of new territories.

Though she spends the majority of her life reliant on her husband and children, her personality, wishes and happiness are not sacrificed. She begins working as a librarian when she became dissatisfied in the house, and pushes those around her to do what is best for them (e.g. her husband to take a job in Ohio, her son Gogol to return to work after her husband dies, etc.) rather than look after her. She accepts their love, but does not demand it for her happiness or livelihood. At the conclusion of the novel, Ashima decides to move back to Calcutta to pursue singing, and she feels that the “city that was once home... is now in its own way foreign” (NS 278).

She established herself in a new world, and outgrew the girl she was in her early life. The humanity in her fear is telling of her battle with the loneliness of independence, exemplifying her bravery through the experience of a type of fear only brought about from pure and absolute freedom.

Though the central character of the novel is Gogol Ganguli, the women characters such as Ashima, Houshumi and Maxine are sketched so elaborately that the shades of the key aspects of Indian diasporic womanism – feminism, womanhood and motherhood – have been drawn in detail. The characterization of Ashima best represents the effects of double marginalization, patriarchal dominance, gender inequality and discrimination, and stereotypical feminine behaviour.

Houshumi plays an unconventional role. She represents a strong womanhood caring nothing the pressures - patriarchal, ideological, social and psychic. She chooses her own way to emancipate herself from the pressures brought upon her by various forces such as family, friendship, identity and culture. Maxine, Gogol’s first love, too comes close to the resemblance of the character of Houshumi but with restraint. Of all the women characters, the one to represent motherhood is Ashima. Her anxiety over adaptation to the new land after giving birth to her child attests her motherly traits. She soon overcomes the difficulty of adjusting to the new culture mainly for the sake of her son, Gogol.

The Unaccustomed Earth:

In the second collection of short stories, *The Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri describes the evolution of an Indian in an alien land. “*The Unaccustomed Earth*” clearly illustrates the power of Jhumpa Lahiri’s writing, her sense of community and ability to create an imagined land, as joyous and painful as life. She presents the efforts of three generations of a Bengali family to take deep roots in America being the unaccustomed Earth. All the stories focus on the members of Bengali families living in England or America. All are the richly detailed portraits of the complexity of these families’ lives; all deal with creating lives, loves, identities in the wake of radical disruptions. The eight stories in *The Unaccustomed Earth* have in them emotional wisdom weightier than in her first collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies*.”

In the accomplished title story, a widower father visits his daughter, Ruma, who has recently moved to Seattle with her American husband and her three year old son. His daughter’s upbringing in a different country, in a new social and cultural setup, her education, her marriage to an American and all influence the formation of her identity and role. Her father’s scheduled visit to her place after her mother’s death puts her in a dilemma whether she should ask her father to stay with them as a responsible daughter.

On the other hand, if she does not ask him to stay with her, it would make her feel guilty. She finds herself in a discrepant position or a ‘liminal’ position where there is a continuous confrontation between the native culture and the host country culture. There always existed a difference of opinion between them. Though her mother also could not agree with her on her decision to marry Adam, she had told her “You are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian that is the bottom line” (UE 26).

Ruma reconnects with her father asking him to move in with her family. Though the decision to ask her father to stay with her was in her own selfish interests, as in her father’s company she finds her son Aakash more cultured, civilized, calmer and cooler. He had developed a liking for Bengali food and language. Ruma’s decision and behavior point towards an inherent desire and willingness of diaspora to accept the ethos of inter culturalism. They want to teach their siblings the social and cultural values of both the countries. The readiness of “new migrants” to negotiate at various social, historical and cultural fronts is the consequence of the globalization. Ruma’s father grows various plants in Ruma’s house in Seattle; his act reinforces the theme of the book and points out towards a possibility of establishment of diasporic people in this global and multicultural world.

In “Hell – Heaven” Lahiri looks at the psyche of a married woman in an alien land through Aparna who falls in love with Pranab kaku, a Bengali man much younger to her. Both of them shared common interest and hobbies and Pranab filled the space in her life and she gave him the companionship which her husband failed to provide her. Lahiri shares the pain, agony and loneliness of these diasporic women in an alien country. These women who have to spend their time waiting for their husbands to return from the office do not have any

company. Their cultural ties are broken and they feel desperate and lonely. The world of Aparna's husband is summed up: "He was wedded to his work, his research, and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate" (UE 65).

In the next story "A Choice of Accommodations," Amit, a Bengali man married to an American woman, goes to attend the wedding of his school mate and finds his wife secretly obsessing about the persisting psychic hold of childhood romance on her husband. This thought torments her and she cannot have a congenial and cordial relationship with her husband. The encounter between two cultures i.e. eastern and western constructs a hybrid culture where both the parties negotiate and interact to reframe and restructure ethnic essentialism, nationalism and fundamentalism.

Three interconnected stories can be read independently, but work better as they are designed: as a triptych telling the story of Hema and Kaushik. The first story focuses on their meeting as children; the second follows Kaushik when his father remarries; the third focuses on their reunion as adults. It also details the relationship of a Bengali-American boy and girl whose lives weave in and out of each other's, over a period of years, almost like an inescapable destiny, ending ultimately in tragedy.

The prime objective of Lahiri in her *Unaccustomed Earth* is to map out the variants of the psyche of the second generation immigrants. Each character in the collection of short stories demonstrates their prejudices on their displacement and the problems they face in the process of acculturation. The main women characters of these eight short stories include Ruma, Bagchi and Ruma's mother in "The Unaccustomed Earth," Aparna in "Hell-Heaven," Megan and Deborah in "A Choice of Accommodation," Sudha in "Only Goodness," Sangeeta in "Nobody's Business," Hema, Hema's mother, Kausik's mother, Chitra and Usha in the second part of *The Unaccustomed Earth* which has three stories: "Once in a Life Time," "Year's End" and "Going Ashore." They all represent different proportions the key aspects of Indian diasporic womanism: feminism, womanhood and motherhood. Most of them sideline the ideological pressures the patriarchal anarchy has brought upon them. The characters such as Ruma, Megan, Sangeeta and Chitra oppose these patriarchal pressures in the way which does not interfere into their other roles such as wife and mother. However, Bagchi and Hema feel bold and liberated fully to go whatever the way they like, and as a result, they encounter numerous problems. Lahiri boldly delineates the sexuality of these women such as Megan and Hema. She also explicitly presents the fornication and the adultery of her women characters. This helps her delineate the sexuality of her women character and their disrespect for the pressures social, psychic and ideological.

Lahiri draws the portraits of women. Though in her short stories the characters are not entirely developed, the women she writes about are relatable and realistic. Her characters suffer emotional complexities that most authors cannot capture. Her writing style allows for difficult topics of conversation such as miscarriages, divorce, immigration and cultural identity crises. She skilfully varies the unfolding of her stories from different viewpoints. Lahiri in the first story of the *Unaccustomed Earth*, "Once In A Lifetime," uses the first-person narrative. In the second story "The Year's End" she gives the role of narrator to Kaushik. The third story "Going Ashore" reverts back to third-person narration. This kind of variation helps her achieve a presentation of crises from different points of view.

The *Namesake*, Ashima respects and embraces women who differ from cultural norms. She accepts her daughter Sonia who married a white man. Ashima's flexibility, strength and openness to change prove her character to be tightly knitted threads of feminism, womanhood and motherhood, through which Lahiri examines societal constructs and their impact on the actions of women.

Lahiri is able to depict clashing cultures and their fusion beautifully, from a feminine standpoint. The overarching themes of motherhood and personal discovery in Lahiri's writing, combined with her observations regarding the dichotomies between American and Bengali lifestyles shed light on the intersections of humanity and womanhood across societies.

The examination of feminism in literature is a rather intriguing aspect of examining the writing of different cultures. Western ideals of womanhood and feminism can differ from that of African and Asian cultures, and thus the ways in which women assert themselves as strong individuals can differ as well. A prime example of this transnational feminism can be found in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. Her female characters often find themselves isolated and alone in a new country, or even alone within a marriage or relationship.

The *Namesake* holds many examples of these quietly empowered and independent women. The female characters in Lahiri's writing receive much of their strength from motherhood, and are depicted largely as mothering figures to the men in their lives as well as to their children. In this way, they possess an understated power that is cognizant of both Western strength and internationally diverse femininity.

Of all the three aspects, motherhood has received the most important emphasis from Lahiri. Her characters as mothers such as Shoba, Ruma, Ruma's mother, Boori Ma, Ashimi and Sudha are more impressive than any other women characters. It is the mothers of the first generation of immigrants who are portrayed in a brighter light than those of the second generation of immigrants.

Conclusion:

Thus the works of Jhumpa Lahiri analyze the experiences, shocks and surprises which are encountered by Indian women immigrants and are marked by an undercurrent of pathos in all the shades of the three key aspects of Indian diasporic womanism: feminism, womanhood and motherhood.

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