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A Complex Identarian Journey Away from English: The Case of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

Since her arrival on the global literary scene in 1999, Jhumpa Lahiri remained in the league of the metaphorical postmodern[1], postcolonial[2], transnational[3] and diasporic writers' club. Though, in her works, she draws attention to the concepts of hybrid identities[4], however, she also found herself increasingly confined within this identity. This realisation amongst others made her wonder if 'diasporic transnationalism'[5] was set aside for writers with a foreign origin. In 2015, Lahiri shocked her readers by proclaiming in a New Yorker piece called "Teach Yourself Italian" that she was no longer reading in English and was progressively trying to write in a foreign language, Italian. In the process, she was probably trying to break free from the limiting framework of the 'confining identity'. In this paper, I examine the New Yorker piece to assess if, in the act of deliberate movement, she managed to escape the confines of her hyphenated literary identity.

Keywords: translocation, diaspora, hyphenated identity, confined, rebellion.

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> For it is a fact that everywhere in the United States, which is, after all, an immigrant society made up of many Africans and Asians as well as Europeans, universities have finally had to deal with non-Western societies, with the literature, history, and particular concerns of women, various nationalities, and minorities; and with unconventional, hitherto untaught subjects such as popular culture, mass communications and film, and oral history. In addition, a whole slew of controversial political issues like race, gender, imperialism, war, and slavery have found their way into lectures and seminars (Said366-67).

There is literary stardom[6] to Jhumpa Lahiri that is matched only by a few. In 1999, when she arrived at the global literary scene winning the Pulitzer Prize with her debut collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, she had already been given the ticket to the metaphorical postmodern, postcolonial, transnational and diasporic writers' club. Until 2013, she kept renewing this ticket, if the metaphor may be stretched, with every book of fiction and non-fiction writing. Such star personae are shaped as much by their skills as by the context within which they emerge. In the case of Lahiri, she came into limelight at a time when brown history and poetics were gaining ground across North America and the global north. Also at the time of her debut with *Interpreter of Maladies,* global history was at the brink of a series of interconnected massive transformations. Words such as 'globalization', 'liberalization' and 'multiple identities' were being discussed, analyzed and criticized across disciplines and in the space of work like never before. Within academia and publishing, as Edward Said writes in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, a strong counter impulse to accommodate North America's diverse immigrant realities had also been mounted. With it also came a resistance to these divergent realities. Reactionary critics and academics lobbied against diversity politics, fearing it for its "fractious" attitude towards the US nation-state. Among the "fractious" voices was also a growing advocacy to mainstream the realities of women across class, race, ethnicity, religion and culture. In such a situation, then, it wasn't unusual for the North American publishing sector to identify an American Indian voice and hail it as representative of the immigrant, diasporic experience.

The immigrant experience, as recreated by Lahiri in her fiction and non-fiction works, has a few distinct characteristics that can be read within the larger poetics of postmodern, postcolonial, diaspora literature. The concept of "estrangement" and "alienation" that she works with, for instance, occupies a leading position in the larger poetics. "My mother tongue,

Bengali, is foreign in America. When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign, you can feel a continuous sense of estrangement," says Lahiri in her article "Teach Yourself Italian". Edward Said, the grand maestro of the immigrant and exile experience, is among the few who drew attention to the poetics identifying it as a vital source of alternative intellectualism that voiced the existence of diverse "alien" realities. (Said 366-67).

Lahiri engages with the experience of the alien using the lens of "estrangement". Through it, the familiar is rendered unfamiliar and vice versa. In her works, the first-generation immigrant characters are often seen trapped in the desire to develop a complex lifestyle vocabulary to keep the left behind, native home, alive in the adopted land. In *The Namesake*, the character of Ashima, who is deeply attached to her roots in Calcutta is a good example. Such characters recreate "alien" experiences in the adopted land and hold on to alienation they feel in the country of adoption. Lahiri's second-generation immigrant characters, on the other hand, are often caught in the illusion of the home that their parents indulge in, but which is largely unfamiliar or alien to them. Their own desire leans towards finding a sense of belonging in their adopted home even as they make space for holding the illusion of their parents. In the same novel, the character of Gogol, who is often confused by his mother Ashima's reveries and remembering, is exemplary. His alienation is borne out of a clash between his mother's maladjustment and his awareness of his ethnic difference from the mainstream. In this clash of desires and alienations felt by the two generations, confusion and dislocation occur both within the interior lives of characters and in the ways, they relate with each other and with their environment. This class and confusion become the bedrock on which almost all Lahiri's fiction works rest.

There is yet another dynamic that characterizes the works of Lahiri that may have been the legitimate reason why she found herself the diasporic literary star of 1999. She was among the few who were successfully able to separate the upwardly mobile Bengali immigrant man's experience from the woman's experience. The Bengali immigrant man, who in her works either appears as the protagonist or the father of the protagonist, is often someone who can be pinned as the ambitious Indian man of the 1960s, who had migrated to the US as part of what was called the "brain drain". However, the wife that the immigrant man leads into the US is often portrayed as a young house-wife who feels uprooted from her home in India. Consequently, she finds it hard to adjust in the US. Her conjugal life is marked by a deep sense of alienation which she infects her home and children with. In the *New Yorker* essay, "Teach Yourself Italian", Lahiri registers the struggle of this woman in recognizing the rebellion her mother mounts:

> I am the daughter of a mother who would never change. In the United States, she continued, as far as possible, to dress, behave, eat, think, live as if she had never left India, Calcutta. The refusal to modify herself, her habits and her attitudes was her strategy for resisting American culture, for fighting it, for maintaining her identity. Becoming or even resembling an American would have meant total defeat." (Lahiri)

The language of her mother, ironically, is foreign to her, and she confesses her lack of fluency, confidence, and authority in Bengali, "I've always perceived a disjunction between it and me. As a result, I consider my mother tongue, paradoxically, a foreign language" ("Teach Yourself Italian"). It isn't pronounced in so many words, but a reader may find that in the act of "othering" the language, Bengali, Lahiri also gives space to the feelings of guilt and shame associated with assimilation, "When I spoke English, I felt I wasn't completely their child anymore, but the child of another language" (Qtd.in Ghoshal, "Jhumpa Lahiri: A Writer Without A Real Language").

Yet, in leaving false nostalgia behind, she also makes space for her own reality to thrive. In her world of fiction, where Lahiri seems to have built herself a sanctuary to "escape to", she allows this dynamic between the second-generation child and the first-generation parent to play out with great subtlety and compassionate sympathy. In *The Namesake,* Gogol, the child, and Ashima, the mother, are locked in a transformative dialogue with each other. Gogol, who is unable to connect with his parents', especially Ashima's, nostalgia for Calcutta at the beginning of the book, develops a slow recognition and acceptance of her state of "exile" in the US, and Ashima, as the novel comes to an end, finds herself more in her skin and comfortable in her Boston home. Sharply contrasted to this reconciliation is the lack of it that has been explored in the story, "A Temporary Matter", in *Interpreter of Maladies.* In this story about the dynamics between a couple, Shukumar and Shoba, who are both first-generation immigrants, and the loss of their baby early in the narrative is the hinge on which alienation and rejection have been woven. The couple attempts to deal with their loss and manage a reconciliation with their tragedy. The woman plays out her passive rejection of the conjugal life in the far shores while the man plays out the role of being blind to the alienation of the woman. As Shoba walks out of the marriage, in the end, it is clear how distinctly different her sense of loss is. She did not just lose a child but also a possibility of feeling connected to the new land!

Lahiri, who, until 2013, examined and re-examined these intergenerational and interpersonal dynamic relationships and how each generation differentially perceived home,

language and belongingness, found herself trapped in the expectations of constantly reworking these relationships with vitally new perspectives. *The Financial Times* while reviewing *The Lowland* did not hold back on highlighting Lahiri's excessively recognizable literary decorations:

> All of these intellectually listless contradictories share the novel's pages with those tiny ants and the softness of kisses and many other maddeningly meticulous, pathologically decorous reflections on memory and identity and tea and biscuits and journeying and jasmine-picking and Googling. Booker or not, *The Lowland* is awash with Lahirical excess. (Boyagoda)

The Guardian article, which also unfavourably reviewed her "Writing in Italian", portrays Lahiri's dual tentativeness as an all too recognizable recipe for crises:

> There really are problems with winning the Pulitzer prize for your first book: as Jhumpa Lahiri did for *Interpreter of Maladies*. … You have always been anxious that you can't deliver a satisfactory account of yourself, either in your Bengali-speaking home or in anglophone America outside it. In your childhood, making up stories seemed innocent and free, an escape; but as you grew up you learned that fiction was fraught with the same old doubt. Whose stories; and for what audience?"

Locating Lahiri's oeuvre within the hyphenated tradition, connecting how she perceived and performed the act of writing within its expectations to how her performance and writing were received by her American and diaspora readership we find that with each new writing in English, Lahiri's experience of communicating with a wide readership becomes entrenched in the degree of satisfaction she affords her readers. It creates in her a growing fear of failing everyone including herself. And as she finds herself inured to the desires of her readers, she also begins to feel a loss of joy in writing and communicating. In an interview in 2017 with Francesca Pellas of *LitHub,* she shared her discomfort with this expectation and how that had slowly begun limiting the joy of writing for her (Lahiri, 2017). Within this fraught relationship between a writer and her readership, a growing sense of burden for the former often leads to a slow receding back to recover writerly impulse. In the case of Lahiri, however, that impulse seems to be that of flight from the language itself.

In order to understand Lahiri's flight and as to whether she manages to escape the confines of her hyphenated literary identity, it is equally important to understand her multifaceted burden. Jhumpa Lahiri, the daughter of the "seeker"[7] father and "nostalgic" mother, finds herself in the double bind when negotiating her complex identity:

> For me, it was always a question of allegiance, of choice. I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers, and the expectations I placed on myself to fit into American society. … I felt that I led two very separate lives. (College 2021)

No wonder in her stories and the novel, *The Namesake*, she finds herself replicating their desires and her own: "Ashoke and Ashima created their own circle of immigrant Bengalis and they all came from Calcutta and for this reason only they are friends. The husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers. The wives homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice." (Lahiri 38) And the child in this family grows in a space of tentative duality: "Ashima teaches Gogol 'to memorize a four-line children poem by Tagore, names of deities at the same time when she goes to sleep in the afternoon, she switches the television to channel -2 and tells Gogol to watch 'sesame street' and the electronic company "in order to keep up with the English, he uses at nursery school" (Lahiri 54). The tyranny of this experience leaves the second-generation immigrant in Lahiri's works in a constant state of being two things at the same time, a state she has represented often in her writing, a state that finally compels her to leave and reinvent herself in a new language. But what is the precise agony of this state that Lahiri is desperate to escape?

I will now segue into analyzing "Teach Yourself Italian", teasing out from within it the strands of self-claimed rebellion and self-imposed exile from the English language. My effort will be to examine if the poetics of rebellion and exile, appropriated by Lahiri, gave her the scope to develop as a writer.In "Teach Yourself Italian" she writes: "Why am I fleeing? What is pursuing me? Who wants to restrain me? The most obvious answer is, the English language. But I think it's not so much English in itself as everything the language has symbolized for me." She goes on to talk about how the language created in her an unsure, insecure writer, exhausted by a need to express and be understood. At the same time one who constantly found herself in a counterfeit space, where her intention and expression were at cross-purposes with the demands of the language's diverse audience.

In this confessional essay, Lahiri's exasperation with the language in which she found fame after years of complex identity-related conflict and resistance is tell-tale of the hyphenated binds that immigrant writers experience. Such a bind and the experience of chokehold seem to have compelled Lahiri to escape to another language. In Italian, she says she finally feels like she is exercising a choice she had not received with either Bengali or

English. She had felt compelled to master Bengali by her mother but seemed to have failed at it, and with English too, which she had to master to find her space in the American intellectual history, she was thrown into the deep waters of the complex history of colonialism within which the language functions. In Italian, she finds herself free from these identarian crises as also from the hauntings of imagined immigrant characters and their trajectories that pursued her in English.

Of reading in Italian, Lahiri declares: "I believe that reading in a foreign language is the most intimate way of reading." And again, "I read as I did when I was a girl. Thus, as an adult, as a writer, I rediscover the pleasure of reading." From mastering the art of reading, the writer transitions into inviting a new sensibility to inspire writing, a transition that she heralds as a metamorphosis of sorts:

> A new language is almost a new life, grammar and syntax recast you, you slip into another logic and another sensibility." However, she recognizes that this transformation will not receive universal acceptance: "A transformation, especially one that is deliberately sought, is often perceived as something disloyal, threatening. I am the daughterof a mother who would never change. ("Teach Yourself Italian")

The escape then remains deeply tied to the complex nature of the identity being escaped from. The chainmail of a hyphenated writerly existence with accountability to a diverse cross-section of people, a pre-life in fame, a pre-life in English- the language of anglophone North America that constantly judges her immigrant experience, and finally, a pre-life in rejecting Bengali- the language that despite her mother's deep nostalgia, does not inspire either devotion or a sense of belonging in her. In Italian, she forcefully locates herself, joining the linguistic stream with the complete knowledge and acceptance that here she will neither belong nor feel embarrassed for not belonging, and yet within it, she can enjoy the deepest desires of her writerly personality, the desire to master a language to communicate within it. ("Teach Yourself Italian")

Lahiri makes another remarkable claim to Italian in the essay. She calls it the 'protective bark' that defends her from intrusions of varied kinds. These intrusions could include: demands of her origin represented by her mother, the demands of the English readership in the US, the demands of performing a complex identarian reality into "a delicate prose", the demands of fame and the demands of the post-colonial, transatlantic canon. To examine her relationship with Italian and to understand how that allows her to productively

escape these demands and carve a new path, let us look at the myth she designs for herself and for the Italian language.

She imagines herself to be the wood nymph, Daphne, who is escaping from the Roman god, Apollo, a figure that may represent the complex demands of both literary canon and the identities. Just as Daphne runs into the wood and prays to the wood sprite, her father, to protect her from the sun god, Lahiri runs into the complex journey of learning the new language, hoping that it will hold space for her. Just as the sprite in the myth then invokes a tree in the wood to assimilate and transform Daphne, in the metaphorical world of Lahiri, Italian is that tree that rescues her from the chokehold of fame and transnational identity politics, to finally allow her the time to meditate on the impulse to write. But the freedom comes with a price that Lahiri is willing to pay:

> As a writer I can demolish myself, I can reconstruct myself. I can join words together and work on sentences without ever being considered an expert. I'm bound to fail when I write in Italian, but, unlike my sense of failure in the past, this doesn't torment or grieve me. ("Teach Yourself Italian")

What inspires the author then is the freedom to communicate in a new language which she can call her own. She wants to experience the sensations of child-like discovery, mutation and growth in the language which was not possible in English or Bengali. In the new language, there is an inexorable sense of release from the anxieties of carrying the identarian burdens, "Oddly, I feel more protected when I write in Italian, even though I'm also more exposed. … I am, in Italian, a tougher, freer writer, who, taking root again, grows in a different way" ("Teach Yourself Italian"). It is the feeling of freedom that promises to the writer and her new readers a transformative experience. Currently, though, the promise is too new for investigations. Only when her oeuvre in Italian grows, can we truly assess the possibility that migration to another language offered to her, and what she may be able to achieve.

Conclusions

As is with Lahiri's diasporic counterparts, the question of the self and the anxieties associated with identity, feelings of nostalgia and uprootedness, and often times guilt appear in diaspora literature, albeit its varied expressions. Hence, Lahiri's claims to Italian as a medium of emancipation and her escape plan from the confines of her diasporic identity and expectations remain suspect and is rooted in the deeper anxieties of identity and

belongingness entrenched in her being a diaspora writer. The question of if one will ever be at ease with the diaspora identity remains

Notes

1."**Postmodernism,** also spelled **post-modernism**, in Western philosophy, a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power." (Duignan, n.d.)

2. "**Postcolonialism,** the historical period or state of affairs representing the aftermath of Westerncolonialism; the term can also be used to describe the concurrent project to reclaim and rethink the history and agency of people subordinated under various forms of imperialism. Postcolonialism signals a possible future of overcoming colonialism, yet new forms of domination or subordination can come in the wake of such changes, including new forms of global empire. Postcolonialism should not be confused with the claim that the world we live in now is actually devoid of colonialism." (Ivison, n.d.)

3. **Transnationalism** includes allegiance to more than one identity, it allows for expression and manifestation of multiple identities rather than one dictated by a singular nation-state. Transnationalism manifested as a result of widespread global migration sped by economic and political exigencies.

4. Homi Bhabha brought the concept of hybridity to discourses on postcolonial and diasporic studies identifying it as a "third space" or an in-between space for the intermingling of two cultures or more.

5. A body of work framed by a theme, in this case, transnational, postcolonial immigrant writing.

6. Jhumpa Lahiri's discomfort with her instant fame with her first book of short stories that won her the Booker is all too well known in the literary circles.

7. Sujharitha quotes S K Sareen where he divided the Indian Diaspora into four major movements, "(i) the indentured labour that built for the empire in South Asia and the West Indies; (ii) the **seekers** who went mainly to the West in search of security, freedom, or identity; (iii) the aspirants who went again to the West in search of opportunities (money); and (iv) the re-migrants who, for self-preservation had to move from where they had arrived from India to other a locale such as the Ugandans to UK and USA and the Fijians to Australia."

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