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# Mapping the Psychological Landscape of the Two Generations of Indian Diaspora in US through the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri

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## Abstract

Every diasporic study or displacement theory inadvertently leads through an analysis and understanding of its governing forces *viz* socio-economic factors, culture, milieu etc. so as to arrive at any recognizable pattern of the given diasporic consciousness.

The first generation Indian diasporic sensibilities, governed majorly by the strong undercurrents of culture and traditions, stick to the natal bonds and cultural identity in foreign lands. These culture-preservation efforts are tested and challenged on several fronts externally. Ironically, the biggest threat is posed by internal agents, the second generation, who being culturally hybridized, find themselves torn between two sensibilities. Intrinsically attached to the American mainstream, they take only peripheral interest in reinforcing the ties with their roots.

The novels of the internationally acclaimed writer of the Indian origin, Jhumpa Lahiri, traverse through the psychological landscape of the first and second generation Indian immigrants in USA mapping significantly the boundaries and distances between the both. This study makes an attempt to look through Lahiri's works at the paradigm shift between the two generations, the first generation with its 'living within the walls' approach and second generation with its unfixed values. The paper also analyzes the set of 'C's'- conflicts, clashes, complexities and compromises, with a view to present the dialectics or the process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis involved in the Indian diasporic reality.

**Key Words-** Acculturation, Deculturation, Hyphenated Identity, Hybridization, Paradox of Otherness, Breaking the Stereotypes

*“Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,  
Who never to himself hath said,  
This is my own, my native land!”*  
“The Lay of the Last Minstrel” by Sir Walter Scott

## 1 Introduction

Over the past two centuries, India has achieved, arguably the world's most diverse and complex migration histories, forming the Modern Indian Diaspora. Spread across all 6 continents and 125 countries, the Indian diaspora is estimated to number around 30 million. For the purpose of easy classification it is often divided into 3 subsets:

*The Old Diaspora* - 1.5 million Indians had been shipped to colonies in the Caribbean, Africa and Asia for cheap labour; today the Old Diaspora consists of 60% of the Indian diaspora: 18 million

*The New Diaspora* - consists of migrants who left India in large numbers from the mid 60s onwards – primarily to developed countries like the UK, US, Canada, Australia and Western Europe. Around 1900, there were less than a thousand Indians in both the UK and the United States. By World War II, the number had grown to around 6,000 in each country. US, UK and Canadian census data from 2010 estimates that the Indian diaspora grew to 3 million in the

US, 1.5 million in the UK, and 1 million in Canada; a twentyfold increase in half a century. Today, we are the fourth largest immigrant group in the United States after the Mexicans, Filipinos, and Chinese.

*The Gulf Diaspora* - The most recent development of the Indian Diaspora is the Gulf Diaspora. The 1970s oil boom in the Middle East ended up triggering significant migration from India to the Persian Gulf - approximately 3.75 million.

In the US, though Indian diaspora is less than 1% of the US population, Indians account for well over 5% of the scientists, engineers, and software specialists; and almost 10% of all the doctors. Their median household income is almost double that of the overall average of the United States.

An increasing number of Indian writers of the diaspora have won high recognition for their writings and made a place for themselves on the literary map of the world. Some names that stand out are - V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, M.G. Vassanji, Shani Mootoo, Bharati Mukherjee, David Dabydeen, Rohinton Mistry, Hanif Kureishi, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri. Among these are writers who were born and brought up in India and migrated subsequently, those who were born in the US or UK and brought up by their migrant parents as well as those who migrated from other continents to US, Canada and UK but whose parents are / were of Indian origin. All of them make up the rich and complex canvas of Indian diasporic writers.

The Indian born writers carry along with them the huge emotional baggage of strong memories of their native land, and experiences of their formative years in India, whereas those born abroad experience the culture of their parents and predecessors through what they inherit and learn from them. Both generations experience the cultural complexities of their situations and are often subjected to the struggle and trauma of negotiating cultures in order to find their equilibrium. The consequent process of conflict and adjustment also plays a pivotal role in defining their relationship with each other.

The deep-seated culture, ideology and value system of Indian diasporic community remain in a state of constant flux once they come in contact with alien socio-cultural forces. Such cross-cultural encounters impact their progeny more powerfully than themselves, and inevitably result in multi-level revelations. These experiences, though varying in nature and degree generation wise, are felt invariably by all, and are responsible for the emergence of a distinct diasporic sensibility, that differs from generation to generation. The differences in the culture of the native and adopted country consequence in situations of conflict, clashes, complexities and compromise, which provide the background for this analysis and interpretation of Indian diasporic consciousness, specifically in the context of America where presently the Indian diasporic population is close to 2.25 million.

This study attempts to examine the issues and conflicts faced by both first and second generation Indian immigrants to America while negotiating cultures, as depicted in the works of the widely acclaimed and awarded writer of Indian origin, Jhumpa Lahiri. Born in London, Lahiri moved to Rhode Island as a young child with her Bengali parents. Her mother was a potent influence in her growing years. Although her parents have lived in the United States for more than thirty years, Lahiri observes that her parents retain “a sense of emotional exile” and the author admits that she herself grew up with “conflicting expectations...to be Indian by Indians and American by Americans.” Lahiri has the uncanny ability to convey the oldest cultural conflicts in the most immediate fashion. Within the limited canvas of mostly Bengali and sometimes non-Bengali Indian immigrants and a few native American characters, she creates stories and situations of family relationships and tensions, love and intrigue, alienation and assimilation, with a keen cultural sensibility.

Lahiri's fiction is autobiographical and frequently draws upon her own experiences 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 the nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behavior.

The diasporic consciousness of the writer emerges forcefully through the several voices of her first generation characters who contend with conflicting emotions of elation at the good fortune of being able to pursue their dreams in America, the land of opportunities, and a deep sense of loss of the warmth and comfort of their effusive, pulsating, native land India. Their children and grandchildren, however, fail to understand the nostalgia and the deep yearning for the homeland experienced by them, more so, because all of them had voluntarily chosen to migrate to the US, and yet continue to live emotionally in the land of their birth. The struggle to conserve one's cultural identity in the process of trying to fit in with popular culture and lifestyle forms the background for most of the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri.

## **2 Identity Crisis**

One of the many challenges faced by the first generation Indian diasporic community is that of identity erosion that happens not just due to invasion of external factors but also due to undermining internal agents. This realization entails the vigorous efforts to relocate and re-establish this endangered identity and this often becomes the primary and painful enterprise for many.

Within the field of various branches of studies and discourses, these shifted people acquire newer identities, labels and elaborations – transnational, diaspora, expatriates, hyphenated immigrants and even dislocated. All these terms inherently contain the sense of 'otherness' which does not allow them to ever forget their divided and fractured identities, their 'in-betweenness,' and displacement. The sense of dislocation manifests in various outward responses like 'ghettoisation' i.e. seeking one's own community for neighborhood, celebrating Indian festivals and other occasions with greater traditional fervor, imposing the native customs and practices on the children or seeking ways to reinforce and reinstate one's native allegiances more strongly. There is enhanced nationalism and heightened patriotism towards one's roots along with the awakened consciousness of upholding the self-hood.

For the first generation, past (home land) and present (adopted land) signify the imaginary and the real. The 'self' keeps developing while negotiating with the present. According to Professor Jasbir Jain,

The condition of isolation and separation, the state of schizophrenia and frustration provides a background for a sense of 'self'...

This self-hood presents itself as a major hindrance for the first generation in the process of assimilation, acculturation or adaptation.

The sense of self-preservation and identity crisis may also be seen in the second generation but in a different manner and degree. For them there is no difference between their past and present, and they have only one home - America. The practices and conventions of their 'homeland' come naturally to them and they have lesser problem with the hyphenated identity of American-Indian. Plurality is the reality of second generation and for many of them the primary pursuit is to strike a difficult balance between their inherited and adopted identity. Most of them come up in an Indian environment in their homes where Indian food, festivals and rituals are practiced by their parents. Once they get exposed to American schooling and peers during their social interactions with them they become excessively conscious of the differences between their own lifestyle, priorities and preoccupations from that of their peers.

In most cases they struggle to cope and sometimes to snap off the familial connect with Indian genes and way of life in which they have been nurtured in their early years. On the whole their relatability with America is much more natural and stronger than with India.

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* celebrates the cultural hybridity resulting from globalization and the interconnectedness of the modern world and rethinks the conventional immigrant's experience. Lahiri is aware of the existing problem of cultural diversity in the multicultural United States, and she argues that the struggle to grasp a transnational identity becomes an urgent issue for immigrants in this environment. While she represents Gogol as someone who is confused about his identity, she also presents Gogol as a prototypical transnational agent who lives between two different worlds with the possibility of creating multiplicity of identities.

The very title of the novel *Namesake* serves as the metaphor of the protagonist's quest for identity. The entire novel is permeated with his struggle to come to terms with his name of affection, his pet name, Gogol. In order to gain general acceptance and have his own name different from the one kept by his family, he legally acquires a good name of his choice - Nikhil. However, he has to perpetually live with his dual identities in America as his family, especially mother refuses to acknowledge his good name. His inability to acquire a separate American identity by shunning the Indian one formulates the dilemma of his life and represents the predicament of the entire second generation in general.

In almost every story of *Interpreter of Maladies*, there is an emotional trade-off when moving to a new land. Each character in this collection wrestles with identity, whether newly displaced or descended from immigrants. There is a longing felt for the place of one's birth, a fear of losing one's culture and anxiety about not being accepted.

### **3 Alienation and Assimilation**

Nostalgia, memories, exile, shared history, sense of loss and uprootedness are few such elements that afflict first generation Indians potently and result in cultural alienation followed by 'living with the wall' tendency. They seek their own Indian or even caste specific fraternity and sharing the past gives them solace. Efforts are made to assimilate and absorb the reality, to be a part of the common order and norm by following the American lifestyle, observing the common code of conduct and, most importantly, shunning the conservative Indian outlook so as to fit in with the liberal American mainstream life. However, the feeling of being an outcaste and different overpowers all these attempts at assimilation rendering them feeble and insufficient.

Alienation of Ashima in *The Namesake* is complete in the sense that she experiences all the variants of the term – powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, cultural estrangement and self-estrangement.

Ashima feels alienated in the suburbs; this alienation of being a foreigner is compared to "a sort of lifelong pregnancy," because it is "a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts... something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect." (Lahiri 2003:49)

In another of Lahiri's short-story 'Only Goodness' in *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri succinctly delineates the picture of parents' alienation and children's outlook on their agony. Sudha says,

Her parents were aware that they faced a sentence of being foreign...Sudha regarded her parents' separation from India as an ailment that ebbed and flowed like a cancer. Rahul was impermeable to that aspect of their lives. "No one dragged them here," he would say, Baba

left India to get rich, and Ma married him because she had nothing else to do. (Lahiri 2008:138)

The immigrant experience takes several forms and shades in *Interpreter of Maladies*. For some characters, like the narrator of 'The Third and Final Continent,' the transition to a new life is challenging but smooth. The narrator looks forward to the opportunity that the new country can afford. In 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,' Lilia's parents move to America which affords them a wealth of opportunity not open to them in India, but the price is paid by Lilia in terms of connection to her culture. In 'Mrs. Sen,' the protagonist flatly refuses to assimilate. For her, "everything" is in India and there is no reason to attempt to make a life in her new home.

There is a reversal of situation in the case of second generation. The idea of India as homeland, roots and history of first generation is nothing more than a figment of imagination, a childhood narrative or even a myth. America is their reality, their place of activity and the soil that sustains and nourishes them. The natural outcome is hybridity, a blend of Indian origin with western mindset. It's a situation where they show receding inclination towards the unknown – their parents' culture – and increasing towards the known – American which envelops them as air. Their attempts to submerge in mainstream are more pronounced, effortless and natural as they are able to relate naturally with America.

The sense of loss, separation and alienation as opposed to their parents is quite negligible in the second generation that gets caught in the dynamics of the changing world around them. Their set of problems is very different as they have to grapple with racial discrimination, ethnicity, marginalization and cultural plurality that sometimes give serious jolt to their otherwise easy course of subsuming in the mainstream.

First generation adopts an ethnocentric approach, overtly or subtly, which, rather than judging the other culture manifests more in the form of denial, rejection and minimization of external impacts. They get defensive towards their self-hood sometimes asserting themselves strongly to reinforce their distinct identity. On the other hand, the second generation shows the tendency of ethnorelativism, a kind of ability to appreciate and accept diversity. Hence this approach manifests thorough acceptance, adaptation and integration in the dominant culture, however, mostly at the cost of one's own culture.

#### **4 Acculturation and Deculturation**

Acculturation and Deculturation are the frequently used psychological constructs used in association with diasporic or ethnic studies. Acculturation is related to a person's level of adaptability to new situations and environment whereas Deculturation is understood as the phenomena of getting estranged with one's own culture or roots after coming under foreign influence. With the predominant thoughts of self-preservation lurking heavily on their minds, the process of acculturation in the case of first generation happens only up to subsistence level, like following the culture of the work place out of obligation, observing certain social conventions out of felt need to gain acceptability and perhaps a few other western celebrations in order to keep connected with one's children.

The process of Deculturation, seen prominently in second generation, during its initial phase is characterized by rebellion against observed norms and practices at home. It is observed in smaller instances earlier like consciously resorting to English at home, preferring American fast food over homemade food, making one's appearance more like Americans than Indians with a notable disinclination towards Indian outfits. This attitude later on develops into registering major revolt against commonly accepted code of conduct at home, complete

adherence to American lifestyle and practices, noticeable shift in value system and rejection of the mythical homeland called India.

The departure of the new generation Indian Americans to concerns that are different from those of their parents, who are devoted to their community – Bengalis in the case of Lahiri's characters, and then Indians in general, positions them in stark contrast to their migrant parents. The American born Indians play the reverse role of trying to break away from the restrictions and constraints of Indian culture imposed upon them by their parents, in their effort to live like Americans and integrate with the mainstream. In *The Namesake*, it does not take Gogol time and effort to incorporate into his American girlfriend's family and household. He loves every good and bad thing about her family and her lifestyle just because it's different from his family's functioning. Further in the story, Gogol even starts making comparison between Ratliffs and his parents, finding the latter to be sadly boring and lacking in every department.

He cannot imagine his family occupying a house like this, playing board games on rainy afternoons, watching shooting stars at night...it is an impulse his parents would have never felt...they would have felt lonely in this setting, remarking that they were the only Indians...he feels no nostalgia for the vacations that he's spent with his family...Instead they were overwhelming, disorienting expeditions, either going to Calcutta, or sightseeing in the places they did not belong to and intended never to see again... (Lahiri 2003:155)

The second generation grows up in reaction to their parents. They inadvertently start falling in line with the more liberal and emancipating American culture. They are faced with a dilemma when, after having been exposed to the more open and practical conventions they are asked to cherish and adhere to their own impracticable and dysfunctional native culture. The process is far from easy as they struggle against what has been imbued in them in their early years by their parents, and what they experience when they set out into the individualistic, emancipated world of their American peers.

As they grow up, they find themselves divided in loyalties which are more towards America, yet they cannot cut themselves off totally from India due to its strong presence in their parents' life. In their attempts to claim America by diminishing their Indianness they sometimes eventually end up being labeled as ABCD an acronym for *America born confused deshi*, which is nothing else but a satirical designation for their fractured status. In *The Namesake*, Gogol's Deculturation is complete when he acknowledges that for his parents and their friends, India will always be *desh*, a generic word for country, whereas 'he never thinks of India as *desh*. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India.'

The idea of acculturation of the first generation is more of being a part of the 'cultural mosaic' as opposed to the acculturation of second generation whose idea is that of a 'melting pot' where they want to submerge and unify with the common culture.

## **5 Ironic Situation**

The dichotomy in the Indian diasporic experience is not limited to the matter of identity as it extends to cover the entire life of both the generations, as both, at one point or another, find themselves falling back on the track that leads them to the starting point, the initial phase. During their respective journeys in life, both get enmeshed in the push and pull of the two strong opposing forces, which makes their onward movement difficult. They retreat and often take recourse to the reality that they initially rejected.

## **6 The Paradox of Otherness**

The feelings of sense of loss and otherness in the first generation are usually followed by the efforts to reclaim the past and relive those experience related to home. They keep looking back over the shoulder as overpowering feelings of nostalgia prevent them from accepting the adopted land as home. Their interaction with the starkly opposite society coupled with their own inability to let go of their memories creates a sense of marginalization or otherness that is two-dimensional. There is no concrete effort either from the host society or the guest to relate with each other. The idea of being guests is more settling as it keeps the hope of returning back to India alive.

However, there comes a point in these people's life when they realize after coming back to home that India of their minds has moved on and things have changed. The old familiarity of known places and faces is substituted with changed ones of the next generation. Herein emerges the 'paradox of otherness' as the images so long carried in hearts no longer correspond with the reality at home any more. The feeling of 'otherness' again assails them but this time in their own home. It places them in a very ironic situation of nationlessness or homelessness where they get the vibes and warmth of home from nowhere and there is nothing left to reclaim at home leaving them unhinged or suspended. Such condition of Ashima and Ashok, the first generation immigrants to US, has been portrayed in a very sensitive manner in Lahiri's *The Namesake*

More deaths come, more telephone calls startle them in the middle of the night...within a decade abroad, they are both orphaned...Ashoke and Ashima live the life of extremely aged, those for whom everyone they once knew and loved is lost...voices on the phone, occasionally bearing the news of births and weddings, send chills down the spine...the sight of them when they visit Calcutta every few years feels stranger still... (Lahiri 2003:63-64).

## 7 Breaking the Stereotypes

Jhumpa Lahiri begins her short-story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* by an epitaph taken out from *The Custom-House* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, which goes thus –

Human nature will not flourish, anymore than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth. (Lahiri 2008)

Throughout her novels, she attempts to subvert the notion by ironically questioning it and presenting the case of her characters so as to show that this does not hold true in certain situations. She challenges the stereotypical beliefs, images, perceptions and stock expectations of people with the view to subtly ask – Are we like this? Can we remain unaffected and indifferent under changed circumstances?

Carrying preconceived notions about people and situations comes naturally to Indian mindset. Her characters suffer setbacks when they find their fixed perceptions breaking apart under chaffing circumstances. This situation presents itself as the epiphany, the moment of revelation that the world around them has moved on while they remained stuck to the delusion of *status quo*.

In *The Namesake*, Ashima is elated on Gogol's finally taking interest in a girl of Indian origin Moushmi. She presumes that her son has made the best decision by getting married to Moushmi and they will definitely bond culturally. Ashima's complacency and deep-rooted trust in Indianness gets a serious jolt when contrary to all expectations, Moushmi, exhibiting American attitude, cheats on Gogol and walks out of his life. Similarly, in the short-story 'Hell-Heaven' in *Unaccustomed Earth*, it is Pranab, an Indian, who betrays his American wife



contradicting his mother's predictions at the time of his marriage that the marriage will not work out because of the girl and her non-Indian values.

## **8 Duality of Estrangement**

According to Salman Rushdie, "The Indian writer, while looking back at India, does so through guilt-tinted spectacles." This is true of the first generation Indian diasporic psyche, which always carries this baggage of guilt of not sharing time and space with their own people back in India. They frequently find themselves faced with the confounding question as to whether the choice made by them was correct or not. They are estranged from, their people due to physical distances.

On the other hand, the second generation, their own offspring, too get estranged from them due to emotional disconnect. They find themselves unable to share time and space with their parents, who despite being physically close to them are still distant owing to difference in sensibilities and lifestyle. Hence, this generation too feels the guilt somewhere when they find that the gap between their parents and them has become so large that it cannot be filled. Unfortunately, the estrangement and loss of the first generation is dual in nature and complete leaving them alone to deal with their own lives. In *The Namesake*, Gogol experiences the guilt pang for the first time after his father's death and his inability to do anything for his parents.

He knows now the guilt his parents carried inside, at being able to do nothing when their parents had died in India, of arriving weeks, sometimes months later, when there was nothing left to do. (Lahiri 2003:179).

## **9 Adaptation: Coming Full Circle**

For the second generation, undergoing cultural mutation or attaining cultural hybridity is an inevitable process. Ironically as they mature into adulthood and step into their thirties, most of them begin to unwittingly value what they earlier shunned, and begin to realize to what extent their Indian upbringing is a part of their sensibility and persona. Easy as it is to attach with the adopted culture, so is it difficult to weed out one's own inherited cultural bonds. With the passage of time, the second generation does tend to fall back on its own native culture inadvertently, as the customs and habits drilled during childhood begin to resurface. In the short-story 'Unaccustomed Earth,' the protagonist Ruma, a second generation Indian, reconciles with the thought that she has become the reflection of her mother in lots of ways, a transformation that happened unconsciously.

Growing up, her mother's example — moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household — had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma's life now. (Lahiri 2008:11)

Contrary to her is the father, of the first generation, who has also come full circle in his adaptability as he easily accepts the fact that his children would grow up to forget him. After the death of his wife, instead of choosing to become dependent on his daughter, he opts the American way, strikes a bond with another woman and decides to travel all around the world with her.

The process of Deculturation seen prominently in the second generation is phased, starting with the total rejection of the inheritance, moving on to the homogenization with the mainstream, and then gradual, howsoever slight shift towards one's roots. A sense of in-betweenness is experienced by this generation in their mature years and they find themselves

trying to achieve a balance between both their identities, a kind of biculturalism that explains the dual dimension of their consciousness and reality.

For the first generation, the interplay of varied cross cultural experiences over the period of time results in adaptation, resignation, passive acceptance or reconciliation with the reality, in varying degrees, largely for the sake of children and also as survival tactics. While living abroad on a permanent basis, they come to terms with their destiny, accept the distances with children as well as India, settling with the idea that home is where the heart is and also that geography is no guarantee of security.

According to Liesl Schillinger, Jhumpa Lahiri through her novels shows that the place to which you feel the strongest attachment isn't necessarily the country you're tied to by blood or birth: it's the place that allows you to become yourself. This place, she quietly indicates, may not lie on any map.

As per the book review of *Unaccustomed Earth* done by New York Times, these Indian-born parents want the American Dream for their children — name-brand schools, a prestigious job, a roomy house in the suburbs — but they are cautious about the pitfalls of life in this alien land, and isolated by their difficulties with language and customs. Their children too are often emotional outsiders: having grown up translating the mysteries of the United States for their relatives, they are fluent navigators of both Bengali and American culture but completely at home in neither; they always experience themselves as standing slightly apart, given more to melancholy observation than wholehearted participation.

The Indian diasporic sentiments can be aptly summed up in Salman Rushdie's words - India, I have swum in your warm waters and run laughing in your mountain meadows... I have eaten your independent salt and drunk your nauseatingly sugary roadside tea... India, my terra infirma, my maelstrom, my cornucopia, my crowd. India my too-muchness, my everything at once, my Hug-me, my fable, my mother, my father and my first great truth... India, fount of my imagination, source of my savagery, breaker of my heart. Goodbye. (Rushdie 2000:248-49)

The process of negotiating cultures is an ongoing one, and will continue to invite increasing attention with enhancement in mobility of people and blurring of geographical boundaries. The challenge to preserve the distinctiveness of individual cultural heritage and at the same time to fit in with multicultural people and environments will remain an essential concern of subjects and writers of the diaspora.

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