



The Fertile “Third Space” in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Stories

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Abstract

Scholarly debates over immigration and “diaspora” have shifted in recent years to pluralistic approaches of critics such as Bhabha and Hall who argue that the “hybridity” and “in-betweenness” of immigrants’ life might function as a suitable ground for the social and cultural improvement of their life-conditions. Drawing on such ideas, writers of the present article contend that Jhumpa Lahiri presents a double-sided outlook about the “third space” of diasporic life in her stories, while most critics have considered her attitude toward immigration a negative one. We argue that though Lahiri portrays immigrants’ problems in her stories, a meticulous appraisal of her work reveals the fact that she opposes too much insistence on traditional definitions of home and motherland, and instead pays tribute to the fluidity and flexibility of hybrid identity. She foregrounds the efficiency and fertility of the “third space” of diasporic life in several cases in her fiction by giving centrality and priority to those characters that are flexible, renounce the restricting customs of the left motherland, venture experiencing the inexperienced, and consequently can match themselves with their changed social position to achieve the best out of it.

Keywords: Unhomeliness, Immigration, Diasporic Life, Hybridity, In-betweenness

1. Introduction

The new inquiries of such thinkers as Homi K. Bhabha into the “hybrid” identity of people living in diaspora have resulted in new understandings of diasporic culture and to some extent a positive perspective toward immigration and social movements. Resorting to Bhabha’s investigations of the “hybridity” and “in-betweenness” of immigrants’ life, the writers of this article discuss the positive effects of social changes presented in Jhumpa Lahiri’s short stories which challenge the common negative outlooks toward them. In spite of depicting the problems immigrants encounter in their diasporic life, Lahiri also exposes that in some cases their attitude toward the new conditions of life might change after a while, and this change results in positive outcomes for them. She depicts flexibility as an apposite ground for productive changes which are mostly observed in the life of those characters that do not stick to old beliefs and traditions; are active in initiating changes, and venture going through inexperienced experiences to improve their life-conditions.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born to a Bengali family from Calcutta in 1967 in London, but her family moved to America when she was just three years old. Thanks to being born to immigrant parents besides the early change of her life place, she has experienced a “multicultural life style” (Lyer 2003, 156) which is also reflected in her stories. She has travelled several times to Calcutta she describes as “a bustling unruly city, so different from the small New England town” where she was raised, and her recurrent going to Calcutta initiated her talent for fiction writing, as she has stated herself: “Calcutta nourished my mind, my eyes as a writer and my interest in seeing things from a different point of view” (qtd. in Jha 2008, 139). The characters she portrays in her stories are either of the first or the second generations of Indian immigrants living in America. The first collection of Lahiri’s short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) depicts the problems faced by the first-generation Indian immigrants such as the feeling of displacement and loss. The collection won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000, and made her the first south Asian winner of the prize. The second collection of her short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) portrays the problems of second-generation Indian immigrants such as alienation and miscommunication.

As the result of Lahiri’s portrayal of those problems in her stories, most reviewers of her work have considered her a diasporic writer who often depicts the drawbacks of immigrants’ lives. For instance Jha points out the depiction of “emotional exile” and “excruciating pain” (2008, 140) in the life of Lahiri’s characters, and Samee holds that her stories mostly expose “the notion of identity loss” (Samee 2004, 6). Chatterjee points to issues such as “loneliness and alienation, culture and tradition, fidelity, debasement of human values” (2005, 114) in Lahiri’s work, and Williams argues that the “snacks and treats consumed by [Lahiri’s] characters, and even an abundance of ingredients, can reflect those characters’ poverty (both monetary and emotional) and isolation” (2007, 70). Even those people who have a rather optimistic view toward Lahiri’s depiction of immigrants’ situations, seeing that her stories “prepare a space

through which the subaltern can speak” (Bahmanpour 2010, 43), have not paid enough attention to the positive aspects of immigration traceable in Lahiri’s stories. There are only a few critics who have heeded her portrayal of “cultural diversity and preservation of one’s ethnic roots” (Filipczak 2012, 8), or the attempt of her female characters to better their life as the result of their relocation (Alexandru 2010, 1), whereas the present article highlights the positive outcomes of dislocation and relocation in diasporic life. The only critic whose standpoint seems somehow close to our viewpoint is Munos who has pointed out that the “notion of homeland and the trope of the return are not unavoidably and exclusively tied up with a nostalgic, backward-looking stance” in Lahiri’s stories, but can “be associated, albeit in a circuitous way, with the advent of new becomings for a second generation” (Munos 2010, 140).

The present article challenges negative outlooks toward immigration and its subsequent changes, and instead notices its positive aspects presented in Lahiri’s stories, because its writers contend that the motivation of immigrants to leave their country in several cases are frustrating restrictions in their homeland, thus they have the possibility of having a better life in sight when they leave it. One of the merits of Lahiri’s work is its openness to different interpretations; though the first impression created by her stories is a nostalgic feeling generated by exposing the sense of displacement and miscommunication among immigrants, optimistic perspectives are also observed in them. Considering her portrayal of hybridization and assimilation, we discuss that this diasporic writer gives credit to positive aspects of immigration due to which a sort of awakening happens in some of her characters, and in some cases their talents are flourished in an “unaccustomed earth”. To show such a point, we mostly resort to the inquiries of such cultural critics as Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall into the notion of homeland, diaspora and hybridity which counter the widely-held idea that immigrants experience “in-betweenness” and thus suffer from displacement.

2. New Outlooks toward Diaspora

Like most contemporary critics who refute absolute definitions, Homi K. Bhabha does not give credence to old definitions of homeland and diaspora which mostly imply a negative sense; instead he notices the positive consequences of immigration. Etymologically speaking, diaspora is a Greek word which “combines the words *speiro* (meaning “to sow”) and *dia* (“over”) (Smith 2004, 254). Challenging the old outlooks about diaspora which emphasize the nostalgic feelings of people living out of their homeland, Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* that “the very concepts of homogenous national cultures” must go through “a profound process of redefinition” (1994, 5), as he believes that human beings have “no necessary or eternal ‘belongingness’” (175) to lose, therefore an essentialist culture sounds nonsensical to him. He contends that “cultures come to be represented by virtue of the processes of iteration and translation through which their meanings are very vicariously addressed to – *through* – an Other. This erases any essentialist claims for the inherent authenticity or purity of cultures” (58).

To elaborate on Bhabha’s idea, Huddart remarks that he has challenged the inclination toward the polarity of the world into the “self” and the “other” by such concepts as hybridity which imply the “mixed-ness” and “impurity” of contemporary cultures. Since all cultures interact with each other, he believes that “cultures are not discrete phenomena” (2006, 4). Anderson also argues that “nationalism” and “nation-ness” are “cultural artifacts of a particular kind” (2006, 4), because “nation” is an “imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). He explicates his assertion by stating that although some individuals have a shared “image of their communion” in their mind, they are not capable of knowing each and everybody in their “community” even if that “community” is very small (6).

Besides Bhabha, Stuart Hall has highlighted the transcendental quality of identity on the whole and diasporic identity in particular, that he defines “as a heterogeneous concept that is constantly recreating and refashioning itself, while ethnic identification is devalued as a monolithic and static phenomenon incapable of variation and transformation” (qtd. Behdad 2005, 399-400). In his “Introduction” to the *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Hall argues that “identities are never unified,” but “increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across” various “discourses, practices and positions,” therefore they are “constantly in the process of change and transformation” (2003, 4). Noting that constant change, Hall contends that “the self” is “multiple and is produced and positioned – that is subjected to and determined within – discourse” (qtd. Procter 2004, 110).

Inquiring into diasporic culture, both Bhabha and Hall move away from the “bipolar model” to “tripolar model” that gives priority neither to the motherland nor to the residing country; rather accentuates the “middle ground” which Bhabha calls “the third space” (qtd. Král 2009, 12). Following Bhabha’s suggestions about the possibilities resulting from diaspora, Faist affirms that “any kind of dispersal blurs the distinctions between various kinds of cross border mobility” (2010, 13). In relation to the questions of freedom in diasporic cultures, Král expresses the same idea and affirms that diasporic people are released from the subjectivity imposed by a given society and have a “metaperspective” point of view planted in their “in-betweenness” conditions (2009, 15).

3. The Fertile “Third Space” Depicted in Lahiri’s Stories

While most reviewers of Lahiri’s stories have drawn on old definitions of diaspora, the writers of the present article try to expose that besides showing immigrants’ problems, Lahiri presents the positive aspects of diasporic life as well. As a writer whose own life is “the very prototype of diasporic culture” (Daiya 2006, 32), she portrays the upsetting aspects of immigrants’ life, but simultaneously reveals that their dismal experiences might be the cause of some improvements in their life. Her attitude toward immigration seems to be close to that of cultural critics such as Bhabha who commend the transitory, flexible nature of hybrid identity which can match itself with changed social positions. To foreground such flexibility in her stories, Lahiri centralizes characters that are active and productive; do not stick to old beliefs; have

open minds, and thus renounce restricting traditional customs dictated to them, and consequently attempt to improve their life.

Having in mind Bhabha's arguments about "the third space," "in-betweenness," and "the borderline work of culture" that engender an amalgam of the culture of the left motherland and that of the residing country (*Location of Culture* 1994, 7), we observe several cases of that amalgam in Lahiri's stories. For instance, the young Lilia who experiences "in-betweenness" in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," really enjoys "the third space" of her diasporic life. She likes learning about both American and Indian cultures, and deems it a privilege in comparison to American youngsters who only know about their own culture. On the other hand she enjoys her secure life in America which many Indian teenagers are deprived of in their homeland. Lack of religious quarrels in America is a remarkable fact for her, since such quarrels perturb her relatives in India. The advantages of diasporic life urge Lilia to question inflexible definitions of nation and geographical borderlines that separate people of the world. One of her delightful experiences is to observe that her parents and Mr. Pirzada, who have migrated from different countries to the United States, "spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, [and] looked more or less the same" (28).

Lahiri dramatizes contradictory ways of handling "the third space" of diasporic life by relating the different attitudes of the couple she depicts in "This Blessed House". The man Sanjeev is one of those immigrants who still stick to old, rigid customs, whereas his wife Twinkle represents those who willingly venture going through the "the third space". She is flexible and creative, and does not obey traditional rules and restrictions. Her flexibility is portrayed in her attitude toward religion; she is neither biased toward her own religion Hinduism, nor is opposed to Christianity, and lets herself go without feeling worried among Christians. She behaves in the same way in dealing with foods; she buys "preroasted chickens from the supermarket and serve[s] them with potato salad prepared who knew when, sold in little plastic containers" (1999, 156). When she finds a new-brand vinegar, her husband asks her to "Throw it away," (148) because he thinks that she cannot prepare any good dishes with it, while she cooks a new delicious dish with it, and when he asks her about how she made it, she simply replies: "I made it up" (157). It seems to us that Lahiri mostly approves of Twinkle's conduct, seeing that at the end of the story she feels happy in the party she has attended, while Sanjeev is sad and lonely at home. In portraying Twinkle's character, Lahiri pictures what Cohen considers fluidity in defining and forming one's identity (2010, 69).

Another instance of the delight resulting from the flux experienced by immigrants is observed in "The Third and the Final Continent" in which the thick ice between the un-named narrator of the story and his wife Mala is broken when they are positioned in a new situation in Mrs. Croft's house in which "Mala Laughed then. Her voice was full of kindness, her eyes bright with amusement" (1999, 212). When Mrs. Croft calls Mala as "a perfect lady" (213), the narrator also laughs, and then tells us that it has been the first time in their married life they see each other laughing, hence he likes "to think of that moment in Mrs. Croft's parlor as the moment when the distance between Mala and [him] began to lessen" (214). Then we find out that he has come to America to seek "his fortune far from home," (216), because he believes that humans can survive "on three continents," and "there is no obstacle" that people like his son "cannot conquer" (216). He sees the same ambition that "had first hurled [him] across the world" in the eyes of his son "who attends Harvard University" (215), and thereby would most likely actualize his father's dreams.

Ruma's father in the "Unaccustomed Earth" is another diasporic character who has a flexible attitude toward "the borderline work of culture". He mostly inclines toward going beyond traditional customs and values, therefore his behavior mostly resembles that of Americans' rather than those of Indians'. For instance, he is deeply concerned about his daughter's decision to live as a mere housewife, while it is not the concern of many Indians. At the beginning of the story, Ruma is depicted as being angry with her father, because he has sold the house in which she has grown up and was hence full of sweet memories of her childhood. Moreover she believes that by selling that house, her father has tried to wipe out "her mother's presence just as a surgeon had" (2008, 6). Later her father discloses to her how disappointing his married life has always been and how much he has suffered the antipathy of his daughter caused by his wife: "All his life he'd felt condemned by her, on his wife's behalf. She and her wife were allies. And he had endured his daughter's resentment, never saying that his wife had been overly demanding, unwilling to appreciate the life he'd worked hard to provide" (2008, 40). It seems that his wife's death has set him free of several restrictions she had imposed on him due to her old Indian ways of life;

How freeing it was, these days, to travel alone, with only a single suitcase to check. ... No matter how they went, those trips to India were always epic, and he still recalled the anxiety they provoked in him, having to pack so much luggage and getting it all to the airport, keeping documents in order and ferrying his family safely so many thousands of miles. But his wife had lived for these journeys. (2008, 8)

Though he suffered those trips, he went through them for the sake of his wife. Now her death has not only released him of those torments, but also removes the barriers in his relations with his daughter. After spending one week with her father, Ruma confesses that "until now, she had not known certain things about him. She had not known how self-sufficient he could be, how helpful, to the point where she had not had to wash a dish since he'd arrived" (2008, 47), and the father observes changes in his daughter's toward him: "She needed him, as he'd never felt she'd needed him before" (53). Lack of restrictions and antipathies induced by the dead mother, who now belongs to the past, like the left motherland, brings the father and daughter together.

Though "in-betweenness" is somehow grimly portrayed in "A Temporary Matter," Lahiri also exposes its positive outcomes in it. The traditional gender roles of man and wife is reversed in the life of the couple portrayed in the story, and both Shoba and her husband Shukumar seem to be at ease with such a reversal: "The more Shoba stayed out, the

more she began putting in extra hours at work and taking on additional projects, the more he wanted to stay in, not even leaving to get the mail, or to buy fruit or wine” (1999, 2). Shukumar has accepted cooking as his responsibility, since he knows that if he does not cook, “Shoba would eat a bowl of cereal for her dinner” (8). He also does other house chores: “gathered onion skins in his hand and drop them in the garbage pail,” and “ran the water in the sink, soaking the knife” (5), while Shoba is indifferent toward the house and “treats [it] as if it is a hotel” (6).

Despite their mutual acceptance of that reversal, however, from the very beginning of the story we see a problematic married life in which both have “become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floor as possible” (1999, 5). They live like strangers; do not spend time with each other, and even do not eat together; for months “they’d served themselves from the stove, and he’d taken his plate into his study, letting the meal grow cold on his desk before shoving it into his mouth without pause, while Shoba took her plate to the living room and watched game shows” (8). We also learn that Shoba’s presence is a source of suffering for Shukumar who works on his thesis in the room that was supposed to be that of their stillborn baby; “the room soothed him, and partly because it was a place Shoba avoided” (9), and he no longer looks “forward to weekends, when she sat for hours on the sofa with her colored pencils and her files, so that he feared that putting on a record in his own house might be rude” (5).

What Lahiri depicts in the life of this couple reminds us of what Bhabha calls “unhomliness” – being physically at home, but *not feeling at home* (1994). Their married life can be compared to the life of those people who do not feel at home in their homeland, consequently set up their mind to immigrate to a new land. To continue such a life is a perpetual torment for both Shoba and Shukumar, therefore she decides to put an end to such an infertile, upsetting life, and moves to a new place. The remarkable point in this departure is the fact that it is the wife who is active in making that crucial decision. Although “A Temporary Matter” is open-ended, and the readers do not know whether the couple reaches to any probable contentment in their future life or not, they know that from now on they would not perturb each other any more.

The problem of “unhomliness” is also pictured, though this time in India, in the “Treatment of Bibi Halder” which relates the life-story of a twenty-nine year old Indian woman who has “suffered from an ailment” (1999, 172) all through her life. In addition to that life-long illness, she suffers living in her cousin’s house: “Bibi Halder was sleeping downstairs Every day they sent her to the roof to record inventory until lunch, at which point Halder brought her receipts from the morning sales and a bowl of yellow split peas for her lunch” (184). She is degraded in her homeland by her own relatives among whom she thus feels alienated. When the cousin’s child is infected, Bibi is the only one to be blamed by the cousin’s wife, consequently she is sent to the storage room in the cellar where she ironically feels relieved of the pain of degradation and released of the restrictions imposed on her by her relatives, as she states here: “now I am free to discover life” (186). The change of her place and lack of the cousin’s control give her the freedom she wished to have for a long time. After a while she is found pregnant in the storage room, and when she gives birth to her child, she is entirely cured of her life-long illness; it acts as a miracle for her.

It is not only in the “Treatment of Bibi Halder” that Lahiri portrays how one’s *home* might be disturbing for them. In “Going Ashore,” she exposes that some people might find what they desperately need out of their motherland. She narrates the story of Kaushik’s mother who suffers from breast cancer, whereas none of her relatives or friends in India helps her fight against it. Therefore she returns to America not only to get cured of cancer, but also to get rid of the distressing behavior of her relatives, as we read here: “It was not so much for treatment as it was to be left alone. In India people knew she was dying, and had you remained there, inevitably, friends and family would have gathered at her side ... to shield her from something she could not escape” (2008, 250). Instead of helping her to be cured of cancer or finding some ways to pacify her agitated mind, their passive conduct toward that fatal sickness makes her think that they are just waiting for her death, since they think “she could not escape” it. By showing such problems in one’s homeland, Lahiri renounces the old definitions of home as a place where you feel safe, serene and at ease.

4. Conclusion

By depicting different dimensions of immigrants’ life, Lahiri urges her readers to give a second thought to the state of “in-betweenness”, to see whether immigrants can release themselves from the bondage of old values and traditions within the “third space” of diasporic life or not. By exposing some cases of experiencing “unhomliness” in one’s homeland, besides presenting the problems of the immigrants who stick to predefined ways of life in the new residing land, she highlights the relativity of values, and makes her readers reassess the preset definitions of home and motherland. Moreover she portrays the positive consequences of flexibility and changing life-style in immigrants’ life, and thus acclaims the possibility of going beyond rigid borderlines to improve one’s life. She also shows that there might be a better relationship among immigrants if they reconsider their way of life, and try to gain the best out of “the borderline work of culture”.

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