

The Battle of Belonging: Reading Culture, Identity and Home in Jhumpa Lahiri's Select Fiction

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Abstract: As a second-generation Indian American writer and translator, Jhumpa Lahiri writes about immigrants and their dilemma of simultaneously belonging to two different worlds. She majorly presents the conflict between Indian and American culture through the two generations of immigrants. First-generation immigrants migrate with their native Indian culture to a foreign land where it comes into contact with the host land culture and results in an unending conflict to grapple with. This conflict is further deepened with the birth of the next generation, the second-generation immigrants, who reject their parents' native culture in favour of the American one and yet lack a sense of belonging. This research paper will attempt to explore the dilemma encountered by the second-generation immigrants as a result of their lack of sense of belonging to any culture by closely analysing the characters of Mrs. Das aka Mina from *Interpreter of Maladies*, Moushumi Mazoomdar from *The Namesake* and Ruma from *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Key Words: Immigration, culture, identity, home, belonging.

As a second-generation Indian American writer and translator, Jhumpa Lahiri writes about immigrants and their dilemma of simultaneously belonging to two different worlds. She mainly presents the conflict between Indian and American culture through the two generations of immigrants. First-generation immigrants migrate with their native Indian culture to a foreign land where it comes into contact with the host land's culture and results in an unending conflict for them to grapple with. This conflict is further deepened with the birth of the next generation, the second-generation immigrants, who reject their parents' native culture in favour of the American one and yet lack a sense of belonging. This research paper will attempt to explore the dilemma encountered by second-generation immigrants as a result of their lack of sense of belonging to any culture by closely analysing the characters of Mrs. Das aka Mina from *Interpreter of Maladies*, Moushumi Mazoomdar from *The Namesake* and Ruma from *Unaccustomed Earth*.

As Lahiri shuttles between two worlds—one of her Bengali Indian parents and another of her American peers to present their dilemmas through her fiction, we can sense that it's the second-generation immigrants who are left with either confused identity or fluid identity because of their liminal or in-between position. The cultural dilemma of second-generation immigrants is well manifested by the following lines of Rushdie: "Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools." (*Imaginary Homelands* 15)

From language to food and values to rituals the second-generation immigrants in Lahiri's fiction are torn between two distinct worlds which seem to collide and entrap them in their complexities. As children, they are groomed to be bilingual and bicultural and this becomes the very cause of their identity crisis in a country with which they are more familiar than the other part of the world that their parents consider as their homeland. Their parents' homeland India is almost a foreign place for them, a remote place which they visit quite often but it is not a part of their life or rather they are not a part of that place. Moreover, they were not born and raised there, their parents were and hence they do not feel connected to it in the same way as their parents do.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a second-generation immigrant, herself faced this dilemma as she stated in an interview with *BookBrowse* that:

[T]he problem for the children of immigrants- those with strong ties to their country of origin- is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. This has been my experience, in any case. For example, I never know how to

answer the question “Where are you from?” If I say I’m from Rhode Island, people are seldom satisfied. They want to know more, based on things such as my name, my appearance, etc. Alternatively, if I say I’m from India, a place where I was not born and have never lived, this is also inaccurate. It bothers me less now. But it bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged.

In the short story entitled “Interpreter of Maladies” the character of Mrs. Das aka Mina is represented as a victim of cultural roots. Her suffering was caused due to the presence of her second child named Bobby who was born out of wedlock. The presence of Bobby always reminded her of her guilt and made her feel terrible. At one point, she speaks to Mr. Kapasi, “I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away. One day I had the urge to throw everything I own out the window, the television, the children, everything” (65). She wanted to get rid of this unhealthy feeling by seeking remedy for it through Mr. Kapasi while on a trip to India. She says, “. . . I’m tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I’ve been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy” (65). Weighed down by the secret, she lost her ability to establish any meaningful bond. Moreover, despite being an American, she cannot shy away from the fact of being Indian as well and this is why she sought Mr. Kapasi’s words of comfort while on a trip to India.

Moushumi Mazoomdar makes her first appearance in the novel entitled *The Namesake* during Gogol’s fourteenth birthday party. As a young girl, she was bookish, aloof and never associated with the other kids. Being the only child of her parents for many years until her brother Samrat was born, she was the centre of her parents’ attention and care. They were fearful and suspicious of America and American culture and like other immigrant parents maintaining their native culture was their primary goal. In the early years of her childhood, she was forced by her parents, especially by her mother, who wanted her to be rooted in Indian soil and at the same time prosper in the Western air, to behave in a certain manner and follow Indian traditions.

She did not know back then how to protest. Therefore, she suffered silently all that was in her fate while her parents, though unconsciously, continued to torture her by just being Indian and this caused her to go through cultural, emotional and psychological pain and affliction. Her relatives too played their part by asking her questions about marriage, at a tender age when such questions were entirely irrelevant:

When she was only five years old, she was asked by her relatives if she planned to get married in a red sari or a white gown. . . .

She hated the way they would talk of the details of her wedding, the menu and the different colors of saris she would wear for the different ceremonies, as if it were a fixed certainty in her life. She hated when her grandmother would unlock her almari, showing her which jewels would be hers when the day came. (213)

This explains why her hatred for her native culture and traditions emerged quite early during childhood and persisted throughout her life.

After all the years of silent torture, she decided to give herself a new life to escape the cultural dilemma and trappings by taking shelter in a third culture and language, just like Lahiri herself, in a city where she was anonymous and inaccessible. Away from the gaze of her family and those who knew her “she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever” (214).

In Paris, Moushumi was free of all cultural restrictions and bonds and so “reinvented herself, without misgivings, without guilt” into the sort of person she always wanted to be (233). Though her transformation appears abrupt, it is the manifestation of her long-repressed feelings and desires.

With no hesitation, she had allowed men to seduce her in cafes, in parks, while she gazed at paintings in museums. She gave herself openly, completely, not caring about the consequences. She was exactly the same person, looked and behaved the same way, and yet suddenly, in that new city, she was transformed into the kind of girl she had once envied, had believed she would never become. (215)

She was very pleased to find her love, Graham whom she met while working for an agency in Paris. Soon she fell in love with him and then one night in a taxi impulsively asked him to marry her. “Looking back on it, she supposed it was all those years of people attempting to claim her, choose her, of feeling an invisible net cast around her, that had led her to this proposal” (216). This manifests her fear of otherwise being forced to marry an Indian man by her parents. However, to her great surprise, Graham was accepted and welcomed by her parents and a Hindu wedding ceremony was planned in New Jersey but just a few weeks before the wedding she broke up after being hurt by his comments regarding her native people and country and the supposed marriage never materialized. “For it was one thing for her to reject her background, to be critical of her family’s heritage, another to hear it from him” (217). She herself was not very fond of her roots and traditions but when she heard Graham criticising her relatives and their manners, she was taken aback which clearly manifests her cultural dilemma.

Later, she accepted Gogol as her husband because in him she saw a sort of a rebel like herself who changed his name from Gogol to Nikhil and chose a profession that was not preferred by their community. Though she loved him genuinely, their relationship was dragging her to a sort of life she had earlier—without the absolute independence that she detests. She began to realize that her marriage limits her in some ways. She had to decline the “research fellowship to work on her dissertation in France” after marriage as it was no more feasible for her to leave behind Gogol for the whole year and so the fellowship was wasted (246). Upon realising that by marrying Gogol she has, in a way, broken her own will, allowed “her parents to have a hand in her marriage” and eventually hugged her native culture, she was devastated (212-13). She wanted to exhibit that she was still capable to deny her roots and betray her culture and traditions and so she renewed her old love affair with a man named Dimitri.

She is clearly presented as a victim of cultural roots like many other second-generation immigrants of Lahiri and her relationship with the three men—Dimitri, Graham and Gogol had been a result of her conflicting nature that switches between Indian and American selves. She entered into relationships with these men for her own cultural benefits. She wanted to assert her Americanness which led her to desire an American man for herself. Like her name which means “a damp southwesterly breeze,” she was a person of changing nature and fluid identity (240).

The constant pressure to follow the old cultural norms of their parents’ native country made the second-generation immigrants feel annoyed and less American than others. Besides, there was the perpetual fear of being singled out or ridiculed by their peer group upon being discovered that they have a much different lifestyle and mannerisms than that of a typical American family. They were exposed to different lifestyles and cultures from an early age and with time decided to side with the mainstream one with the hope to ascertain an American identity.

In the short story entitled “Unaccustomed Earth”, Ruma tried her best to assimilate into the American culture by imitating her peer group in high school. Going against her parents’ wishes, she chose to work as a busgirl in a restaurant that was quite common in America for children of her age but was looked upon down in her parents’ native country. Later, her decision to marry an American man, named Adam, once again, against the wishes of her parents, especially her mother, bewildered them. Her mother could not imagine her only daughter marrying an American and therefore had not left a single stone unturned to dissuade her from marrying Adam. She told Ruma that “he would divorce her, that in the end he would want *an American girl!*” (emphasis added) (26). What she meant by this was that Ruma was not American enough or not an American in the traditional sense of the term.

Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt in her book chapter entitled “Gendered (Be) Longing: First and Second Generation Migrants in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri” argues that “the death of a parental figure disrupts for the second-generation subjects a sense of roots and routes, resulting in a loss of a home(land)” (160). However, this is not the only thing that happens. At the same time, when their bond with their parent’s motherland is severed with the death of either parent, it also opens a space for exploration of their bond with the parents that they hardly understood, respected or valued earlier. The untimely death of Ruma’s mother creates a void in her that allows her to view things differently or in an unbiased way. It also, somehow, strengthens her bond with her father.

To conclude, the questions regarding identity, belonging and culture can be answered through one major question that is- Where is home? Or as it is mostly put to the immigrants- Where are you from? For first-generation immigrants, this question does not seem as complex as for the second-generation immigrants who find themselves in an in-between position, sandwiched between two cultures. Most of the first-generation immigrants, continue to view India as their home and this helps them in maintaining their Indian identity besides providing them with a sense of belonging to a particular land whereas the second-generation immigrants are welcomed and accepted in both countries but at the same time they are viewed as foreigners. Hence, they neither get rooted nor uprooted as there is no single place where they can have a complete sense of belonging.

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