

**THE METAPHOR OF JOURNEY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S FICTION**

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**Abstract**

*Reading Jhumpa Lahiri is like engaging in a literary journey through the diasporic space created in her fiction. Space and time are inter-related. Space provides significant dynamics for historical representation of a culture, the geographical dislocation from the land of origin alienates the writer from her cultural roots and through her writing she engages in a process of reconstruction of her personal and national histories. Space becomes an important determinant in redefining boundaries of human relationships. If a sense of space is one of the imperatives of the writer's being, the linearity of time within which the writer moves with ease frames the writer's perspective.*

*Journey as a metaphor within the context of diasporic writing focuses on the effects of the transformations relating to migration. Writers use journey as a trope to explore the transformation of self, the construction of a new self by self-invention. The reality of the space in diasporic writing across borders connecting the acquired home with the native homeland is re-presented as a *modus operandi* for translating the concepts of home and territories. The journey of the diasporic, the travails and travels of the migrant across space and time gives a historical dimension to the narratives, the process of uprooting and re-rooting through routes is a continued process with newer perceptions and possibilities.*

*Jhumpa Lahiri is a writer in whom the diasporic consciousness is markedly present, since she was born in London of Indian parents and brought up in America. Lahiri in her writing explores the transnational flow of culture and how it shapes the diasporic consciousness of the second generation of immigrants, she explores the theme of imaginative connection to a place and the commitment to the ideas that it represents. America emerges as a place of possibilities that is at the same time liberating and corrupting. Her stories are anchored in characters and their relationships to place and people. Lahiri suggests in her works that Diasporic spaces have become fluid with porous boundaries as the diasporic communities partake transnational character in continued migration and return. In the age of global movement, diaspora has both biological and spatial connotation, with a host of references to travelling, border-crossing, exile, return, social and cultural boundaries and multi-locality. The writers of diaspora like Jhumpa Lahiri does not necessarily restrict their diasporic representations to the physical act of migration, but also creates space for an interpretation of imagined, virtual, historical, cultural movement involved in the very act of migration.*

Reading Jhumpa Lahiri is like engaging in a literary journey through the diasporic space created in her fiction. Space and time are inter-related. Space provides significant dynamics for historical representation of a culture, the geographical dislocation from the land of origin alienates the writer from her cultural roots and through her writing she engages in a process of reconstruction of her personal and national histories. Space becomes an important determinant in redefining boundaries of human relationships. If a sense of space is one of the imperatives of the writer's being, the linearity of time within which the writer moves with ease frames the writer's perspective.

The term "Diaspora" has become a popular usage in modern times in everyday conversation but it has its origin in the dispersion of the Jews in Biblical times and connotes a scattering and dislocation from the land of origin; hence journey or movement is a significant metaphor for the diaspora writers. It referred to the Jewish communities exiled from their homeland forced by the Romans between 66 and 70 CE. Diaspora thus has connotations of loss and suffering due to homelessness, dislocation and memories of the original home. If we look at history then we can see that another form of dislocation began in Africa in the sixteenth century in the form of slave trade where the native Africans were deported to America and the Caribbean Islands. It was with the colonial expansion and imperial adventures of the European countries that transport and relocation of people as human resources becomes significant from nineteenth century onwards. However with modern globalization and cosmopolitanism in the twenty first century the concept of Diaspora needs to be redefined to make it an umbrella term for a broader spectrum of activities. The dispersal of heterogeneous societies and groups from across the world wrought changes in the cultural map of the world. Ethnicity is translated to multiplicity and the diasporic communities are increasingly been seen to establish their sense of identity, their cultural difference, positioning themselves not as minority against a background of a dominant majority culture, but as the emerging face of contemporary post-colonial existence.

The United Nations considers an individual as a migrant when the subject has resided in a foreign country for more than one year, irrespective of the causes, voluntary or involuntary, and the means, regular or irregular, used to migrate. It clearly distinguishes tourists from migrants and seasonal migrants from immigrants. Evidently all those who cross borders do not necessarily acquire a diasporic identity, since these dispersions do not reach back through generations to inform a collective identity. James Clifford in his book, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* elaborates on the difference between border and diaspora:

But borderlands are distinct in that they presuppose a territory defined by a geo-political line: two sides arbitrarily separated and policed, but also joined by legal and illegal practices of crossing and communication. Diasporas usually presuppose longer distances and a separation more like exile: a constitutive taboo on return, or its postponement to a remote future. Diasporas also connect multiple communities of a dispersed population. Systematic

border crossings may be part of this interconnection, but multilocal diaspora cultures are not necessarily defined by a specific geopolitical boundary (246).

Yasmin Hussain in the "Introduction" to *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity* (2005) has cited the example of North African day-labourers who regularly cross the Mediterranean to harvest crops in Southern Spain, move to a seasonal workplace and then return home to which their cultural links are intact. So, the conditions of leaving, as well as arrival are important when deconstructing the concept of Diaspora. Diasporic journeys are not casual journeys or temporary migrations, but according to Avtar Brah in her book *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996) they are about "settling down and putting roots elsewhere" (182) - crossing geographical and mental borders. Geographical borders mark and distinguish physical territories; they are regularly patrolled to protect illegal migrations from the land outside the boundary. Borders also act as metaphors of social, cultural and psychological boundaries guarding the invasion of the alien culture and its literary productions from overwhelming the narratives of the local, the regional. But with the advent of new migrants who put down roots to stay, the localised narratives become "fragmented, rudimentary and enveloped" (ibid.9). The advent of new subjectivities and hyphenated identities in the context of globalized mobility gives birth to new narratives where the possibilities of multicultural identities are explored.

Journey as a metaphor within the context of diasporic writing focuses on the effects of the transformations relating to migration. Writers use journey as a trope to explore the transformation of self, the construction of a new self by self-invention. The reality of the space in diasporic writing across borders connecting the acquired home with the native homeland is re-presented as a *modus operandi* for translating the concepts of home and territories. The journey of the diasporic, the travails and travels of the migrant across space and time gives a historical dimension to the narratives, the process of uprooting and re-rooting through routes is a continued process with newer perceptions and possibilities. Diasporic writing post 1990s are celebrations of the migrant experience, rather than looking back at the 'old' world and lamenting the loss of their roots, these fictions celebrate their routes. The noted anthropologist James Clifford in his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* elaborates on the "spatial practices" of travel. Clifford borrows the phrase "spatial practice" from Michel de Certeau for whom space is not a specific location but it is corporeally practiced by people's movements "through and around it" (54) as he opines in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). Clifford, tracing anthropology's changing relations with travel considers "field" as "a habitus rather than as a place, a cluster of embodied dispositions and practices" (69). Clifford studies the practice of travelling through "routes" and tries to localize "natives" and their cultural roots, he thinks that "roots always precede routes" and the two words are interconnected. He observes that there is a change in scholarly interest from "old localizing strategies" (303) of community, culture, nation to the study of movement and connections between contact zones. The new trend in migration is not an unilinear movement, as observed by Van Hear in the book, *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities* (1998),

migration no longer connotes a sharp break from the homeland but links are maintained through remittances and other forms of transfer and exchange, or through return and circular migration. Transnational social spaces are created by such individuals who traverse more than one continent, move within multiple locations and owe multiple allegiances and affiliations. Such transnational living composes of maintaining and reproducing a social and cultural milieu of the homeland in the everyday lived reality of the hostland. Their sense of belonging do not conform to maintaining rigid geo-political boundaries and borders, they are defined by their pluralities. It informs the identity of such transnational individuals who are citizens of the world rather than of any singular country.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a writer in whom the diasporic consciousness is markedly present, since she was born in London of Indian parents and brought up in America. Lahiri in her writing explores the transnational flow of culture and how it shapes the diasporic consciousness of the second generation of immigrants, she explores the theme of imaginative connection to a place and the commitment to the ideas that it represents. America emerges as a place of possibilities that is at the same time liberating and corrupting. Her stories are anchored in characters and their relationships to place and people. In an article entitled “American Child” that was published in the *New York Times Book Review* on 6 April, 2008 Liesl Schillinger points out that Lahiri “shows that the place to which you feel the strongest attachment isn’t necessarily the country you are 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.”

Lahiri’s first published book, *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) which is a collection of short stories ends with the story “The Third and Final Continent” in which the narrator is a traveller around the world as he leaves India with a certificate in commerce and sails across the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean to reach England where he attends lectures at LSE. When his marriage is arranged he travels back to India and then farther to America with a sixth-preference green card and a prestigious job at MIT. He compares his success in adapting to the land of immigration to that of astronauts whose landing on the moon is lauded; while they spent mere hours on the moon he has spent thirty years in America and survived in three continents which is no small an achievement.

Lahiri’s transition from short stories to fiction is remarkable as it afforded her the scope to deal with the themes of migration, alienation and acculturation in a broader canvas. In *The Namesake* (2001), Ashok and Ashima represent the Third World migrants who undergo a perplexing experience as they travel to the American melting pot. The journey for the couple is more metaphorical than literal because it is a journey made into the cultural heartland of America with the responsibility of bringing up children in an alien soil. The Gangulis travel into the multicultural society of the United States and settle there, they make occasional visits to India to revitalize their cultural roots; they try to maintain a fine balance between their Indian ness and the American culture, they create a ‘meta-home’ in America for their children. To their children Gogol and Sonia the visits to India are mere sojourns to a past they cannot relate to and coming back home to America they shed off their Indian culture “like clothes worn for a special occasion, or for a season that has passed, suddenly

cumbersome, irrelevant to their lives” (88). However, for Ashok and Ashima, India remains their real home and they make emotional journeys to their homeland through keeping up the cultural practices of home in America. The Bengali community in America makes this journey through the practice of cultural activities at family get-togethers, through remembering the homeland and its essences:

They all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends ... The families drop by one another's homes on Sunday afternoons. They drink tea with sugar and evaporated milk and eat shrimp cutlets fried in saucepans. They sit in circles on the floor, singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore, passing a thick yellow clothbound book of lyrics among them ... They argue riotously over the films of Ritwik Ghatak versus those of Satyajit Ray. The CPIM versus the Congress party. North Calcutta versus South (38).

They celebrate their occasions in the Bengali traditional manner so that even in a foreign country the import of the home culture is not lost in transition. However, home is directly connected to the people they are related to and without them it loses the pull that it exercises upon the immigrants, so Ashima does not want to go back to Calcutta when she learns that her father is no more: “I don't want to go”(47). They seem to travel in mind the distances between New York and Calcutta as the midnight telephone brings in the news of more deaths in the family, those who live seem to be dead also, “always invisible, impossible to touch” (63).

After the death of Ashok, Ashima finally decides to divide her time between India and the United States: “True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere” (276). She will make the journey to India entirely on her own for the first time in her life, the metaphorical journey comes full circle as Ashima acquires the diasporic consciousness, her self is no longer bound to people, places and traditions, she is free to choose.

Lahiri's next collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) takes the theme of diasporic journey and putting down roots further through a multi-layered vision of connectedness in the eight stories. In the titular story Ruma's father comes to visit her Seattle home for a weekend and Ruma wishes earnestly at the end that he should stay with her, she wants him in her lonely life, but she realizes that being free from the burdens of a family her father has chosen the life of a wanderer; he has denounced all commitments to enjoy uncommitted bliss and liberty. The metaphysical journey he has made is to arrive at the truth like Ashima in *The Namesake* that “Life grew and grew until a certain point. The point he had reached now” (53).

The three stories of Hema and Kaushik ends the collection; they build up a poignant journey through love, loss, death and rebirth. “Once in a Lifetime” is set in Cambridge, as Kaushik along with his parents, making the journey from India is searching for a new house and move in with Hema and her parents. “Year's End” is profound in a deeper sense as it explores the grief of a mother's loss. Kaushik returning home after his mother's death can reconcile himself neither to his father's hasty remarriage nor to the reality of living with two



step-sisters. As Kaushik leaves home and drives to Canada he is swept by the sense of freedom of the journey: "I had never traveled alone before and I discovered that I liked it. No one in the world knew where I was, no one had the ability to reach me. It was like being dead, my escape allowing me to taste that tremendous power my mother possessed forever" (290). The story ends with the motif of journey, literal and metaphorical as Kaushik's father tells him that they are moving in life "New roads to explore" (293). The final story "Going Ashore" looks at Kaushik's life as a photojournalist that takes him through Latin America, Madrid, Salvador and Guetenmala. The demands of his job allowed him to avoid the United States and to drift across the world without anyone taking hold of him. He thinks that he is different from others, "that in ten minutes he could be on his way to anywhere in the world. But he knew that it was impossible, wherever he landed, not to form attachments" (309).

In an interview given to John Mullan for the Guardian Book Club that appeared in *The Guardian* on 31 August, 2013 Lahiri speaks about her rereading of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* that carried the germ of the stories of *Unaccustomed Earth*:

I felt that a writer who represents everything that I seemed not to be while growing up – an American, a New Englander, whose work is set in the very terrain in which I was raised and from which I felt always estranged – had articulated, almost two centuries ago, the journey and experience of my family, and had also expressed my project as a writer. The sense of recognition, of connection across space and time, was profound. It was the crossing of a fault line, a handshake in a darkened room. (n.pag)

Lahiri uses journey as a major trope in her latest novel *The Lowland* (2013); the characters do not merely journey across continents but revisit actual places through memories. As the lives of Subhash, Gauri and Bela unfold in the backdrop of multiple journeys between Calcutta and New York, the history of the times with its revolution, disillusion and reconciliation is played out in the novel. Subhash moves to America at a time when the Naxalite movement was rocking the homeland and the youths like his own brother Udayan could not escape the powerful hold of the movement; yet Subhash could not resist the allure of a prospective career in the West and gave in to the pull of America. Every year and each death only made the distance between home and homeland wider for Subhash; though he would travel to Tollygung he could never return to his home, because it was no longer his. Lahiri depicts the dilemma of leaving and arriving through Gauri as she prepares to leave Calcutta, or rather flee the place of memories; she is apprehensive and the thick fog enveloping the road to airport correlates the state of her mind, but the fog lifted as the plane took off: "No one prevented her from rising above the city, into a black sky without stars" (129). Gauri moves to Rhode Island with Subhash after Udayan's death, primarily because she wanted to escape the conventions, the stifling memories and the people of her homeland; the push was greater to her and once in America she reinvents her self in its liberated climate and finds a purpose to live for her own sake, she finds no logic in returning to the place that had restricted her self. However, Gauri in her memory makes a thousand journeys to her home in Calcutta. After they drift apart they lived on "either side of the enormous country"

(222), never obtaining a divorce yet remaining separate. Bela's life too, consisted of a series of journeys – to her father's home country and across the country she grew up in. She used her father's home in Rhode Island as a temporary retreat whenever she needed a certain amount of time to herself and left without bothering to say when she would be back. Lahiri seems to suggest in this novel that Diasporic spaces have become fluid with porous boundaries as the diasporic communities partake transnational character in continued migration and return. In the age of global movement, diaspora has both biological and spatial connotation, with a host of references to travelling, border-crossing, exile, return, social and cultural boundaries and multi-locality. The writers of diaspora like Jhumpa Lahiri does not necessarily restrict their diasporic representations to the physical act of migration, but also creates space for an interpretation of imagined, virtual, historical, cultural movement involved in the very act of migration.

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