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Dilemma of Male Immigrants in Lahiri's Short Stories

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Abstract: Jhumpa Lahiri is accepted as one of the postcolonial authors whose main concern is to exhibit the identity crisis, predicament, troubles, psychological and cultural fluidity of Indian immigrants who try to be a part of the American society, but cannot dispose themselves of their native cultural identities throughout their lives. These crises pose threats to the social and familial relations of these people since they cannot achieve in reaching an ultimate and static identity. While moving into a phase of alienation in a Western landscape right after their arrival in there, they on the other hand preserve their traditional habits in their daily lives although they sometimes perform these customs unconsciously. The main focus of this study is to manifest Lahiri's attitude and theoretical views in her short stories regarding the postcolonial identities of male characters becoming apparent after these people immigrate to foreign countries with a variety of reasons and hopes. In the study, two short stories are touched upon in order to argue this author's approach to the structural features and acts of native identities of male characters in the postcolonial period. Since Lahiri is often identified with a female approach to the postcolonial identities, it is also necessary to explore her male immigrants who also have the same feelings of ambivalence and predicament like her female characters.

Keywords: Lahiri, male immigrants, dilemma, identity, short stories.

America has posed an imagined landscape for ages with its opportunities for education, living, entertainment and occupation, and that is the reason why it receives an influx of immigrants from not only European but also non-European countries, but it is arguable whether it is able to satisfy the demands of these immigrants to a great extent since it is necessary to ask if these immigrants really embrace the American lifestyle and ways of thinking with ease after they step on this land.

Although America employs lots of immigrants from a variety of nations such as China, India, Spain and Africa, these immigrants basically experience the same incidents and mood throughout their stay in that country in terms of being wholly adapted to an unfamiliar culture. Referring to the psychological dilemma of Africans who live in America, Du Bois claims that "One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in a dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (8). What Du Bois tries to define as regards the blacks' predicament in a foreign Western landscape can also be assigned to other immigrants' mental stalemate for the reason that they also question themselves as to the real degrees and borders of being American and acting within the borders of their native identities. They on the one hand observe the American culture, food, drinking, dressing and linguistic features, but they on the other hand recall their native culture and lifestyle even if they can be children in America who have never been to the native land and never seen their parents' experiences there.

Amar Acheraiou refers to the structural attributes of identities as the ones which cannot protect and sustain their core structural elements, discussing that "identities were to be reformulated within an enmeshed network of centripetal and centrifugal forces; forces that generated a complex dynamics of identification, whereby no side had no prevalence over the other" (99). This perception raises the controversial and ambivalent structure of cultural identities which come up as a result of the interrelation between the colonized and the colonialist nations. After the colonial period ended, the cultures and identities of the once colonized societies did not remain in the previous patterns of their native identities. They were put into a phase of alienation and crisis in

which they could not remove their cultural existence from their minds whatever they performed. A large number of these people had to leave their homeland since they believed that the Western landscape would provide them with what they wished and sought for. It was essential for them to cope with this dilemma and vague alienation whose borders were not clear and predictable.

As for the situation of Indian immigrants in America, these people make up one of the immigrant communities in this continent with their indigenous culture and identities that seem strange to other citizens in America. Before immigrating to America, they had their own cultural manners in eating, drinking, clothing, religious systems and wedding ceremonies; however, after becoming a member of the American population and leaving their homeland with great expectations such as having education with high-standard, finding a job that offers high salaries and escaping from their homeland where heavy political and social crises occurred, they have confronted a sort of alienation which cannot be said to eliminate their earlier native identities totally. In meeting their daily needs including transportation, nutrition and hospital care, they assume new and dissimilar identities due to exchanging patterns and cultural attributes between their Indian and American self, generating identities which possess coexisting cores, fundamental features and components (Lamb 210). They begin to be obsessed with their real home: whether their current land or their previous native land, and as Brah mentions it, home becomes "a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality" (188-189). Despite sometimes yearning for their ancestral cultures and heritage in their homeland, they attempt to be fused with a Western living and thought, generally preserving a state of floating consciousness and identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the postcolonial writers who focus on the social and familial issues or experiences of Indian characters living in America where they have to maintain their lives in the face of two coexisting cultures. Like other South Asian authors who "explore contemporary realities of shifting national boundaries, multiple locations of home, multiracial and multicultural identities by deftly

yoking together the local with the global," Lahiri similarly raises the dilemma of Indian immigrants in a foreign landscape like America and their tentative adaptation to the American surrounding (Rajan and Sharma 151). Even she tries to become a part of America in spite of being partly alienated while dealing with the subject matters of "the human predicament", "the crisis of identity", "marginality", "alienation" and "nostalgia" (Sharma 34). "Lahiri's characters, located as they are at the intersection of Indian and western cultures, struggle to survive in the baffling new world where the old relationship and old mores and manners are out of place" (Srivastava 8). In addition to these issues of Indian American home, Lahiri also makes some references to the subject matters of "loneliness", "love" and "self-realization" (Ling 141). She touches upon both the first and the second generation characters of Indian-American culture that cannot disentangle from the conundrum of fragmentation owing to their inescapable bonds with the native and western identities (Srivastava 8). While the first generation characters do not submit any extrovert personality as a kind of precaution against the cultural invasion and assimilation caused by the American lifestyles, the second generation or their children are often discomforted by these attitudes of their parents which bring about critical problems and gaps between themselves (Singh 124).

Both in "Hell-Heaven" and "The Third and Final Continent", Lahiri deals with mainly the identity crisis and ambiguities of male characters who immigrate to America in order to study, and who are exposed to an ambivalent alienation and impasse between their original roots and a new unfamiliar culture. Although they seem to cling to their native cultural identities firmly at first, they suddenly turn away from the native culture towards the American awareness which they also abandon after some time since they cannot manifest any steadfast cultural identity permanently.

Included in Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* as one of the short stories, "Hell-Heaven" makes references to the cultural dilemma and identity crisis of an Indian young man called Pranab Chakraborty who came to America in order to complete his studies. Arriving in Boston which is entirely an unfamiliar city when compared to his native Indian culture and customs, Pranab begins to think that it is essential for him to

meet some Indian people since he feels isolated in such a foreign surrounding; therefore, he sees the narrator and her mother whose clothes reveal her Indian identity and follows them in order to make friends as the narrator articulates: "After Pranab Kaku was befriended by my parents, he confessed that on the day we met him he followed my mother and me for the better part of an afternoon around the streets of Cambridge …" (Lahiri 2008, 60). The ambivalent feelings and impasse of Pranab surface immediately after his arrival in America where he cannot attain the sense of self-confidence and become a part of the American population because he longs to meet the narrator and her mother as they are Indian people whom he wants to have close ties with. Recognizing the presence of other Indians like the narrator and her mother in America, he cannot preclude himself from following and speaking to these Indians, which is one of the signs that display his inescapable bonds with Indian culture albeit he lives in America now. During his frequent visits to the narrator's parents, Pranab points out his retaining some aspects of his Indian identity as is raised by the narrator as follows: "He appeared without warning, never phoning beforehand but simply knocking on the door the way people did in Calcutta and calling out 'Boudi!' as he waited for my mother to let him in" (Lahiri 2008, 63). The reason why Pranab maintains closer and more intimate relationship with the narrator's mother is, as the narrator elucidates it, that:

> They had in common all the things she and my father did not; a love of music, film, leftist politics, poetry. They were from the same neighborhood in North Calcutta, their family homes within walking distance, the facades familiar to them once the exact locations were described. They knew the same shops, the same bus and tram routes, the same holes-in-the-wall for the best jebalis and moghlai parathas. My father, on the other hand, came from a suburb twenty miles outside Calcutta, an area my mother called wilderness … (Lahiri 2008, 64)

The narrator's mother does not consider even her husband so close as to have a deep affiliation with him through some non-essential differences in their background. Belonging to the same cultural roots and also the similar ways of life in the same setting in Calcutta, Pranab and she recall and activate Indian sides of their identities whenever they converse and bring up the issues of their Indian civilization. To exemplify, the author directs attention to the fact that "Within a few weeks, Pranab Kaku had brought his reel-to-reel over to our apartment, and he played for my mother medley after medley of songs from the Hindi films of their youth" (Lahiri 2008, 65). While beginning a love relationship and spending time with an American girl called Deborah, Pranab does not abandon his native Indian culture and customs as well as his native linguistic legacy, which is explained by the writer: "Pranab Kaku taught Deborah to khubbhalo and aacha and to pick up certain foods with her fingers instead of with a fork" (Lahiri 2008, 68). He seems to be so firmly steadfast in his preserving his earlier disingenuous habits during eating, speaking and having fun that Deborah is also assimilated into imitating his attitudes by learning words from his native language and embracing his eating habits that are peculiar to his native culture.

Lahiri, however, does not present a purely Indian identity adopted by Pranab since his strict adherence to his native culture is not carried on permanently. One of the indications which underscore his obscure alienation from his Indian roots and identity can be observed when the narrator and her mother get the impression which the narrator mentions: "He had a striking face, with a high forehead and a thick moustache, and overgrown, untamed hair that my mother said made him look like the American hippies who were everywhere in those days" (Lahiri 2008, 62). Along with his Indian appearance, Pranab reflects an American identity through his hair style that the narrator's mother associate with an American pattern seen lately. This can be accepted as the author's emphasis on this male character's partial alienation which makes him a concrete example of having both an Indian and American self. Additionally, Pranab displays some patterns of sharp deviations away from his Indian culture and identity that are seen once he chooses Deborah who is precisely an American citizen as a partner and a wife rather than an Indian girl with whom he can

preserve and share a native Indian culture. He even ventures to defy his parents' refusal of such a marriage, which denotes that he sets his mind on deviating from his indigenous customs and moral principles for the sake of getting married to an American girl. On learning that their son will get married to an American girl called Deborah, his parents never consent to Pranab's decision, as the narrator expresses it:

> Pranab Kaku's parents were horrified by the thought of their only son marrying an American woman, and a few weeks later our telephone rang in the middle of the night: it was Mr. Chakraborty telling my father that they could not possibly bless such a marriage, that it was out of the question, that if Pranab Kaku dared to marry Deborah he would no longer acknowledge him as a son. Then his wife got on the phone, asking to speak to my mother and attacked her as if they were intimate, blaming my mother for allowing the affair to develop. She said that they had already chosen a wife for him in Calcutta, that he'd left for America with the understanding that he'd go back after he had finished his studies and marry this girl. (Lahiri 2008, 68)

Even though Pranab shows sympathy for the narrator's mother and gets satisfied with spending time with her as well as being absorbed in remembering the old memories of their homeland in Calcutta and taking pleasure in commemorating them, which can be supposed as one of the remarks of his fondness and strong sympathy for his Indian culture and traditions, he does not want to look for an Indian girl in order to marry, thus exhibiting his alienated self by acting against the grain owing to his insistence on disobeying one of the basic customs in India even if he loses his parents' love and respect. His reaction to this refusal cannot be associated with an Indian on the grounds that he does not care about his parents' disowning him as is reflected by the narrator: "In the face of this refusal, Pranab Kaku shrugged. 'I don't care. Not everyone can be as open-minded as you,' he told my parents" (Lahiri 2008, 72). His alienation and behaving like an American can be traced in his wedding

ceremony which does not possess any Indian culture or tradition except for a conventional Indian meal made by the narrator's mother before the wedding, which the narrators makes clear: "It would be the only Bengali aspect of the wedding; the rest of it would be strictly American, with a cake and a minister and Deborah in a long white dress and veil" (Lahiri 2008, 72). As years go by, Pranab and Deborah have two daughters who do not carry any Indian trait and identity because of Pranab's alienation and ambivalence, and the narrator defines them in the following expressions: "two identical little girls barely looked Bengali and spoke in English and were being raised so differently from me and most of the other children," ascribing these girls' alienation to Pranab's marriage with Deborah (Lahiri 2008, 75). Nevertheless, Pranab's alienation and American side do not remain steady as his Indian self does not in a similar way. Attaching to the American way of living through his relationship and marriage with Deborah does not end up with a wholly American identity for him for the reason that he verifies this fluctuation and shifting once he deceives Deborah with a Bengali woman and ends his marriage because of his love affair with this member of his native culture.

In "The Third and Final Continent" in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri deals with a male character from Calcutta who leaves his homeland in order to study in London and then who is able to find a job in a library of a university in America. This character, also the narrator of the short story, functions as one of the most remarkable male characters who try to get accustomed to the unfamiliar and odd conditions in Western countries, particularly America, while conserving their traditional connections with their native culture and lifestyles albeit their alienation that is worthy of attention. While living in London, the narrator raises his experiences with other Bengali young people and their common attitudes when they come together abroad, mentioning that "I lived in north London, in Finsbury Park, in a house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like myself, at least a dozen and sometimes more, all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad" (Lahiri 1999, 82). Instead of staying with foreign citizens and spending time with this kind of unfamiliar people, he stays with other Indians abroad who lead him to reconstruct their collective customs and cultural traits in such a foreign environment. In spite of

living far away from his homeland and his native citizens living there, the narrator cannot dissociate himself from other Indians and from establishing reconnections with these native people as he cannot disengage his bonds totally from his cultural roots. The reunion of these people who share the same cultural features and ways of life helps them revive their customs and keep active their national memories even though they maintain their lives physically very far away from their native land. For instance, the narrator emphasizes that "We lived three or four to a room, shared a single, icy toilet, and took turns cooking pots of egg curry, which we ate with our hands on a table covered with newspapers" (Lahiri 1999, 82). Rather than adjusting themselves entirely to the American customs such as eating with forks and spoons, living only one person to a room and eating Western food, the narrator and his friends insist on continuing to preserve their cultural attachment and traditions of India such as eating spicy food, living in a single room with more people and eating food with hands. Nevertheless, he cannot prolong his ties with his Indian culture so strongly and steadily after moving to America and staying alone there. Upon spending some time in America, he does not regard the American food as strange, which is conveyed in this work:

> In the end I bought a small carton of milk and a box of cornflakes. This was my first meal in America. I ate it at my desk. I preferred it to hamburgers or hot dogs, the only alternative I could afford in the coffee shops on Massachusetts Avenue … In a week I had adjusted, more or less. I ate cornflakes and milk, morning and night, and bought some bananas for variety, slicing them into the bowl with the edge of my spoon. In addition I bought tea bags and a flask, which the salesman in Woodworth's referred to as a thermos (a flask, he informed me, was used to store whiskey, another thing I have never consumed). (Lahiri 1999, 83)

The narrator does not prepare spicy eggs for himself and does not eat his food with his hands, thus revealing his alienation from the native traditional habits that he performs while living with other Bengali

citizens in London. His alienation and confusion deepen after he learns that his landlady is one hundred years old and that she does not have any psychological illness due to living alone without her husband because he remembers his mother's psychological damage for the loss of his father, which he imparts as follows: "I'm mortified. I had assumed Mrs. Croft in her eighties, perhaps as old as ninety … That this person was a widow who lived alone mortified me further still. It was widowhood that had driven my own mother insane," and he implies the Indian women's strong loyalty or affiliation to their husbands in a patriarchal society in which these women like his mother get into a sort of crisis and die albeit being not in an old age (Lahiri 1999, 88). These different cultural features in America make him an alienated and confused person who begins to regard his own culture and civilization as odd and unfamiliar while he partly adapts himself to that dissimilar surrounding. After settling in America for his job and spending a certain amount of time, his wife comes to America from Bengal so as to live with him there, but his deviation from his cultural aspects causes him to be disturbed by his wife's traditional and native attitudes while living with her in America. To illustrate, he claims that:

> I waited to get used to her, her presence at my side, at my table and in my bed, but a week later we were still strangers. I still was not used to coming home to an apartment that smelled of steamed rice, and finding that the basin in the bathroom was always wiped clean, our two toothbrushes lying side by side, a cake of Pears soap from India resting in the soap dish. I was not used to the fragrance of coconut oil she rubbed every other night in her scalp, or the delicate sound her bracelets made as she moved about the apartment." (Lahiri 1999, 90)

His wife's traditional way of living leads him to have strange feelings and discomfort although he was very familiar with this kind of customs and cultural elements while living in India, and his arrival in a Western landscape and interaction with the cultural patterns and traditions of this land turned him into an ambivalent and fragmented person for he

cannot remove his connection from the native culture of India. Then, his alienation does not continue so steadily and securely as can be expected from him. He confesses that "Though we visit Calcutta every few years, and bring back more drawstring pajamas and Darjeeling tea, we have decided to grow old here" (Lahiri 1999, 92). He still feels that he partly belongs to India since he attempts to maintain his use of Indian products and drinks even though he indicates some symptoms of sharp separation from his native origins after settling in America. His anxiety to make his son preserve some manners of Indian culture in America can provide evidence for the reader concerning his dilemma and identity crisis emerging between the vague edges of two wholly discrete cultures which pertain to America and India. The narrator and his wife visit their son who studies at Harvard University and take him home so that he cannot forget his culture, saying that "he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die" (Lahiri 1999, 92).

To sum up, Lahiri can be said to be drawing attention to the ambivalent identities and fragmentation of immigrant characters of Indian origins who arrive in America with various inspirations, but who find themselves in a deep gap where they strive to manage their lives along with coexisting different identities and alienation. Regarding the state of these immigrants being torn between Indian and American culture, Lahiri does not reflect any different approach to male and female characters as can be understood from the main characters in "Hell-Heaven" and "The Third and Final Continent". In her fiction, she implies that the same dilemma and psychological predicament can be experienced by both female and male characters who immigrate to an unknown setting in America in which they struggle to adjust themselves to the requirement of a foreign population in a variety of ways. They astonish others through both their nominal loyalty to their native roots and their nominal alienation which they exhibit sometimes unexpectedly. They sometimes seem to be an inseparable part of the Indian culture and land as soon as they meet their native citizens in America; however, when they become isolated or have close ties with Americans, they give the impression of being fused with the American society although they never achieve in disconnecting themselves entirely from their original culture and nation.

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