



Canons and Controversies: The Critical Gaze on Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction

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Abstract

The South Asian American diasporic writer, Jhumpa Lahiri has been widely acclaimed by the first-world intellectuals for her *truthful* representations of diasporic experience. In recent years, however, some scholars have drawn upon Gayatri Spivak's notion of "Native Informant" to interrogate the controversial canonization of Lahiri in the West, and point instead to her disavowed participation in the production of favored knowledge. In consideration of the rising incidence of critical controversies in naming the diasporic writer, this article aims to conduct a review of the established literature to synthesize and integrate the copious amount of scholarly insights available on variables related to naming and categorizing. To this end, the corpus of interpretation, criticism and appreciation are surveyed with three questions in mind: What controversial and mixed reactions have Lahiri and her fiction provoked? How much deliberation has been given to interpreting her short stories and novels as works of art, and how much thought has been given to critique or to side issues? This will allow the researcher to track the critical gaze that seemingly produces *auras* of exoticism and thereby allegedly appropriates the position of the writer as a Native Informant. The study concludes that the major concern of any critical work on Lahiri should not merely be the issues of diasporas and cultural tensions, but facets of the author's politics of representation.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, Conformity, Repetition, Native Informant, De-/Politicized Fiction

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Introduction

In her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward A History of the Vanishing Present*, the contemporary postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999) accuses certain members of the Indian diaspora intellectuals for acting as native informants for “first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other” (p. 270). In recent years, increasing efforts have been made to monitor the canonization of certain so-called informants and their disavowed participation in the production of favored knowledge. As one of the contemporary writers of Indian diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri has been widely acclaimed by the “first-world” elite for her “truthful representations” of diaspora experience and for her “enlarging the human story” (Obama, 2015, para. 4). While awarding Lahiri with the America’s 2014 National Medal of Arts and Humanities, the US President Barack Obama remarked that “writers and scientists” are sort of his “crew,” and that Lahiri is appraised for her sharing “rare truths about the common experiences that we have as Americans” in much the same way as they do in the White House (Obama, 2015, para. 1).

Indeed, since the publication of her debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, in 1999, Lahiri has been widely acclaimed as one of the greatest contemporary South Asian American diaspora writers (Asl, 2018). Soon after its appearance, the collection became *The New Yorker* magazine’s best debut of the year, and won Lahiri the O. Henry Award, the PEN/Hemingway Award, and the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000. Once announced as the “Pulitzer” winner, Lahiri’s “life shifted into fast forward;” promising the then “thrilled critics and enchanted fans” more to come of “the maturity and assurance” embedded in the work of the “first-time author” (Jones, 2000, para. 4). Her second offering, *The Namesake* (2003), was also impressively well-received; was being adapted into a less well received film by Mira Nair in 2007; which was similarly a New York Times Notable Book, a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and chosen as one of the best books of the year by USA Today and Entertainment Weekly. In 2008 she published her second short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* which was debuted at No. 1 on The New York Times bestseller list, winning her the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award and the Vallombrosa-Gregor von Rezzori Prize, and having ever since been published in 30 countries. Her second novel, *The Lowland* (2013), only added to this already well-stocked trophy cabinet by succeeding to be a National Book Award Finalist and being shortlisted for the 2013 Man Booker Prize. The book’s acclaim eventually crested with the 2014 America’s National Medal of Arts and Humanities.

Due to such considerable recognition, many scholars have labeled Lahiri a “celebrity author” (Dennihy, 2012, p. 239), feeling compelled to associate or compare her with canonical writers such as Alice Munro, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ernest Hemingway, Anton Chekhov, William Wordsworth, William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, Jane Austen, among many others (Brady, 2008; Bron, 2008;

Freeman, 2008; Kipen, 1999; Kohli, 1999). But Lahiri has garnered this colossal reputation only after an unending dispute among (normally Western and Eastern) critics and general public; ergo, when we turn to the existing criticism on Lahiri's oeuvre, we find the literature abundant and diverse. Her scholarly readers have attempted to take one element of her writings and extrapolate it towards total explanation. Particular topics appear often enough to provide a succession of leitmotifs: the individual/universal duality (Bess, 2004), miscommunication (Brians, 2003), ethics, aesthetics and socio-stylistics (Karttunen, 2008), space (Caesar, 2005), gender (Alfonso-Forero, 2007), immigrant culture (Bhalla, 2008), postcolonialism (Tettenborn, 2002), visual dynamics (Asl & Abdullah, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Asl, Hull, & Abdullah, 2016), foodways (Williams, 2007), photography (Banerjee, 2010), globalization (Asl, Abdullah, & Yaapar, 2016), melancholia (Munos, 2013), generational breaks (Puttaiah, 2012), along with others.

The diverse critically reflective strand(s)—albeit by taking cross-disciplinary issues, each offers a unique conceptual or theoretical insight into Lahiri's fiction—at times appear to be laden with the respective researchers' ideological perspectives, suggesting that some of their appraisal is very likely affected by their particular personal and social circumstances. As a result, a few critics have developed grave misgivings about the overwhelming success and popularity of Lahiri's fiction in the United States, and have felt compelled to examine her writings in the light of Orientalizing discourses and postcolonial exoticism (Asl, 2016; Bhalla, 2008; Mehrvand & Asl, 2013; Shankar, 2009). These researchers, as Leyda (2011) contends, point to the highly celebrated representation of Lahiri within the mainstream culture to argue that “cultural conditions in the United States (and other western countries) make it difficult or impossible for western reading audiences to embrace an Indian American writer's book only on its own terms” (p. 67). In doing so, they have charged Lahiri with conforming to pre-scripted norms of the hegemonic society and its capitalist market.

In the light of the above considerations regarding the rising incidence of critical controversies in naming the diaspora writer, it appears timely to ask to what extent statements like these should be viewed as misconceptions, exoticizing, aurora-making, or errors and partial understandings? This question is of current relevance to the controversial public and scholarly response Lahiri's fiction has provoked. This essay aims to track the critical gaze that seemingly produces auras of exoticism and in so doing allegedly appropriates the position of the figure of the native informant.

Methodology

A review of the established literature will be conducted to synthesize and integrate the copious amount of scholarly insights available on variables related to naming and categorizing. The survey of the corpus of interpretation, criticism, and appreciation will be conducted based on the following question: What controversial

and mixed reactions have Lahiri and her fiction provoked? How much deliberation has been given to interpreting her short stories and novels as works of art, and how much thought has been given to critique or to side issues? To this end, the study will first review the general public and critical commentary that aim at de-/canonizing Lahiri's works by demonstrating how they either easily fit into or depart from simplistic categorization. Then it will focus on the reactions that deal pointedly with questions of racial roles and thus examine the body of literature that situate Lahiri's writings in a larger debate on ethno-racial identity.

There are three reasons why this study is studying Lahiri in the first place. First, it is her widespread popularity and meteoric success that position her among the canons in the hegemonic market—epitomized in her winning the National Humanities Medal of the “first-world.” Second, there is the fact of her “location in a privileged western metropolis” and her having limited knowledge of India that appears to make her fiction indulge in stereotypes and clichéd details (Akhter, 2014, p. 100). Finally, there is her own confession: in a direct opposition to parent's expectation of remembering and respecting the traditional “home” (Indian) culture, Lahiri revealed to us that she had strived to fit herself into mainstream American culture.

Discussion

Unless one delves deeply into the response each and every one of Lahiri's works provoked from the public in the West, one would not be able to fathom the rapturous reception they enjoyed, nor would one be able to comprehend the early charge of Lahiri's conformity to Western rubrics. Ever since the publication of *Interpreter of Maladies* in 1999, Lahiri has earned glowing reviews for each of her works: “Perceptive” (Heltzel, 1999), “Dazzling writing” (Donahue, 1999), “quietly elegant” (Abbott, 2000), and “simple yet stunning” (Changnon, 2000); all these comments run right through the glowing reviews of Lahiri's first collection, with scarcely a dissenting voice. The early adulatory commentaries are essentially repeated in later reviews of Lahiri's other works. Her much-anticipated first novel, *The Namesake*, was acclaimed quite similarly. The novel is described as a “novel of exquisite and subtle tension” (Caldwell, 2003), “quietly dazzling” (Kakutani, 2003), and “hugely appealing” (Prose, 2003). With the emergence of her second collection of short stories, Lahiri continued to receive a lot of adulation: “[D]eeply satisfying” (Freeman, 2008), “sensuous collection” (Sethi, 2009), and “gorgeous prose” (Memmott, 2008), are only some of the rhapsodic comments that pervade reviews of *Unaccustomed Earth*. Similarly, within a relatively short time from its release, Lahiri's second novel, *The Lowland* (2013), began to amass overwhelming public recognition: “[m]agisterial” (Sacks, 2013), a “provocative novel” (Mehta, 2014), and “an ambitious undertaking” (Allfrey, 2013). The other contemporary critiques, albeit with no less adulation, are more pointed in their remarks, Rothstein (2000), for instance, praises Lahiri for leaving the conventional “magic realism” and looking at

“reality.” According to her, even though Indian writers’ “voices are being heard much more loudly in the West than in India, they are ushering in a new era for Indian literature in English”.

This paper does not refute the fact that Lahiri is a “powerful ‘interpreter’” with a deceptively simple style; nor does it aim at disparaging her for the “impressive number of prizes” and glowing reviews she has received for her works (Taylor, 1999). But from a study of this sort the first conclusion that emerges is that Jhumpa Lahiri was completely valorized and exoticized by the American mainstream press. Against this mainstream wave, however, there appears sporadic reviews that aptly repeat the early charge of Lahiri’s conformity to the pre-established normativities, with the foregone conclusion that her fiction is “overwhelmingly dependent on western publishers and markets [and] has suffered from something of this pressure to conform, whether through the social realism of arranged marriages, the whimsical comedy of accumulated exotica, or post-Rushdie linguistic pyrotechnics and grand-scale novels about ‘India’ (Jaggi, 1999). Hence, it is fair to question Lahiri’s so-called “truthful representations” of diaspora experience (Asl, Abdullah & Yaapar, 2018, p. 1), and examine the ways in which she complies with Western normative scripts and produces a limited point of view.

Lahiri’s Fiction as a Complex Tissue of Repetitions

What is said two or more times, J. Hillis Miller tells us in *Fiction and Repetition* (1982), “may not be true, but the reader is fairly safe in assuming that it is significant” (p. 2). I argue that regardless of all the rhapsodic commentaries, Lahiri’s fiction is a complex tissue of repetitions and of repetitions within repetitions. First, it is her generic repetitions that breaks with the customary pattern. After she followed up the stunning debut collection of short stories with a novel in 2003, Lahiri returned to short fiction with *Unaccustomed Earth* in 2008 to convey that she was more comfortable with the short form. But in 2013, she returned to the longer form with *The Lowland*.

Second, it is the commonality and interrelation of her works. It may at first sound odd, however, to define her fiction as internally connected to make up a unified whole, but the present study emphasizes on the repetitive nature of Lahiri’s works by identifying recurring themes and motifs as well as stereotypical representations of gender roles and racial relations. When read together, Lahiri fiction looks like a mosaic, “a portrait of an Indian-American family” (Day, 2008). In other words, while each piece of work is granted a sort of autonomy through its own unique narrative style, diverse and unrelated characters, various locales, and somewhat distinguishable set of formal strategies, they are then given the semblance of unity through relation to an external “whole,” a fundamental *idea* of the work—a distinctive feature that Brada-Williams (2004) identifies in a smaller scale in

Interpreter of Maladies and refers to as patterns and motifs that bind the stories together (p. 451).

Lahiri's works are also thematically interconnected as they are directly or indirectly annexed to diaspora experience. A distinctive feature of her characters, for example, is the tension that they suffer from due to the problem of displacement and "the sense of belonging to a particular place and culture and yet at the same time being an outsider to another creates" (Chakrabarti & Chakrabarti, 2002, pp. 24-25). Another common thread in Lahiri's works is the setting of her narratives as she jumps India and the States. Such experience of dislocation ties together the whole body of her work. Apparently, Lahiri revisits her earlier works to develop new stories. As McAlpin (2008) asserts, "Lahiri continues to plow the fertile ground she first sowed in her 2000 Pulitzer Prize-winning debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* - Bengali immigrants and the culture gap that sprouts between them and their American-raised offspring". In addition, Lahiri's Indian characters who live abroad are all similarly "afflicted with a 'sense of exile'" (Choubey, 2001, para. 4). As one reviewer has rightly said, Lahiri is merely concerned with themes of "cultural displacement, only with a different focus" ("Exiles on main", 2008). Many of her characters are "Indian immigrants trying to adjust to a new life in the United States, and their cultural displacement is a kind of index of a more existential sense of dislocation ... Lahiri's characters realize, however, that America offers them, or at least their children, opportunities they would never have at home" (Kakutani, 1999).

Naming Jhumpa Lahiri

In response to her colossal reputation, many scholars have primarily attempted to contextualize, situate and name Jhumpa Lahiri—distinctively labeling her as American, Indian-American, Asian-American, postcolonial, South-Asian, Bengali, Bengali-American, Bengali-Indian-American, Indian-Diaspora and global, to give a non-exhaustive list. Their argument mainly revolves around the provocative question of identity, i.e. whether Lahiri is "Bengali, Asian American, Postcolonial, Universal?" (Dhingra & Cheung, 2012, p. xi). Yet, it seems that the widespread popularity of Lahiri is part of what makes naming her a complex and contradictory process. Even though Lahiri is a prominent writer of Indian diaspora, she proves to be an inaccurate informant (Asl, 2018). This means that her reception in the neocolonial America and her subsequent literary acclaim and commercial success in the West are by virtue of her exoticism. Srikanth (2012) reaffirms this position by arguing that Lahiri's Indian characters "conform to the model of successful citizenship" (p. 59). This is of course in contrast to some critics who, in keeping with the positive reception of the mainstream culture, commend Lahiri for her universality and for her eschewing earlier forms of gender or racial politics. The subject matter of a few works such as Shea (2008), Banerjee (2010), and Cheung and Dhingra (2012) deals with Lahiri's fiction as transmitting cultural knowledge or

postcolonial loss. A few other scholars like Dhingra (2012) and Tripathy (2014) review literature on Lahiri's gender representations.

Individually, all these essays are engaging and worthwhile as they contribute to analyses of postcoloniality, gender, generations, assimilation, hybridity and migrations; and as a whole, they are all connected by questions of categorization and canonicity as their connecting thread. Some of the essays even go beyond the disciplinary boundaries of literary criticism, and connect Lahiri's writings to artistic, political, and historical contexts. Cheung and Dhingra's (2012) article on loss, melancholia and compensation, for instance, contributes to a better understanding of the socio-political contexts of Lahiri's fiction by situating her first novel within histories of Indian exclusion laws in America, and examining assimilationist patterns of Indians coming to the US in the twentieth-century. Similarly, the main argument of Srikanth's (2012) essay is to compare Lahiri's stories to US "deployments" of Muslim American women as "spokespersons" for post-9/11 America, confirming the assumption that Lahiri's immigrant characters represent "model[s] of successful citizenship" (p. 59). Mani (2012) provides another perspective through her essay on the film version of Lahiri's novel and the related art gallery *Namesake/ Inspiration*. The subject matter of her study is to demonstrate that the "intertextual relationship between the literary, cinematic, and photographic" offers a better understanding of how narratives of South Asian migration circulate within US culture (p. 75).

All being said, it is noteworthy to remember that in their exploration of the myriad ways that Jhumpa Lahiri is situated and categorized in academic and commercial contexts, these essays, not only do possess similarities to the main points of each other, but they also contain overlapping discussions that (re)appear in almost every one of them. Some of the other relevant topics that these critics touch upon include the examination of the recurrent themes of exile, difference, gendered ruptures, familial belongings, roots and routes, and loss and melancholia. Read together, these works discuss notions of immigration, race, assimilation, gender depiction, family, belonging, to name a few; but the more than frequent similarities of the discussions among these critical works make the task of putting them under one heading highly challenging. Therefore, it is not unexpected that certain interrelated discussions, that of gender, race, and assumptions on assimilation, (re)appear under almost every heading. Nonetheless, these essays, altogether, help locate readings of Lahiri's writings in the socio-political context of late twentieth century America, chiefly around the gender and racial hierarchies that the American panopticon disseminates.

Lahiri as a Native Informant: De-historicized and De-politicized Fiction

Debates regarding Lahiri's contribution to South Asian diasporic and immigrant American literature have always existed. One of the major controversies

surrounding her fiction is the degree to which she represents her subject matter accurately and authentically. While some scholars acknowledge her employment of “a lucid realism to orient us within settings, activities, and relationships” (Koshy, 2013, p. 344) and her “sociologically realistic and ethnographically detailed portrayals of Bengali Americans” (Nagajothi, 2013, p. 1), a few other critics accuse Lahiri of cultural misrepresentations and of exoticizing the immigrant characters (Dhingra & Cheung, 2012, p. xv). One of the scholars that questions the accuracy and credibility of Lahiri’s representations of Indian culture is Aubeeluck (2006), who draws upon Spivak’s (1999) notion of “native informant” to acknowledge that because of Lahiri’s belonging to an Indian ancestry, and her being in the “possession of a credible amount of information for the Indian diaspora” (p. 5), she has been aptly expected to be an authoritative source about Indian culture. But Aubeeluck goes on to argue that given her emergence from affluent upper middle-class Indian society, Lahiri cannot provide the authentic voice of a formerly oppressed and colonized nation. Instead, as we are told, in negotiating Indian American alliances, Lahiri’s depiction of the Indian immigrants has been affected by a Western-imperial perspective and is therefore “designed more for the eyes of the West” (p. 148). To support this argument, Aubeeluck indicates that Lahiri presents characters only from urban India and rich, middle class families. Her protagonists are mostly “intellectuals, upper-middle class, productive people, with university degrees from Yale, MIT, or Brown, have prestigious jobs and earn big paychecks” (p. 136). This is due to the fact that Lahiri herself does not belong to a social or cultural subaltern category, a premise that not only enhances the possibility of her not being “very different from the European colonizers,” but also suggests that she is “complicit in helping the colonizer to control the masses” (pp. 23-5). In this regard, Lahiri, according to Aubeeluck, belongs to a First World elite in India, the wealthy and the powerful ones whose upper (middle) class images, though “suffered debilitation during the period of British colonization,” they still have access to “wealth, power, and Western education” (p. 23). Aubeeluck’s elite subject matter is also touched upon by other critics. Waldman (2008) contends that Lahiri’s “books are more about the coastal elite experience” than they are about the everyday Indian-American life (para. 1). In a similar discussion, Srikanth (2012) accuses Lahiri of depicting only a small cross-section of Indian American life, and argues that Lahiri’s sense of realism has failed in portraying an “incredibly heterogeneous Indian American population” (p. 58). Lahiri’s characters are all professionals that belong to the middle class, or even to the upper middle class.

Srikanth affirms that Lahiri’s characters conform to the model of successful citizenship and tell us that it is the reason why they are easily absorbed and well received in American society. Taking Aubeeluck and Srikanth’s assertions into account, it is easy to understand Cardozo’s (2012) argument for Lahiri’s inability to accurately depict the South Asian diaspora. As she declares, “Lahiri can neither comprehensively nor objectively ‘represent’ a diverse South Asian/American

population: her autobiographically informed fictions necessarily reflect particular class, geographic, and historical experience” (p. 8). Cardozo’s argument can be corroborated by Sanga’s (2001) proposition that the works of Indian immigrants are undoubtedly rooted in and emanate from a Western literary tradition. That they write in English “is itself enough justification for this - yet, at the same time, [they break] away from that same tradition when [they incorporate] Eastern, or specifically Indian tropes in” their writings (p. 84). Sanga’s view, however, seems more ambivalent than Cardozo’s, in acknowledging in Lahiri both a rootedness in Western literature and a breaking-away from that culture. All the same, the misgivings about the type of character that Lahiri presents proves to be quite timely. To employ Spivak’s terms, Lahiri is an “indigenous elite” whose work is of an “impossible perspective,” or a “somewhat dubious” situation that she speaks for herself and lends voice to her own feelings; an idea that hints at the de-historicized and de-politicized nature of Lahiri’s fiction (1999, pp. xi-40).

Lahiri’s problematic representation of immigrant characters, however, is such a significant topic that it has drawn the attention of many other scholars like Shankar (2009) and Hai (2012). They all provide a worthwhile perspective on how Lahiri’s fiction offers a comforting version of difference within the contemporary cultural politics of the United States. According to them, Lahiri resorts to a pre-scripted narrative propagated by the American hegemon, and hence transmits rather stereotypical and reductive ideas about South Asian immigrants. This argument is very much based on the existing omissions (of politics, power, class, diversity of religion, and issues of race) in her narratives. Shankar (2009) points to the narrowness of Lahiri’s conception of the South Asian American Other, asserting that Lahiri’s narratives are sufficiently de-historicized as to “omit the many unjust institutional challenges (of immigration laws and other state-sanctioned discriminations) they confront” (p. 53). And it is this de-historicized and de-politicized art that, according to these critics, is in the service of the United States’ notion of exceptionalism. In a similar critical vein, Hai (2012) confirms that “Lahiri’s stories do not carry a radical or transformative political edge, [...] They remain limited to a heteronormative model of sexual familial formation –there are no same-sex couples here, or single parents, or other non-traditional forms of familial organization” (pp. 205-6).

It is acceptable that Lahiri does not portray the heterogeneity of the Indian community in the United States, and it is indeed a timely invitation to probe deeper into Lahiri’s works to excavate the latent histories underlying them, yet the contention that the political sphere—the issues of power, privilege, and rights—are completely absent from Lahiri’s writings is unconvincing. What these critics neglect to answer is the question that, if Lahiri takes a conservative and safe standpoint, why the United States is still depicted and advertised as a “refuge” from India. That these critics are totally aware of Lahiri’s representation of the United States as the

liberating force is out of question, because at one point, they argue that Lahiri's portrayal of the different Others is in fact in keeping with what the American reader expects. But, whereas they note this simply as an act of Lahiri's "desire to be seen as writing fully within the American literary tradition" (Srikanth, 2012, p. 65), the present study suspects this desire to be an internalization and perpetuation of the hierarchies of power that the dominant culture propagates.

Conclusion

Many scholars have credited Lahiri for making new contributions to Indian diaspora literature. Some have complained about the false notes her fiction rings when describing the Indian culture and society. By taking cross-disciplinary issues, each critically reflective strand offers a unique conceptual or theoretical insight into Lahiri's fiction. The present article examined merely the body of literature and controversies that provide background information needed to understand and situate Lahiri's writings in a larger debate on ethno-racial identity. The reviewed literature thematically addressed key topics such as the public reception of the works, the problem of naming the diasporic writer, the accuracy and reliability of Lahiri as the supposed subject of knowledge, her advocacy or rejection of Assimilation/Americanization, her works as a medium of transmitting cultural human knowledge and her representation/s of the racial other. The fact that Lahiri narrates details about Indian culture and milieu offers enough proof for the idea that she is representing the ethnic group. It is concluded that with respect to Lahiri's location in a privileged western metropolis, the major concern of any critical study on Lahiri should not only be issues of diasporas and cultural tensions, but facets of the author's politics of representation. This would entail a reiteration of the literary gaze that as an apparatus of governmentality establishes ideologized images of power and plentitude. In order to materialize such a gaze, the present study suggests that the focus of future studies should be on Lahiri's diasporic writings that gaze at the gaze. Her writings offer the advantage of showing the process of gazing, subjects looking and being looked at, the affects and effects of those gazing subjects, and the way that their literary gaze formulates and structures the literary discourse they are located in.

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