“How many voices here?” A Study of the fictional works of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Verbal discourse is a social phenomenon”, remarked Bakhtin. The connection between language and society is not a new revelation, since the significance language plays in the construction and formation of society is so natural, it can often be overlooked. The continually rising studies of diasporas, of how societies are constantly interconnecting and changing, can benefit from a more stylized approach to the role language plays in how newly formed diasporas bare. One author who consistently emphasizes the considerable role language plays in the formation of diasporas is Jhumpa Lahiri. Her narratives, which always intertwine elements of “Indian” and “American” life, abound in the type of verbal discourse that emanates with social implications. The present paper is an attempt to explore the reciprocating relationships between culture, language and the representation and acculturation of identity through the lense of diaspora in the short fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri. Her stories have a fine thread of simultaneous autonomy and interconnectedness. As Lahiri’s characters remember back to earlier generations and look ahead to future ones, and as they constantly struggle to construct an identity in their interactions with diverse and traditional characters, Lahiri’s stories emphasize the transience not only of a sense of self dependent upon locale, but also of how a sense of self is always contingent upon a character’s ability to cope with and communicate with an ever-changing world.

Diaspora, by its very nature, is a term inclined toward transience. As the physical movement and intangible connections of people across the globe shift, so does the scholarly use of the term to describe such movement. Khachig Tololyan describes how “an even larger amount of authors working in various disciplines and non scholarly genres [have] been using the word, giving it an even larger variety of meanings”. The heightened popularity of the term and its ever-broadening connotations has led to even more analyses of diasporas as well as of the term itself. It is not beneficial, then to control and define an ever-changing concept, especially when the concept itself is relative to ever-changing people and identities. It can be, however beneficial to address the criticized limitations of diasporas and attempt to clarify the significance of their use in literature. The following argument is but an attempt to make meaning of a large, ambiguous, and controversial concept in one specific scenario. Scholars in multiple fields have used diaspora to refer to a constantly changing, unsettled concept of cultural identity. Waltraud Kokot, Khachig Tololyan and Carolin Alfronso, for example, explore how the concept of culture and diaspora are now related to “a vast field of meaning, including global processes of de-territorialization, transnational migration and cultural hybridity” in their literacy studies. There are reasons for
people’s relocations across continents continuously, if even subtly, change, so will the definition of diaspora. Therefore, the present paper investigates diasporic studies as a tool of cultural analysis in a compilation of short fiction by an Indian – American author with a constant awareness and allocation for the inherent changes constantly taking place in the real life diasporic movement of people and their sense of identity. This study of Lahiri’s short fiction collection *Unaccustomed Earth* will be accomplished by analyzing the presentation of diaspora in a set of specific multicultural narratives, and discussing how the depicted diasporas have individual and societal effects.

Since diasporic study looks at the role different cultures play in the formation of a character’s sense of self; it is natural to pair it with Mikhail Bakhtin’s Study of polyphony, which can refer to how a character expresses the different voices, and therefore cultures, at work within his sense of identity. Bakhtin states that a ‘novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized.” [262] and therefore works as an effective way to analyze the role culture and diaspora play in establishing those different voices.

Exploring the different voices at work in the character, construction of self can allow diasporic studies from becoming too narrow. Polyphonic study by looking at the multiple voices at work within a character, naturally incorporates more than just the past culture versus the present culture a character must incorporate into a sense of identity as all diasporic characters must do. Himadri Lahiri explains that this is an important process because the “immigrant experience is a series of reincarnations, deaths of earlier experiences followed by rebirths of promise “(“Individual – Family Interface”). Born in London to Bengali parents, raised in Rhode Island, and author of several Indian – American based publications, Jhumpa Lahiri is an obvious candidate for the study of diaspora. Critics such as Bonnie Zare have credited Lahiri for making new contributions to South Asian American Literature. [99] and Judith Caesar commends Lahiri’s ability to construct images, metaphors, themes, and ideas (that) run both with and counter to the American grain” (American Spaces” 57). Most of the critical analysis of Lahiri’s stories focus either on one small sampling of a story or two or are limited to a narrow criticism or theme. For example, Madhuparna Mitra has elucidated symbolic cultural clashes in "Border Crossings in Lahiri's 'A Real Durwan',” and Judith Caesar has explored metaphors of space in "American Spaces in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri." While these critics and others have been successful in exploring the literary dynamics within a selection of Lahiri’s stories, it seems till date a true diasporic analysis of her short fiction and its use of polyphony and diaspora is missing.

While Jhumpa Lahiri’s short fiction may not be overtly or traditionally polyphonic, it is appropriate for this study because of her stories’ simultaneous autonomy and interconnectedness, a key component to polyphony according to Sue Vice (123). Noelle Brada-Willliams has explained this inherent cyclical of the stories within *Interpreter of Maladies* is due to their unifying themes surrounding marked rituals, care, and neglect (455), and the same
interdependence is apparent throughout the stories included in *Unaccustomed Earth*. These connections are also dialogic and diasporic in nature. Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* also follows the same thematic path, but it is interesting and useful to keep with the analysis of the short stories, as their interdependence, individuality, cohesion, and confusion are symbolic for the larger debate and role diaspora and polyphony have in the construction of self identity. Lahiri’s debut collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies* has been analyzed via its multicultural themes, her lesser-known collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, unveils a study of its diasporic content that too connects thematically and developmentally with her earlier work.

In general, Lahiri’s characters who rely too heavily on homeland nostalgia and the characters who look only toward progressing in diasporic space are unsuccessful in finding a space for their own identity. Just as Brada-Williams points out how Lahiri is careful to balance notions of the US and India (453), she is also careful to emphasize the point that characters must work equally within the contexts of their diasporic space. However, this does not mean that Lahiri’s stories are simplified or too optimistic. In fact, her mixture of third and first person narrations reveal a complicated process of selfconstruction: it is inherently personal, yet characters cannot avoid interacting with others during the process. The majority of her stories are written in third person, with subtle shifts in perspective between characters, a tendency that empowers certain characters at crucial thematic moments. The less used first-person narratives always reveal the learning process of a character attempting to situate the self within a social context. The switching perspectives within and between Lahiri’s stories do not necessarily emphasize a clash between voices about the home and diaspora, but rather a clash within voices about home and diaspora. The multiplicity of the voices, even within singular characters, emphasizes the personal process of identity construction within a populated, diasporic space.

The stories which best show the “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (Vice 123) are “A Temporary Matter,” “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” “The Interpreter of Maladies,” “The Third and Final Continent,” “Unaccustomed Earth,” and “Hell-Heaven.” The next component of diaspora in Lahiri’s fiction is the role of silence and miscommunication in characters’ ability to negotiate culture and life in order to create a solid sense of self. “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar,” “A Temporary Matter,” and “Only Goodness” best exemplify this claim. Finally, many of Lahiri’s characters are unable to consolidate their sense of self through their conflicting cultural, personal, and societal expectations. Sue Vice explains, “among the features of the polyphonic novel are the depiction of how the hero sees the world and how he sees himself, not how the world and he objectively appear; the absence of anything perceptible to a third-person observer, or obtrusive narratorial comment” (133). This lack of objectivity is exaggerated in Lahiri’s characters whose own view of the world is imaginary and/or metaphorical because they cannot or will not accept “reality.” Several of her characters live by the mantra “This you will not believe,” because they cannot believe themselves. Such characters are in “The Real Durwan,” “Mrs. Sens, “This Blessed House,” “Third and Final Continent,” “Interpreter of Maladies,” “Sexy,” “Hell-Heaven,” and “Nobody’s Business.” The
large number of characters who cannot consolidate the divergent elements of their diaspora are indicative of the imminent struggles with the construction of self.

The very fact that Lahiri’s tales shift between monologic and polyphonic portrayal encourages an analysis of the multivocality of the stories. In diasporic stories, it is only natural for the different voices of the character’s new environment to have a significant impact on his construction of a new self. Diaspora involves (at least) two countries and two cultures, “Which are imbedded in the mind of the migrant, side-by side” (H. Lahiri 1). As migrants, and even succeeding generations, have to battle with the plurality of voices in their consciousness, they have to find a way to manage themselves within the multitude of voices.

Through a reading of the incorporation of polyphonic voices in her short story “Unaccustomed Earth,” it becomes apparent that the shifts in third-person focus reveals the disjointedness of characters and their ability or disability to join the voices of their past with the voices of the present. “Unaccustomed Earth” was chosen for this analysis because it reveals that it is not only nostalgia in terms of cultural, geographical location that can hinder a character’s ability to cope with the voices of his or her past. In “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma is a young woman who proves to be more reticent toward change than her widower, old-world father. In the story, the use of monologic and polyphonic narration is often symbolic of the characters’ level of willingness to access and understand their own self in conjunction with others. The story begins with a monologic narration of the family’s situation. The first sentence identifies the significance of the family’s situation, and leads the reader into identifying with the daughter: “After her mother’s death, Ruma’s father retired from the pharmaceutical company where he had worked for many decades and began traveling in Europe” (Lahiri, Unaccustomed Earth 3). The emotionless distancing of the monologic narration reveals not only the ever-present and indirect voice of the mother, but also reveals the accustomed physical and emotional distancing between father and daughter.

Ruma’s sections of the story continue to depict her mother in a monologic fashion, and her father in a self-conscious, polyphonic fashion. The style of description reveals Ruma’s unquestioning acceptance of her mother and her constant turmoil when thinking about and interacting with her father. Considering the associations Ruma has with her mother’s strong connections with India (6) and her father, who “resembled an American in his old age” (11), her constant connections with monologic narration emphasizes how much Lahiri thematically empowers the characters who are open to polyphony. While Ruma’s character is the only one who actively seeks “the perfect balance,” her inability to disengage the nostalgia of her mother with her traditional, oldworld ways, leaves her incapable of achieving such a state. The narrator takes over Ruma’s portions of the story in a way that reveals her inability to deal with trauma and to blend her voice with others. The blunt description of her mother’s death declares that “she had died on the operating table, of heart failure; anesthesia for routine gallstone surgery had triggered anaphylactic shock” (5). Readers learn only of the facts of the death, and the lack of emotional
effect it has on Ruma reveals it is a moment in the past. She is either not capable of handling or toward which she no longer has feeling. Also, since Ruma constantly identifies her self with her mother (and against her Americanized father), there is the subconscious problem of both women’s hearts: neither women seem capable of letting go of the past and therefore have trouble opening their hearts to the voices of the present, even in small, everyday scenarios. This concentration on the past (India) reveals why Ruma is unable to connect to not only her father, but her husband and son as well (America).

While the monologic memories of her mother reveal Ruma’s reticence to view her mother or the world in any other light, her polyphonic views of her father reemphasize her unwillingness to change and such reluctance’s connection to her unhappiness. Any time her father is described, the narration becomes polyphonic by incorporating Ruma’s own self conscious, emotional connections to his actions. Bakhtin explains that “the real task of stylistic analysis consists in uncovering all the available orchestrating languages in the composition of the novel and their relationships”(416) and Ruma’s character reveals how one utterance can be home to several languages or voices at once.

While the characters in “Unaccustomed Earth” reveal their struggles to accommodate disparate voices through polyphonic descriptions, the characters in “Nobody’s Business” reveal that the struggle to construct a sense of identity relies just as heavily on dialogic interaction with others. The story is largely polyphonic, especially since the main character, a white graduate student named Paul, is a quiet, introverted personality: it is natural for his commentary to be revealed through an internal critique of others, rather than expressing them verbally. However, also due to Paul’s introversion, most of the polyphonic narration is from his perspective. Since this essay aims at analyzing the role of polyphony in diasporic contexts, the analysis of “Nobody’s Business” is better served to encompass the vocal interactions between Paul and his Indian-born roommate Sang. Lahiri shows through these multicultural characters that relationships between individuals are often received or denied dialogically, and this transference of spoken words, both monologically and polyphonically, can often lead to a breakdown in power archetypes and a confusion of cultural power.

The characters in “Nobody’s Business” exemplify Bakhtin’s central concept of dialogism, which refers to the “ceaselessly shifting power relations between words, their sensitivity to each other, and the relativising force of their historically motivated clashes and temporary resolutions” (Vice 5). Paul and Sang both experience the upper hand of dialogic power and both experience the difficulties of having dialogic power denied. Paul fails miserably to impress Sang in the beginning but eventually has the power to withhold power dialogically. When Sang pleads for him to tell her the truth about Diedre’s phone call, he casually remarks, “Don’t know. I guess I’d ask Farouk” (Lahiri, Unaccustomed Earth 201). When Paul is finally confident in his communication skills, it is at the cost of his original goal of communicating with Sang. Bakhtin states “All direct meanings and direct expressions are false and this is especially true of emotional meanings and
expressions” (Vice 134). Because Paul and Sang are never able to consciously realize their sense of self in conjunction with dialogic communion with others, their level of obscurity in dialogue is heightened. They prove through and through Allison White’s claim that “Languages are socially unequal” (qtd. in Vice 19).

Perhaps even more so than her other stories in Unaccustomed Earth, “Only Goodness” outlines the struggles of family in conjunction with its generations of immigrants. While it, like much of Lahiri’s short fiction, is not overtly concerned with the role of diaspora in basic plot progression, an analysis of the lead character and her interactions, silences and miscommunications with her multi-generational, diasporic family prove that cultural differences in the characters’ lives breed interpersonal problems between the individuals who compose the once tightknit unit. The story begins with a description of a family laden with secrets, judgmental perspectives, and an overall inability to consolidate its individual views and opinions. Not only does the older generation have trouble identifying with their newly diasporic environment, but the younger generation also has trouble accommodating their cultural heritage. A nostalgic memory recalled through the sympathy of the protagonist, Sudha’s, polyphonic voice fondly recalls when she and her brother first became close. However, the sibling closeness is only achieved through the subversive and illegal hoarding of alcohol in their adolescent rooms, all at the freeing risk of disappointing their hypertraditional parents (Lahiri, Unaccustomed Earth 129). In fact, the act’s clandestine implications are underlined by the ensuing description that Sudha’s parents were “prudish about alcohol to the point of seeming Puritanical, frowning upon the members of their Bengali circle – the men, that was to say, who liked to sip whiskey at gatherings” (129).

While the commentary on the parents emphasizes their tendencies to adhere to the most extremes of Indian traditions, it also points out how inherently different Sudha is from them. Since the story begins “It was Sudha” (128), it is apparent that the polyphonic judgments of the descriptions come from her perspective. And in explaining her parents’ tendency toward everything Indian, as well as her conviction that they are constantly judging others including her, she unwittingly reveals her own tendency toward everything American through her Americanized comparison of Puritans. Sudha is so intent on degrading her parents’ unwillingness to change in regards to their diasporic environment, she is blind to the fact that she is as well. Even without the direct statements of distressed communication between parents and offspring, Lahiri establishes the lack of communication between the generations through many such subtle descriptions. As it will be proved, though, it is not only cross-generational means that the characters lack the ability to functional dialogue.

Mikhail Bakhtin claims that all languages are a specific perspective in which a person can conceptualize the world in words (292). For Lahiri’s characters who are trying to conceptualize a world that appears “other,” meaning the social and cultural contexts of their diasporic communities are in discordance with lifestyles they are comfortable with, language can not only help a character understand a pre-existing world, but to also create an escape into a fantasy
world. Oftentimes, words fail – or characters fail to use words effectively - and many of Lahiri’s characters are unable to consolidate their sense of self through their conflicting cultural, personal, and societal expectations. Simply put, these characters are unable to see the inherent link between dialogism and diaspora: they see utterances as indicative of either one culture or the other rather than a new coexistence of previous meanings. Sue Vice explains, “among the features of the polyphonic novel are the depiction of how the hero sees the world and how he sees himself, not how the world and he objectively appear; the absence of anything perceptible to a third-person observer, or obtrusive narratorial comment” (133). This lack of objectivity is exaggerated in Lahiri’s characters whose own view of the world is imaginary and/or metaphorical because they cannot or will not accept what they assume to be the only “reality.” Several of her characters in stories such as “Mrs. Sens” and “The Real Durwan” live by the mantras related to the poor durwan’s “This you will not believe.” Such characters assume that no one else can understand their own worldview because they cannot believe the perceived world around them. When many of Lahiri’s characters are incapable of handling or negotiating the reality of their dialogic and diasporic surroundings, they subconsciously choose to imagine a reality that does make sense to them. The characters imply a lack of acceptance of dialogic heteroglossia, which Bakhtin explains as representing “the coexistence of socio-ideological contradictions between present and past” (Vice 21). Judith Caesar indirectly approaches the topic of diasporic acceptance as she explains how Lahiri’s fiction compares to other current American literature. Referring to characters’ mental solidarity in connection to their physical surroundings, she states, “The difference is in the imaginations of the characters or their inability to find the space in which to imagine one another and construct a set of values for themselves that respects the humanity and the differentness of others” (“American Spaces” 66). While Caesar focused on the universality of characters’ struggles, I believe that the polyphonic nature of how these characters depict their imaginative versions of reality reveals how Lahiri’s characters that immerse themselves in imagination versus reality are doing so because of their inability to deal with the diasporic context of their struggles. It has been stated that “perception is not universal” (Karttunen 42), and Lahiri’s imagination-driven characters emphasize just how different perception can be. What these imaginative characters are ultimately struggling with is to come to terms with their own dialogism, which Bakhtin Describes as “a struggle among socio-linguistic points of view, not an intra-language struggle between individual wills or logical contradictions” (Vice 50).

Lahiri’s Indianborn characters often suffer because they feel they cannot assimilate to American culture, when the thematic implications of the stories themselves suggest what they should really strive for is a newly constructed “socio-linguistic” meaning. While Caesar focuses on the significance of physical location in relation to a character’s ability to “step outside that door to understand himself and make meaningful contact with others” (“American Spaces” 51), I wish to focus on the intangible spaces between people and cultures that must be negotiated for such contact. Unlike traditional American literature, Lahiri’s characters do not often need to escape
the confines of a building for symbolic freedom; her confines are more often characters’ mental connections to their past way of life. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the short story “Hell Heaven” is the best representative of these circumstances, as the story is told from the perspective of a second-generation Indian immigrant who focuses on the stresses of her first-generation mother. For these reasons, this section will analyze “Hell-Heaven” for its portrayal of words as imaginative escape in a narrative rife with diasporic conflicts of identity, rejection of the dialogic nature of discourse, and polyphonic descriptions of communicative failure. The narrator of the story is an American-born and bred individual, looking back at the conflicts her Indian-born mother faced in a new country. The American influences on the narrator’s voice are always present, down to the description that her “parents were strangers to each other, and [their] marriage had been arranged” (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 61). If told from the perspective of an individual born into a nation which practices such marriages, the description would not likely include the fact that they were strangers; after all, their parents would have met and condoned of each other’s families prior to the marriage. Therefore, this story is less diasporic in narration than several of Lahiri’s other short stories. Rather than being a voice of cultural multitude, the narrator prefers the voice of youthful America. This narration only emphasizes the instances where the mother resorts to her Indian nostalgia and eventually creates friction between the two characters. It also reveals an ironic bias the narrator has against the mother, as she too neglects to acknowledge the presence of dialogic heteroglossia. She merely condescends her mother’s tendencies to cling to her Indian nostalgia, while the narrator doesn’t even realize her own unwillingness to accept new meanings for terms that accept a diasporic, rather than American, nature.

As her short fiction proves, Jhumpa Lahiri is an author entering into the current issues of diaspora with a contemporary perspective of immigrants and their status in a new land. For Lahiri, the role of diaspora and polyphony in the construction of identity and expression of self revolve around dichotomous issues of the private/public, Indianness/Amerianness, rigidity/spontaneity, and the said/unsaid. However, the ability to construct self revolves around the ability to transcend these oppositions as either-or scenarios and accept them as elements of life that must be navigated, not chosen between. Lahiri’s narratives emphasize the necessity for diasporic studies to avoid the ultimate quest for an “answer.” Their sometimes transient and sometimes stubborn characters reveal that diasporas are about a person’s ability or willingness to change and adapt in multiple ways. Diasporas are about change and the evolution of personal identity and cultural affiliation within constantly changing geographical and personal boundaries. Simply put, Lahiri’s polyphony emphasizes the role of diaspora in a character’s ability to “move beyond metaphor that identifies growth with leaving what is known and shows that it is also rearranging what is known” (Caesar “Spaces” 58). What this focus on polyphonic descriptions and diasporic conflicts reveals is
that Lahiri’s narratives center around the notion that language, in the specific moments in which it is used, generates its own meanings: meanings that are intertwined with its historical and cultural past and temporal present. They also emphasize Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogized word will never be completed, but rather “increase in complexity as it continues to live” (Bakhtin 426).

The choosing of the mother’s phrase as title in “Hell- Heaven” exemplifies how characters in diasporas actively search for and use language in various attempts to gain access to their surrounding communities. However, the American-born daughter’s spurning of the mother’s ‘misuse’ of the term also emphasizes how unwilling diasporic characters can be in acknowledging the dynamic agency of words. Like Paul in “Nobody’s Business,” the characters paradoxically pine for dialogic interactions with others, yet either run away from the opportunity or abuse the power, just as Paul abused his over Sang. Lahiri’s subtle incorporation of characters’ polyphonic judgments, such as Ruma critiquing her father in “Unaccustomed Earth,” reveals an innate tendency to cling to the historical meanings and connotations attached to terms. However, the mythical fashion in which Sudha describes her parents’ migrant past in “Only Goodness” places awareness to the fact that the historical value put on dialogue is not reliable nor is it consistent. While Lahiri’s characters such as Sudha and the “Hell- Heaven” mother never prevail in their dialogic imaginative escapes, Lahiri repeatedly reminds readers of the inherent link between the ability to construct and accept new meaning to language and the ability to maintain acceptance of the past with an ability to imagine a new and different present. Characters must navigate between past and imaginative present in order to achieve sublimity with their diasporic surroundings. As Mikhail Bakhtin states, “The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions” (263). It is only when the characters acknowledge and accept the many-voiced nature of their diasporic settings, and allow imaginative room for change and acceptance in the future, that they are able to accept and maintain a cohesive sense of self in their diasporic contexts.

Lahiri’s texts warn against trying to fuse the oppositions at work in a diasporic context, because such a fusion empowers the type of stasis that all of her narratives work against. The opposing forces at work in a diaspora are not a problem for Lahiri; rather, they are what actually exist. Her characters that find the most happiness learn to navigate through their cultural contexts and learn to speak a language that is forever shifting and changing. Lahiri effectively deconstructs the common notion that “great novelistic heroes are those with the most coherent and individuated ideologies” (Bakhtin 429) by disallowing them access to any stable form of ideologies, thereby continually forcing them into constant reformation of language, lifestyle, and beliefs.

Works Cited


