

Uses of (Media) Technology in Constructing Diasporic Home in the Shorter Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract: Use of technology is an indispensable feature of modernity. But communities imagined along modern lines use technology in multifarious ways, be it print or digital technology. Benedict Anderson in his path-breaking study of how nation socio-culturally comes into being stresses the decisive role print technology (in the form of newspaper and realist novel) plays in constructing the community of nations. In a globalized world, however, the role of print technology in imagining larger collectivities as well as home is being fast replaced by information and media technology. Nowhere are such uses of the later technologies perhaps as prominent as in diasporas. Diasporic communities, though largely defined by the parameter of deterritorialization, attempt to appropriate and use technology (especially media technology) with a view to “producing locality,” to borrow from Arjun Appadurai. That is to say, diasporas resort to technology to cope with the often traumatic sense of dislocation and minimize the overwhelming sense of insecurity in an alien cultural environment. In the present article, I intend to look closely at the uses of technology in general and media technology in particular by Indian/South Asian diaspora in some of the short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri. The more precise critical agenda here is to examine how Indian/South Asian diaspora utilizes (media) technology to construct “home” or a sense of “homeness” in the selected stories.

It would be difficult, and perhaps impossible, to find a work of fiction by Jhumpa Lahiri in which her characters do not use all kinds of modern technology, from television to cell phone. Take, for example, the story called “Sexy” from *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri’s first, Pulitzer-winning book of short fiction, published in 1999. The story opens with a conversation between two women colleagues, Laxmi and Miranda, who work, significantly, for “a public radio station” based in Boston (83). A “public radio station,” of course, is a public site airing a medley of educational and socio-cultural programs, using information and media technology. Now to get back to the opening conversation, it is itself a spin-off of a telephone conversation between Laxmi and her anonymous cousin located in Montreal. The reader learns: “Laxmi had been on the phone for at least an hour, trying to calm her cousin down” (83). The reason for such a prolonged, personal conversation on telephone and that also from a public space is that after almost a decade of marriage Laxmi’s “cousin’s husband ha[s] fallen in love with another woman,” while flying from Delhi to Montreal (83). With the narrative shifting to focus on the personal life of Miranda, the reader comes to know that Dev, also an Indian like Laxmi and Miranda’s present fiancé, can’t spend “the whole

night” at Miranda’s place, “because his wife call[s] every day at six in the morning, from India, where it [i]s four in the afternoon” (84). What is apparent from these two simple details is that technology, especially communications and information technology in the form of telephone, for example, penetrates deep into the private and professional life of Lahiri’s diasporic characters and that there seems to be some ambivalence at work in the way these characters engage with technology, sometimes in control of it and at other times, under its control.

In the present essay, rather than examine the whole range of diasporic uses of digital technologies in some of the short fictions of Lahiri, I focus on one particular end to which her diasporic characters use these technologies, namely, taming an alien cultural environment in the process of constructing a “home” away from home. I also point out at the very outset that an important coordinate of diaspora – that of generation – needs always to be kept in mind in any investigation of the uses of information and media technology by diaspora. In several of Lahiri’s short stories the diaspora represented tends to configure itself in terms of generation. More often than not, Lahiri’s first-generation South Asian characters now based abroad use electronic technologies to come to terms with what appears to them an uncomprehending and at times threatening socio-cultural milieu, while her second-generation characters born and brought up abroad seem to be largely indifferent to the very idea of India or Pakistan or Bangladesh as “home,” a tendency most vividly portrayed in Lahiri’s second book of short fiction titled *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008).

By now the use of technology by diaspora has come to assume the status of an extensively investigated research agenda in a number of disciplines, ranging from cultural to media studies. There appear to be basically two positions on how diaspora uses communications and information technology. One stance is that a diasporic community needs first to tame technology in general, to be able to feel at home in the host country. This position sees technology as part of the new hostile environment in which immigrants end up and has come to be defined as “domestication theory” (Silverstone and Hirsch). The other stance sees diasporic appropriations of technology in general and information and media technology in particular as providing the migrants at least some hold on an otherwise alien cultural environment, if not exactly facilitating the process of adaptation for them in the host land. One of the key proponents of the second position is the Indian-American cultural anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai. In his powerful essay titled “The Production of Locality,” Appadurai identifies and analyzes some of “the special problems that beset the production of locality in a world that has become deterritorialized ... diasporic, and transnational” (188). As “an aspect of social life,” “locality,” like home, is “variably realized” in what Appadurai calls “neighbourhood” (179). In the case of diaspora, the work of producing locality to a large extent entails constructing home or homeness in the spatiotemporal reality of the land it has adopted. For Appadurai, however, the most compelling point about the diasporic production of locality or home is “the role” played by “mass media, especially in its electronic forms” (194). In other words, what fascinates Appadurai about the work of imagination of diaspora, including the work of constructing home, is that it cannot but be heavily electronically mediated.

Of the two kinds of use of communication and information technology just outlined, Lahiri’s first-generation diasporic characters – both men and women – resort to the second sort: they appropriate electronic technologies with a view to managing the usually painful, though self-chosen, experience of displacement and playing down the devastating feeling of uncertainty in an unfamiliar cultural setting. The title of one of Lahiri’s early stories, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” to begin with, is both a little deceptive and highly suggestive. It is deceptive in the sense that it foregrounds a fact about the character in the title that can hardly be accorded central importance in his life. On the other hand, its suggestiveness lies in its capacity to rouse the curiosity of the reader about the unstated things that happened when Mr. Pirzada came to dine. Now to move on to the story itself, Mr. Pirzada, a Bengali Muslim from Dhaka, is not a member of the Indian/South Asian diaspora in the United States in the true sense of the term. He is in America for a year, because “he [has] been awarded a grant from the government of Pakistan to study the foliage of New England” (24). Another important point about Mr. Pirzada is that he did not choose to become a temporary member of the Indian/South Asian diasporic community in Boston. It is rather an Indian family, “[i]n search of compatriots,” who “discovered Mr. Pirzada, and phoned him, and invited him to [their] home” (24). Mr. Pirzada’s advantage in accepting the friendship and hospitality of the narrator’s family, however, is two-fold. Not only does it allow him to speak “the same language” and enjoy “the

same jokes” and foods with the parents of Lilia, the ten-year-old narrator; it also provides him with the much needed technological means that allows him to keep himself updated on the developments in the war-torn East Pakistan in 1971 (25). In short, Mr. Pirzada often visits the Indian family as much to relish the Bengali/Indian dinner they treat him to as to watch the evening news on television in their “bright, carpeted living room” (24, 32).

With the postal service in disarray in East Pakistan, the national news at six-thirty on television is the only way Mr. Pirzada can connect with the place of his birth while in America. It is through this electronic media that Mr. Pirzada comes to know about the devastations the Pakistani army are daily causing to his soon-to-be liberated country. It is interesting to note here that Mr. Pirzada and his host do not appear to pay much attention when “the television [is] tuned to the local news” but when the national news starts the former watches it with “an immovable expression on his face” while the latter gets busy raising the volume and adjusting the antennas, clear indications of the amount of attention both pay to the news of home *only physically* left behind (28, 31). It is thus the availability of one of the most advanced information and media technologies of the 1970s in the household of his Indian friends that makes Mr. Pirzada visit them so often. The living room with the television set provides Mr. Pirzada with that cherished space where he along with his host can go about constructing a home away from home. Like his “silver watch without a band” which is “set to the local time in Dacca,” Mr. Pirzada belongs to a different spatiotemporal zone – one that obtains in East Pakistan, soon to emerge as independent Bangladesh (30).

The urgency with which Mr. Pirzada strives to stay in touch with his homeland, however, does not derive from any real or supposed threat posed by America to his cultural identity. He knows that he will have to go back home as soon as the term of his grant is over and that once he is back home, his former self would joyfully shake off whatever elements of American culture it has picked up in a year. But such is not the case of his Indian friends who have consciously chosen the US as their home. As members of the Indian/South Asian diasporic community based in Boston, they will not, to borrow from Stuart Hall and Vijay Mishra, return home (355, 2). Yet America is not what they mean by home. Home is over there – continents away. The narrator meticulously lists the things her parents miss in their adopted homeland:

The supermarket did not carry mustard oil, doctors did not make house calls, neighbors never dropped by without an invitation, and of these things, every so often, my parents complained. (24)

On the face of it, these are small disappointments. But the sharpness and frequency with which their absence is felt really originates from a deep-seated anxiety – an anxiety that has to do with the parents’ former Indian identity now threatened by its close proximity with the American way of life. The threat as well as the resulting worry multiplies when it comes to the upbringing of their daughter in an alien cultural environment. Lahiri dramatizes this unnerving diasporic tension by means of focusing on the way the narrator’s father reacts to what Lilia is taught at school. The father wonders what his daughter really learns at school and whether she studies history or geography there (26). He would be much pleased, one can safely assume, if the American schools taught their students Indian geography and history – subjects which obviously they do not. In such alienating and identity-destroying circumstances, the narrator’s parents (especially the father) adopt what one might call a conservative strategy of “cultural survival,” to go back to Appadurai: instead of coming forward to embrace American culture, they rather prefer to escape into a home constructed as a replica of the home left behind. Here too electronic technology plays a vital role (194).

As days go by, the flow of news from Dhaka shrinks, so much so that often “only a death toll [is] announced” on the news (34). This scarcity of news from home seems to rouse an inordinate passion in Mr. Pirzada and the narrator’s parents for creating in the latter’s household an ethos reminiscent of the one they associate with home over there. The work of imagining home is mediated here, among other things, by electronic technology:

After the television was shut off ... they joked, and told stories, and dipped biscuits in their tea ... Eventually I was sent upstairs to do my homework, but through the carpet I heard them as they drank more tea, and listened to cassettes of Kishore Kumar (34)

The case of Mrs. Sen in the story titled “Mrs. Sen’s” is rather more pathetic. Married to a university mathematics

professor, she finds life in America as confined as is a cage to an untamed bird. Although less nostalgic than her husband about India, Lilia's mother in the earlier story sees and appreciates at least some benefits of living in the US: she is both happy and proud for her daughter who in her judgment is "assured a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity" (26). Childless, Mrs. Sen, however, does not have any such consolation. One just needs to pronounce the word "India" in her presence and she is (transported) there. Almost at the very outset of the story, she gives a memorable expression to her acute sense of displacement in a short, simple sentence: "Everything is there" (113). Even the silence of her neighborhood is so oppressive that she "cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence" (115).

Two things are overtly mentioned in the story that somewhat enliven Mrs. Sen's otherwise barren and unbearable existence in America. One is "the arrival of a letter from her family" (121) in India and the other is "fish from the seaside" (123). But there's a third, technology-dependent source of satisfying nostalgia for Mrs. Sen. There's a cassette player in the house on which she can play cassettes of *raga* music and "of people talking in her language," the latter being actually an audio recording of a "farewell" she was given by her family "the day [she] left India" (128). While getting a letter from India or fish from the seaside is irregular and uncertain, the cassette player is always at Mrs. Sen's disposal and she can play the cassettes whenever she feels homesick.

Some early readers of Lahiri's short fiction, especially *Interpreter of Maladies*, have argued that one of the means most often utilized by Lahiri's first-generation diasporic characters to mitigate their sense of exile in their adopted homeland is to continue cooking and eating their foods in the Indian way. In delineating "how Jhumpa Lahiri makes an effective use of food metaphor in *Interpreter of Maladies*," one such reader notes:

For immigrants and non-residents food certainly serves as an important part of their identity. When away from home the food from one's land brings as much pleasure as mother's voice on overseas calls. Food provides a link[;] it induces [...] a sense of belonging in an otherwise alien world. Food serves as a key to binding. (Choubey)

Although very true, the analogy of "food from one's land" providing as much pleasure as "mother's voice on overseas calls" suggests the other means that Lahiri's diasporic characters commonly resort to in their desperate attempt to construct home and a sense of belonging in their newly adopted home is information and media technology. Appropriating these technologies, they create a sheltered niche in their households where, to borrow from Salman Rushdie, their "imaginary homelands" can be kept from being invaded by the ones in which they have chosen to strike root (10).

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