Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies
Ed. Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung
221 pages, 2012, $32.99 USD (Paperback)
Lanham, MD, Lexington Books

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This collection of nine essays is a timely attempt to contextualise Jhumpa Lahiri, who has garnered considerable literary acclaim and commercial success beginning with the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000 for her first offering, *The Interpreter of Maladies*. Globally regarded filmmaker Mira Nair made an eponymous film based on her debut novel, *The Namesake,* in 2006 and in 2008 Lahiri's third book, *Unaccustomed Earth,* went straight into the *New York Times* fiction charts at number one. Lahiri is mainly concerned with the uneasy lives of first-generation, highly educated and skilled Bengali immigrants in America and the inheritance of their cultural losses by their children, the second generation of immigrants. Thus, the recurrent themes in her fiction are exile, difference, roots and routes, and the loss and melancholia that underwrite Asian American and postcolonial literature.

It is mainly as the quintessential Asian American writer that this collection situates and names Lahiri although the editors, Dhingra and Cheung, frame the question of identity provocatively in the title of their short introduction: "Bengali, Asian American, Postcolonial, Universal?" (xi). Indeed, the first three categories are conceptualised fairly homogeneously: it is her Bengali origins that qualify Lahiri to be both postcolonial and Asian American; many postcolonial writers are based in the US now and a persuasive argument to dissolve theoretical distinctions between the two categories is already in circulation. The last term, universal, may be the odd-ball as the literary associations it evokes are to do with canon formation and mainstreaming—generally considered inimical to the subversion and marginality attributed to the first three—but the editors make an attempt to argue away any possibility of conflict. They reiterate that Lahiri is already being taught in many graduate and under-graduate courses. They also counter David Lynn's contention that "there's nothing postcolonial about Lahiri's work" and that it succeeds to the degree that it is "old-fashioned and literary" with the question: "Can't her work at once appeal to such ostensibly universal sensibilities and address the recurrent concerns of so-called ethnic canons?" (xiv).

Seven of the essays that follow are in the same vein and argue in favour of successful resolutions of various contradictions in Lahiri's fiction. In the first section entitled "The Ethnic, the Orientalist, and/or the Universal," Karen Cardozo discusses intertextuality as a vehicle that mediates between the particular and the general, building on Vijay Prashad's notion of polyculturalism or the state of being at the

confluence of multiple heritages. In the second chapter Cheung and Dhingra carry the theme of universalism forward and provide a historicised diagnosis of postcolonial loss and the melancholia that haunts the Asian American community. They argue persuasively that Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* creates an empowered third-space and an alternative to the British-American vs. Indian context: Gogol, the protagonist, may be looking at a way out of the stasis in his life by adopting his late father's patrilineal Bengali cosmopolitanism. This is symbolised by his reading the book of short stories by the Russian writer Gogol many years after it was given to him by his father. However, their suggestion that *The Namesake*—book and film—might have brought "Russian literature to the foreground of the imagination of the Indian intellectual elite" (39) is startling. Most Indian reviewers of Lahiri's fiction contextualise her as a diasporic writer. Diasporic writers and filmmakers in Indian criticism are more associated with inaccurate and simplistic representations of the mother country than with the kind of authority that Cheung and Dhingra ascribe to Lahiri.[1]

Lahiri's reception in India, which might have proved poignantly relevant to naming her, goes largely unaddressed in the book. All three chapters in Part II, which has diasporic communities as its theme, locate her exclusively, although with great felicity, in the American context. In an evocative article Rani Neutill uses Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* to understand inherited loss and foregrounds Lahiri's cultural translation as the awakening of the Bengali community in the US to the need to weep and grieve together. In this essay and another one from the same section, Lahiri's short-story collections are discussed as story cycles or short story sequences that prioritise affect as a strategy to shed light on the politics of race and immigration in America.

The last three chapters of Part III of the book are about "gendered ruptures and familial belongings" (133). They work well as a unit and Lahiri's vision is discussed as movement beyond gender wars and natal families: hers is the "unique and universal" point of view of the "narrative hybrid" who successfully brings about a fusion between the "immigrant and the exile" (177). All three critics join those mentioned earlier to commend Lahiri for eschewing earlier forms of gender or racial politics—which marked the works of Maxine Hong Kingston and Bharati Mukherjee, for instance—and celebrate the evolution of Asian American sensibility into universalism.

To a reviewer located in Delhi, the universalism that the above-mentioned contributors ascribe to Lahiri and valorise is problematic not only because it has not been distanced theoretically from assimilation into America but also because it is factored on the quietism of her work that borders on the apolitical. Had it not been for two chapters mid-volume that raise important questions, I would have found this particular endeavour to name Lahiri incomplete and very unsatisfactory. Rajini Srikanth's "What Lies Beneath: Lahiri's Brand of Desirable Difference in *Unaccustomed Earth*" and Bakirathi Mani's "Novel/Cinema/Photo: Intertextual Readings of *The Namesake*" pose a powerful challenge to the argument that is made in the introduction

and extended in the above-mentioned seven chapters. Srikanth points out that Lahiri's Indian characters are widely acceptable in America because of their exoticism:

> That Lahiri's characters are easy to absorb is not surprising. They allow the non-Indian reader to encounter Indian-ness as though it were not significantly different from what is familiar. Her immigrant Indians and their offspring conform to the model of successful citizenship that is comfortable and easily embraced by the majority group. These are ornamental Indians, their presence adding color and variety to the American ethnic landscape. (59)

Srikanth is cautioning the reader against the easy universalism that is ascribed to Lahiri. An effort made by Ambreen Hai in the last chapter to contain Srikanth's argument by valorising fiction over criticism sounds specious at best: "But while cognizant of what an author's work lacks or fails to do, I would question the critical demand that an author must do what a critic wants" (206). One might retort by asking whether critics should only celebrate literary success and not critique socio-political processes that make it possible.

In the chapter that follows Srikanth's, Bakirathi Mani analyses what powers Lahiri's universalism by studying the circulation of *The Namesake* as a classic text of immigration in America and its reception as "an 'ethnic' story that engenders 'universal' narratives of belonging to America" (90). She describes the journey of the text from novel to cinema via a photography exhibition that opened three days before the release of the film. She argues that both the novel and its cinematic rendering "foreground a middle-class history of South Asian migration at the expense of the heterogeneous class experiences that define South Asian immigrants in the United States" (90). Nair's celluloid vision of the "new South Asian cool" segues into the photography exhibition entitled *Namesake: Inspiration* that overlooks the particularity of South Asians entirely and tells "a quintessentially 'American' story of arrival" (93).

Read together, these two essays accurately capture Lahiri's orientation in middle-class cosmopolitanism factored on social and economic privileges enjoyed by only a select section of Asian Americans. This is a far cry from 'universalism,' and the volume would have benefited if the editors had acknowledged the radical departure that Srikanth and Mani are making from the main argument by, perhaps, putting their essays in a separate section. In the present placement the two essays come across as unexpected but welcome voices of dissent in the celebration of universalism that regrettably excludes most of the universe. They successfully take away the focus from jubilation around the phenomenal literary success of Jhumpa Lahiri to important concerns regarding the consecration of hegemonic voices as alternate visions in the present-day literary establishment. Unfortunately, it is obvious to the reader that such an effect was completely unintended in the volume.

Note

1. For instance, Harish Trivedi problematizes the enterprise of cultural translation by Indian diasporic writers who are mainly monolingual. In my recent article ("The Making of Global Success") I critique the commodification of Lahiri's fictions and interrogate the process of their consumption.

Works Cited

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Trivedi, Harish. "Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation." *91st Meridian. The International Writing Program, University of Iowa*. May 2005: n.pag. Web. 23 June 2010.