Abstract

The South Asian diaspora has been in motion for centuries, far before large parts of the region came under the rule of the British East India Company, and later the Crown itself. Within nations themselves, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical features, and religion, among many other things, work to shape unique experience. Any notion of South Asian, or even Indian, “authenticity” is fraught from the start. Authenticity is contextually specific in practice, and yet theorized in broad terms. Identity is overwhelmingly intersectional, and so any notion of essentialism, while an interesting thought experiment, is
largely useless and untrue to human experience. Familiarized authenticity sells; radical and nuanced authenticity is a risk. It is essential then to consider the modes of canonization, and how and why certain authors are given the powerful title of “authentically South Asian.” As such Lahiri’s success is dependent on her work and her image remaining universal enough that innumerable versions of authenticity may be placed upon her. This paper explores why she functions as a fruitful case study for the construction of Indian diasporic authenticity by looking at her biography, and prolific career. It also provides an alternate analysis of agency she and her agent have in this situation by considering the para text of her novel Interpreter of Maladies.

Key words: South Asian, Authenticity, Indian diaspora, Identity etc.

Introduction

In the Fall of 2008, the popular HBO series, In Treatment, a show starring two therapists working with patients and on their own relationship, premiered its third season. Jhumpa Lahiri received a very curious credit on this season, titled: “cultural consultant.” Though she had the experience of her popular 2003 book, The Namesake, being transformed into a movie, television was not a medium into which Lahiri had previously travelled. This season of In Treatment focuses Sunil, a middle-aged Bengali man who is dealing with the loss of his wife and with his immigration from Calcutta to Brooklyn, and into the home of his son and American daughter-in-law. Irfan Khan, who also starred in the film adaptation of The Namesake, playing Sunil, and Lahiri appears to play the Bengali psyche. She was brought on to the project to advise the writer, Adam Rapp, on how a 50-
year-old Bengali man might interpret his alarming and abrupt transition to a foreign American environment. Lahiri is neither a middle-aged man who lived first in Bengal for 50 years, nor is she widowed, but she is considered here to be the authority figure on both topics, because they fall under the umbrella category of “South Asian-ness.”

It is not at all strange or somehow incorrect for authors to write about experiences they have not personally had, but most good ones compensate for this by doing research and conducting interviews with people who have lived through such things. It is notable that Rapp and the writing team saw hiring Lahiri as a reasonable substitute to doing so, and that Lahiri so readily embraced this role. In speaking about the project, Lahiri remarked: “Once I understood the scenario, the mood of the piece, I was able to tell Adam a lot about the attitude toward the family and what the character might be seeing in Brooklyn.” Lahiri is applying her own experience to a fictional character, but as an official “consultant” because she is being considered an all-encompassing authority on the South Asian immigrant experience.

It is, of course, far easier to criticize than it is to commend. I look not to condemn but rather to examine the various agents of authenticity that work together to create her brand and allow it to succeed. Lahiri is certainly an element of the equation that leads to practices as reductive as hiring a “cultural consultant,” but there are also other factors at play here. Why does Rapp feel that he can rely heavily on watching Khan’s role in Lahiri’s The Namesake, in order to “lear[n] a little bit about the culture” and figure out how to paint his scenes and build his characters? What larger systems at play allow Rapp to feel as if he can rely solely on Lahiri in order to understand “Diasporic South Asianness” and participate in this kind of large-scale metonymy.
The South Asian immigrant experience is as diverse as every South Asian that lives through it, as clearly indicated by the history discussed in my introduction. This idea is, however, quickly forgotten as the public is only fed a few specific narratives. When so few moments of such wide-scale exposure like that of Lahiri are available, they must be studied. We must walk through Lahiri’s beginnings to understand her rise both as an artist and as an authentic diasporic figure.

Ninlanjana Sudeshna Lahiri was born on July 11th, 1967, in London, English. The name Jhumpa was a family nickname that her schoolteachers encouraged her to retain because they found Ninlanjana difficult to pronounce. Her father, Amar, was a university librarian, and her mother, Tapati, was a schoolteacher. The two of them had Lahiri while they were still in London, and soon after moved to the United States and settled in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. Lahiri describes her parents as being devout to their East Indian culture and wanting to make sure they raised their children with an understanding of and appreciation for their heritage. While her parents never sent her to any kind of Indian after-school program, as is common to do amongst Indian parents, they “sort of correctly assumed that [she] would learn things just by the virtue of being their child.” Lahiri absorbed all that she knew about South Asia from the attitudes of her parents and a few visits. At the same time, she received a canonical Western education, and lived life as an American child, teenager, and eventually, adult.

Her extensive schooling carried her away from Rhode Island and first to Barnard College in New York City, where she received a bachelor’s degree in English Literature in 1989. Though she never considered writing as a profession, it became an occasional habit for her in her anxious post-undergraduate state. She spent
her first year out of college working in a bookstore, and soon after moved to Boston to work as a Research Assistant at a non-profit. It was at this job that Lahiri, for the first time in her life, found herself with constant, daily access to a computer. And naturally, she began to write regularly.

Lahiri then earned three Masters degrees, one in English, one in Creative Writing, and one in Comparative Literature, and a PhD in Renaissance Studies, all from Boston University in the 1990s. During this time, Lahiri began to write prolifically and started sending out material to various editors and journals. She received little recognition or affirmation for many years, until her luck took a turn and she had several stories published by culturally important journals, including *The New Yorker*, *Harvard Review*, and *Story Quarterly*. And thus, a rising literary star was born. Lahiri was critically acclaimed for her talent as a cautious and thoughtful writer, but her cementation as a powerhouse of South Asian authenticity deserves further explanation. Though she was not the only South Asian author of the time, and not the only one to be canonized in such a way, the amount of attention she received from reviewers was astounding.

For example, *The New York Times* Book Review covered her 2013 novel, *The Lowland*, three separate times, all just a matter of days apart. This focus on Lahiri is no accident. While still in grad school, Lahiri won the Transatlantic Award from the Henfield Foundation, her first major institutional award, for her early writing. She then went on to win the fiction prize from the Louisville Review in 1997. With this official backing, Lahiri was able to get a residence in the Fine Arts Work Centre in Provincetown, Cape Cod, where she worked on her first short story collection from 1997-1998. The resulting work,
Interpreter of Maladies (1999) was released in 1999, by Houghton Mifflin, and quickly rose to prominence. With it by her side, she officially won seven awards, but the lasting effects would be innumerable.

Lahiri published the essay “Teach Yourself Italian” and later fully committed to the art of communicating in a language foreign to her own understanding with the publishing of her book In alter parole / In Other Words (2016). This move was complete departure from the grips of her “South Asian diasporic” label, and one that will be further examined later given its implications for authenticity. Though a clearly talented and prolific writer, she was also able to break into a American idea of what being authentically South Asian means. But how? What aspects of authenticity did she hold within her, or did other people place upon her, that allowed her such a strong grip on the literary pulse of a nation struggling to identify and understand its ever-growing immigrant population?

The Para text of Interpreter of Maladies

While this paper focuses on the outside force of authenticity that guides the way Lahiri is labelled and then spoken about by reviewers, this section provides an example of a way in which she can control her narrative and brand. Again, this approach is not the one taken by my thesis. By looking at the Para text of her first short story collection, Interpreter of Maladies, we can understand the way that Lahiri and her agent wanted to introduce her to world. First just looking at the original cover art, the book is adorned in soft hues of red, yellow, and orange. These are colours that have long been tied to South Asian culture – since Europeans first encountered and wrote about the vibrant hues of South Asian spices – and immediately bring the reader to a place of exoticized difference.
Behind the shadow of the colours lays the gentle red outline of two, presumably female, hands covered with the traditional henna, or mehndi, patterns.

By having the hands of a woman adorned in henna on the cover, Interpreter of Maladies is calling out to a essentializing stereotype of the female as the more authentic carrier of culture. This trope will hold familiar to many general readerships of popular fiction in the West, and as such, they will be drawn to an idea with which they are already comfortable. Lahiri’s publisher quite smartly chose to place her within a publicly outdated but still universally understood mode of Indian authenticity. This decision allows for immediate authority and popularity on her part. If the collection’s cover featured one of its white characters, as there are many, there is no doubt that it would not have been as successful.

The effort to place the relatively unknown Lahiri within the bounds of Asian authenticity is seen in the quote from Amy Tan that appears on the cover. The quote is really the only other adornment the collection has, with the exception of Lahiri’s dedication to her family, and it reads: “Jhumpa Lahiri is the kind of writer who makes you want to grab the next person you see and say, ‘Read this!’” Amy edited the 1999 edition of Best American Short Stories, appeared on The Simpsons as herself, lectured at Stanford, Oxford, Jagiellonian, Beijing, and Georgetown, gave a TED talk, spoke at the White House, was featured on NPR, and acted on Sesame Street. Before long, “her essays and stories [were] found in hundreds of anthologies and textbooks, and they [were] assigned as required reading in many high schools and universities.” All this is simply to say, Tan had, by this point, been cemented and canonized as an Asian American writer who had clout.
By highlighting Tan’s praise on the collection’s front cover Lahiri’s publishers are attempting to place Lahiri under the same umbrella of authenticity and allude to her impending position in the greater order of canonized diasporic writers. They are trying to highlight that not only is she authentic, but that there is already a spot for her in the tradition of Asian Americans who provide a comfortable exposure to difference by being non-white but also raised within American ideological constraints.

Conclusion

Lahiri in interviews, stresses “writing allowed [her] to observe and make sense of things without having to participate. [She] didn’t belong. [She] looked different and felt like an outsider.” This image that she perpetuates allows her to remain as the intriguing other that attracts the Western eye and points to her authenticity as an outsider who, despite being born and brought up in London and Rhode Island, “[was] always looking back, so [she] never felt fully at home.” Lahiri is to be relatable in her construction of her own unique authenticity and identity.

In a famous Charlie Rose interview – one that Lahiri now probably regrets – Rose compared the young author to Phillip Roth, an author known for speaking for the young Jewish population in America. He asked her if she “[saw herself] in some way as being an interpreter of these experiences,” or rather, of these maladies, and if “that’s part of the reason why this book seems to have resonated?” After a brief pause, Lahiri responds: “I’m trying,” alluding to her diasporic Indian authenticity and ability to represent the masses.

Lahiri does have agency in taking on this role as interpreter, with her “informed cultural chiselling,” but it is important to consider the forces at play that make this kind of reductive authentic
stance possible. These same forces allow for Lahiri’s astounding authority as “the” South Asian American immigrant, when in fact, she is just one, highly educated and talented, person. Her stories are taken to represent the South Asian diaspora not only because there is such a small space for popular South Asian diasporic writers and so her version of events is what people come to associate as authentic experience, but also because of her positioning as an artist. If but one truth can be made clear from the completion of this paper, it is that any discussion surrounding authenticity is an inherently complicated one, especially in the case of non-white Americans.

I have grounded this exploration in the specific case of Jhumpa Lahiri because her diasporic identity and public persona expose a misalignment in the way the American literary sphere connects the artist to both specific identifiable authenticity and universal struggle. While authenticity is no longer explicitly considered the ultimate standard to which all artists are held, the idea of being true to something higher or deeper still guides the way in which we think and speak about literature and art. The pieces of Lahiri’s authentic puzzle do not fit neatly together, as seen by the demands for her continued universality, and this misalignment only proves that it does not matter so much to the public to what she is authentic, but only that she is authentic to something accessible.
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