

LOCATION OF CULTURE IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES*

Bhashkra Charya

Assistant Professor
Ramakrishna Paramhans
Post Graduate College,
Kulha Ataura,
Unnao, India

Abstract

Culture is a fundamental thing for human beings. None of us can deny the fact of culture. We find that culture comes with us as an inevitable hour. Culture is energetic and changeable. Culture has many shapes and forms. Most of the times when we hear “culture” we probably think of the different people around the world, live and act. Their life style, dress, food habits, and the ways they celebrate their religious ceremony, rituals, festivals make the artefacts or culture. The paper explores the various location of culture in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. The stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* usually begin with the mention of the first generation immigrants with their identities and cultural orientations. It is firmly grounded in the Indian ethos and the next generation struggling with their cultural heritage. Lahiri's work explores human relations in a cultural context. But the writer's approach to culture seems to be in terms of the two possible paradigms, 'large' and 'small' culture. The textbook explores human relationship. It exists in the complex network of society, nationality, identity, cultural integration and rejection as well as hybridity in the Bengali community in the United States. The complex use of patterns and motifs binds the stories together. There are recurring themes of the barriers and opportunities for human community, including marital, extra-marital, and parent-child relationships; and the dichotomy of care and neglect.

Keywords: Culture, Heritage, Identity, Immigrant, Indianness, Location and Nationality.

The migrant has become one of the representative figures of the contemporary world. Travelling and adapting across the cultures have turned into major issues of the contemporary globalizing environment. Contemporary fiction attempts to offer possible solutions to the more than evident crisis of communication between cultures. It is through literature that many of the contemporary writers try to come with their immigrant condition, to find a voice of their own by making the two worlds. They are forced to live in coexist harmoniously within the traumatized self.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a story teller who weaves the lace of love, identity, crisis, lies and faults. Her works are enriched with sensitive dilemmas in life. The characters in her books experience the cultural as well as the generation gaps. However, she comments on the effects of Western Colonialism on Indians and Indians in Diaspora. She is not only a writer but a weaver of dreams, the fabricator of emotions and therefore her each and every work becomes an outlet for her emotions.

Lahiri has always been inclined to creative writing. Her early short stories faced rejection from publishers for years. Her debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* was published in 1999. The stories address sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indian immigrants, with the themes of marital difficulties, miscarriages and the disconnection between first and second generation of United States Immigrants. She later wrote, “When I first started writing I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not mature enough, to allow in life.” (34)

Jhumpa Lahiri made her debut as a novelist with the publication of *The Namesake* in 2003. The narrative spans over thirty years in the life of the Ganguli family. A film adaptation of the novel was released in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and India in March 2006. It was directed by Mira Nair. Lahiri’s second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, was published on April 1, 2008. It is about three generations, and the relationship between the three, the father, his daughter, Ruma, and her son, Akash. The father, a retiree, and also a recent widower, visits his daughter’s new home in the suburbs of Seattle. *The Lowland* is the second novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, published in 2013. The novel tells the story of two brothers who come of age in the 1950s and 60s in the city of Calcutta. When one of the brothers becomes involved in the Naxalite movement in the late 1960s, their paths diverge and one of them goes to the United States and the other one stays behind to take part in the movement.

Lahiri has also had a distinguished relationship with *The New Yorker* magazine in which she has published a number of her short stories, mostly fiction, and a non-fiction including *The Long Way Home; Cooking Lessons*, a story about the importance of food in Lahiri’s relationship with her mother. Since 2005, Lahiri has been a Vice President of the PEN American Center, an organization designed to promote friendship and intellectual cooperation among writers.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s contribution to the short story tradition has been significant and noteworthy. In literature she stands at a junction where the East meets the West. Imbibing a conservative Bengali tradition from her parents, she at the same time was exposed to the American way of life from an early age. The influence of both cultures, Indian and American, so fused in her that to speak of one necessarily includes a discussion of the other.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection of stories *Interpreter of Maladies* is the result of the writer’s “desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life” (“My Two Lives” 26). The stories, set across national, but also generation, or gender frontiers that contribute to the writer’s finally finding of an identity of her

own. Reconciling her two selves as, “like many immigrant offspring, I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen” (31). Consequently, the collection may be interpreted as the writer’s journey into her new, even if not necessarily true, self, a journey of initiation into the major adaptation problems of the contemporary world. The writer’s journey, partially recorded in her stories, evolves from the condition of the individual. For whom, “one plus one did not equal two zero, my conflicting selves always cancelling each other out” to that of the individual finally aware that “one plus one equals two, both in my work and in my existence, the traditions on either side of the hyphen dwelling in me like siblings, still occasionally sparring, one outshining the other depending on the day”. (“My Two Lives” 47)

On a first reading, Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection of short stories seems to offer an image of the complicated cultural relationships between India and the West, investigating troubled position of the displaced individual caught between two cultures which, in most cases, he/she finds unfamiliar. On a second, more in-depth reading, all the stories record journeys across visible and invisible frontiers that the characters must transgress in order to find their real self.

The frontier itself requires a more nuanced interpolation. It is not only the visible, national, in particular, frontier, between cultures that people have across, but also the invisible frontiers which separate individuals belonging to the same culture. The frontier is “an elusive line, visible and invisible, physical and metaphorical, moral and immoral” (Rushdie 411). The idea behind Lahiri’s stories is that we all have to fight our share of frontier wars. Jhumpa Lahiri seems to fictionally agree that “the journey creates us. We become the frontier we cross” (Rushdie 410). And this is mainly because she herself, although born in London and then spending the rest of her life in the United States, was, however, born to Bengali Indian parents, which made her inevitable to be looked as an immigrant. As she states about her belongings, “the immigrant’s journey, no matter how ultimately rewarding is founded on departure and deprivation, although it secures for the subsequent generation a sense of arrival and advantage.” (“My Two Lives” 53)

Because of her origin, primarily, the critics were tempted to include *Interpreter of Maladies*, as her debut book, however, her subsequent productions in the Asian American literary section and to approach it as a sample of Asian American writing. Yet, we consider that Lahiri’s artistic intention is more specifically associated with her desire to move beyond the stereotypical image of Indianness and, through her writing, to find an identity and discover a voice to help her to overcome the stigma of marginality.

Out of the nine stories, three are set in India, whereas six are set in America, focusing on the lives of first or second generation of Americans of an Indian origin. According to Mickiko Kakutani, “Many of Lahiri’s people are Indian immigrants trying to adjust to a new life in the United States; their cultural displacement is a kind of index of a more existential sense of dislocation.” (48)

Lahiri’s stories explore human relations in a cultural context, but the writer’s approach to culture seems to be in terms of the two possible paradigms, ‘large’ and ‘small’ culture. Culture is, thus, looked at both as the “large cultural, national or international” entities and as “cohesive social grouping with no necessary subordination to large cultures” (Holliday 63). That is why none of the stories exclusively focuses on the encounter between the ‘large cultures’ or on the one between and within the ‘small cultures,’ but rather the tension generated by the fact that individuals perforce evolve in both. Lahiri’s characters seem to confirm that:

Dislocation in the norm rather than the aberration in our time, but even the unlikely event that we spend an entire lifetime in one place, the fabulous diverseness with which we live remind us constantly that we are no longer the norm and the center. (Hoffman 275)

It is no longer and only the clash between national cultures that represents the writer's main interest, although some of Lahiri's protagonists do seem to confirm to the typical image of the contemporary migrant, the individual "severed from his roots, often transplanted into a new language, always obliged to learn the ways of a new community . . . forced to face the great questions of change and adaptation" (Rushdie 415). It is the case of the protagonist of 'The Third and Final Continent' who looks at himself from the very beginning as the typical migrant:

I left India in 1964, with a certificate in commerce and the equivalent, in those days, often dollars to my name . . . I lived in north London, in Finsbury Park, in a house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like myself, all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad. (Lahiri 173)

It is also the case of Mrs. Sen in 'Mrs. Sen' or Shobha and Shukumar in 'A Temporary Matter.' Lahiri's attempt is to see beyond the visible frontiers and to plunge deeper into the springs of human action. That is why; she frequently deals with problematic relationships between individuals within one and the same society, and is it American or Indian. Many of her stories treat marriage and the tense relationships within couples.

'This Blessed House' focuses on the troubled relationships within the couple. "At the urge of their match maker, they married in India, amid hundreds of well-wishers" (Lahiri 143). They realise soon how different they are and how lonely they felt. Miranda, the protagonist of 'Sexy' also feels insecure in relationship she has with a married man, the story about her becoming aware of her displacement and loneliness. "A Temporary Matter" is about a couple and how they "become expert at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending much time on separate floors as possible." (4)

'A Real Durwan' is set in India and features only characters whose origin is not commented on since they are natives in their own country. The protagonist of the story is a sixty-year old woman, deported to Calcutta as a result of the Partition, whose problems of adaptability to a new culture rebrought to the fore, "No one doubted she was a refugee; the accent in her Bengali made that clear" (Lahiri 72). However, she always inclined, "to exaggerate her past at such elaborate lengths and heights" (73) in order to protect herself against the aggressiveness of the new cultural environment.

Out of nine stories, one seems to have a more accentuated political content, in the sense that, because of an explicit reference to the Bangladeshi War of Independence in 1971, the reader is tempted to see it as dealing with contemporary political issues:

In the autumn of 1971 a man used to come to our house, bearing confections in his pocket and hopes of ascertaining the life or death of his family. His name was Mr. Pirzada, and he came from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, but then a part of Pakistan. That year Pakistan was engaged in civil war. The eastern frontier, where Dacca was located, was fighting for autonomy from the ruling regime in the west. (Lahiri 23)

Although Lahiri's work may be interpreted as essentially focusing on the problems of immigrants, "her real subject is miscommunication. The relationships in her stories are a series of missed connections" (Brians 196). The individual in Lahiri's stories is not simply Indian or

American, Indian in America, or Indian in India, or American of Indian origin in India. The individual is rather the locus of much more complicated cultural relations and tensions. Culture therefore, for Lahiri, is not understood in an essentialist manner, as national culture, homogeneous and Unitary, but as “a fluid, creative social force which binds different groupings and aspects of behaviour in different ways, both constructing and constructed by people in a piecemeal fashion to produce myriad combinations and configuration.” (Holliday 3)

The cultural clash is the central theme to Lahiri’s stories. Its treatment is not limited; however, to the encounter between India and America but the clash of culture can be happened both side of the frontier. “Interpreter of Maladies”, the collections title story, also has a gifted linguist, Mr. Kapasi and an Indian American family touring in India. The Dases are perceived by Mr. Kapasi from the start as foreigners as they “looked Indian, but dressed as foreigners did” (44). During the first encounter with Mr. Das who is an air of confidence has given the fact that “Mina and I were both born in America” (45). The Das family cannot be mistaken for Indian, although they look do so. They are Indians and behave like Americans. Mr. Das cannot do anything without his tour book, which provides the information. He thinks the need of acquiring knowledge of Indian culture. The Das family’s encounter with India is an example of failed intercultural communication. Mr. and Mrs. Das do not try to recover a sense of belonging, but they are rather keen on reasserting their identity as Americans. Yet, during the trip they take to the Sun Temple in Konarak, Mr. Kapasi feels he identifies with Mrs. Das. He sees in her the same unhappiness he felt about his own marriage. “The signs he recognized from his own marriage that were: the bickering, the indifference, and the protracted silences” (53). But communication is hindered again, as Mr. Kapasi was looking for a friend, while Mrs. Das was looking for someone to “interpret her common, trivial little secret,” (66) that is why he felt deeply insulted. Mrs. Das misinterpreted ‘the interpreter of maladies’. She wanted some remedy to cure her consciousness, expecting to feel better and relieved. Mr. Kapasi wanted to “fulfill his dream, of serving as an interpreter between nations.” (Lahiri 59)

Because of subject matter of the stories, it is rather difficult to find a common denominator to keep the collection together. Apparently, the only binding element is Indianness. But to say that Lahiri’s main concern is the status of the Indian immigrant in America, or at best, the precarious condition of Indians in India would mean to over-simplify and ignore many of the issues from which much of the artistic vigour of Lahiri’s stories is derived. Critics themselves found it difficult to produce a consistent evaluation of Lahiri’s stories and to unerringly identify the writer’s position to the Indian or American community.

Ever since *Interpreter of Maladies* was published, she has been variously proclaimed to be an “American writer,” an “Indian-American author,” “Non Residential Indian” (NRI), and “American Born Confused Desi” (ABCD). Her writings are described as “diaspora fiction” by Indian scholars and “immigrant fiction” by American critics. (Shuchen 126)

It is just by overcoming our tendency to label and to see and interpret the world in black and white that we are able to read Lahiri’s stories as what they really are – an insight into the essentials of life, but also an investigation of the condition of the individual in the contemporary world. According to Brada Williams:

A deeper look reveals the intricate use of pattern and motif to bind the stories together, including the recurring themes of the barriers to and opportunities for human communication; community, including marital, extra-marital, and parent-child relationships; the dichotomy of care and neglect.

To conclude that Lahiri's stories bring to the fore issues related to intercultural communication, the cultural clash, stereotyping and etherizing, and see all these problems as having to do with human nature rather than being strictly associated with the condition of the immigrant Indianness. "The nine stories have in common certain themes and motifs, such as exile, displacement, loneliness, difficult relationships, and problems about communication" (Shuchen, 126). Essentially, Lahiri's stories deal with the encounter between self and other, individual identity being in most cases the result of mirroring effect. Although ethnicity seems to be central to all the stories, Lahiri is too little interest in ethnic aspects and Indianness is seldom, if ever, exaggerated. She resorts to India either as a setting of her stories or as place or cultural set of customs beliefs most characters refer themselves to in order to define their identity. The stories also feature characters that are either Indian or Indian-American. Yet, what Lahiri tries to avoid is the exoticism associated in the mind of the Westerners with either the locale or the people. She rather investigates and draws attention to problems of more general human interest that have nothing to do with India or being Indian either in India or America.

The stories may be considered equally heterogeneous if analysed in terms of the narrative technique employed. Two of the stories "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "The Third and Final Continent" are first-person narratives. The former is narrated from the point of view of ten-year old child, the latter from the perspective of an Indian emigrant in America. The rest are third-person narratives, but the stories are filtered through the consciousness and sensibility of a more or less involved character. It would be difficult to say whether Lahiri's choice of method of as anything to do with a certain pattern she intended for the stories.

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Author:

Bhashkra Charya holds MA (English lang. & lit.) and MPhil. (English) from C SJM University. He also possesses SET/SLET of Uttrakhand, Jammu & Kashmir, Rajasthan and North-East Commission SLET. At present, he is working as an assistant professor at Ramakrishna Paramhans PG College, Kulha Atura, Unnao, affiliated to CSJM University, Kanpur, India.