

**DIASPORIC EXPERIENCES REFLECTED IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S
*INTERPRETER OF MALADIES***

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Abstract

Diasporic literature has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation. Jhumpa Lahiri, a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, focuses sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants with themes such as marital difficulties, the disconnection among the immigrants and others through her nine short stories in her work *Interpreter of Maladies*. It is about the experiences of Indians who live in an alien country and how they are crushed under the burden of alienation and become rootless. This paper tries to focus a textual analysis of Lahiri's debut work through the analysis of diasporic discourse.

Key words: Short stories, Indian diaspora, relationship between sexes, cultural identity

Introduction:

Indian writing in English has achieved a great significance in the literary world of today. Short story is one of the most popular literary form through which the writers from diverse background of the South Asia wish to show the culture, social and political issues of this area. Diasporic literature deals with, displacement, existential rootlessness, alienation, nostalgia, quest of identity etc. It focuses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures. Indo – American diaspora is one of the important diasporas which has contributed a massive impact on the literary world and produced literary genius of today. Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the most prominent authors of Indo- American writing, weaves a full fabric of human relationships, spanning from the imperfection of domestic life, the intense solitude of lovers engaged in a sensual affair, and the daily affairs of life that happen within the confines of marriage. Like other expatriate writers, Lahiri too suffers the same dilemma and undergoes the strong longing for Indian culture, which is a part of every Indian as an individual. Lahiri was born in London on 11 July 1967 and grew up in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. She was the daughter of Indian immigrants from the state of West Bengal. Her family moved to the United States when she was just two years old and so her life is a beautiful blend of the East and West. Her first short story

collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* was released in 1999 which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000 and other awards for this collection. *Interpreter of Maladies* depicts the displaced immigrant protagonists and second-generation Indian-American characters searching for a way to fit into a community. In an interview She expresses “the problems of the children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin, is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. That has been my experience in any case”. The book is a collection of nine short stories concerning with the diasporic postcolonial situation of the lives of Indians and Indian-Americans whose identity has let them to be caught between the Indian- American traditions and culture. It focuses a strategy of diasporic in the post-colonial era through the effort of imagination.

Lahiri, through *Interpreter of Maladies* tries to focus about the South Asian diasporic community with the notion of identity loss. In each story of the book, almost all characters feel isolated when they desire to search their own identity. The first story of the book, *A Temporary Matter* is a story which focuses the cold and cruel reality, that human faces. At the beginning, Lahiri wished to focus this story into a Indian one which is seemingly predictable where a boy marries a girl. He works and earns, and wife cooks and they live happily but this is not a typical Indian story. Here, in this story, Sukumar and his wife Shobha coming from Indian backdrop commit that they spend their life together and find them unable to even utter a word with each other just like they play hide and sick game. It seems to be a common sort of marital strife. The setting, the author shows is integral to the plot and the characters of the story. The story reflects the alienation and loneliness that the emigrants face in a foreign land. The marriage bond which is still considered sacrosanct in India is slithering down under the pressure of new needs under a different background. This is the main cause that Shobha and Sukumar failing to find any foothold of security.

In her story, *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* she purports that culture is a value loaded concept. It does not merely symbolises any particular institution or any social system rather it is the blood and bone of human conduct. Culture is very akin to verify the spirit of life. The story exposes beautifully the cultural hiatus between an Indian family settled in the USA and a Muslim Academician. It shows the differences between Pakistan and the U.S. through a way a family lives and dines with Mr. Pirzada. This story is told from the perspective of a ten year old innocent child Lilia. It is based upon the time of Indo-Pak conflict in 1971. It is a story of Mr. Pirzada who is a professor from Bangladesh and doing research in America. He is always worried about the safety of his family in Bangladesh during 1971 war as he has left his wife and seven daughters without anybody to look after them. Mr. Pirzada always looks worried and restless. The story ends with his returning back to Bangladesh living with his family. The story describes the refugee crisis, Indo- Pak war and the genesis of Bangladesh.

The title story *Interpreter of Maladies* itself reinforced precisely and tells the story about a family visit to India. The crux of the tale is not nostalgia for the homeland or conversely a deep- seated cultural loss because the Indian in America sound so totally deracinated. The crux is located in the relationship between husband and wife on their way to Konarak with the taxi driver cum guide Kapasi who is an interpreter of maladies. Mr Kapasi is a character who signifies the deep divide between the culture of American born Indians and that of Indians living in India. His other job is as a translator in a Doctor’s surgery. There he explains people’s illness to the Doctor who does not understand the language of these patients. A compliment made guide and tourist share secrets as Mrs Das confesses about her second child Bobby. At this point the interpreter is silent and he can not quite see the significance of the confession to a total stranger.

The character of Kapasi demonstrates “is a man who has given up his dreams to support his family and who only yearns for some recognition and interest in his life.”(Brada-Williams: 2004: 458)

Jhumpa Lahiri, after her visit to India in 1992 wrote *A Real Durwan*, a story of Boori Ma, 64 years old woman from Calcutta who is the stair-sweeper of an old building. She came to Calcutta after partition. Her present life is almost gloomy, surrounded with suffocation which ultimately pushes her into the vertex of alienation, deprivation and uncertain future. In the story, the residents of the building chuck Boori Ma out of the building after a thievery suspicion. The people forget her honesty and her truthfulness. Her only fault was her garrulousness and her boasting of her rich past and rich parents.

Sexy is a story based on extra-marital relationship. This is a story of an American Indian girl Miranda who is unaware of his marital status and falls in love with a married Bengali man Dev. Emigrant Indians living abroad raise their eyebrows at this but cannot escape from it. Miranda is entitled sexy by Dev. Love does not mean to be sexy; it rather means being in each other's thought that is why at last Miranda came to realize that despite of her beauty and smartness she is not made for Dev.

Mrs Sen's is the story of another emigrant in America whose husband is a Professor of Mathematics in a university who cannot spend time with his wife because of his academic engagements. The story articulates the utter disgust, disorientation and dislocation of a lady coming from Bengal and settled in U.S.A. The family is keenly observed by an American boy of eleven years named Eliot who is looked after by Mrs Sen while his mother goes to work. Mrs. Sen, chops and prepares food as she tells Elliot stories of her past life in Calcutta, helping to craft her identity. She shares her boredom with him. Like *A Temporary Matter*, this story is filled with lists of produce, catalogues of ingredients, and descriptions of recipes Eliot functions as a foil to demonstrate Mrs Sen's inability to assimilate into American culture. Although Mrs Sen dominates the story, Eliot becomes a figure who not only illustrates the balance between the cultures but also develops as a character that grows through experiencing other customs. He also tries to determine his identity. His lack of understanding towards his mother and his own life is mirrored by Mrs Sen's frustration at the new world she finds herself in. Eliot feels the warmth in her voice. The greater tragedy is that he cannot relate and share his present sense of dislocation with her. Lahiri clearly portrays the two mindsets emanating from two cultures.

The Blessed House is the story of a young newly married couple Sanjeev and Twinkle who have just started their married life in USA. The tenderness of love can be figured out and explored in this story. Sanjeev voluntarily selects her who has already abandoned by her American boyfriend. As he has no experience in the art of love, so he thinks if he truly loves his spouse or not. Twinkle, as a student of literature wants to treasure the Christian antic monuments left over by the earlier tenant, when they shift to the new house whereas Sanjeev hates and disapproves of Twinkle's idea. Gradually he starts to hate things just because Twinkle likes them. Through the story, Lahiri tries to show that tolerance is essential both to cultural harmony and within relationships and she explores both the complications of an arranged marriage and the adjustments that must be made to accommodate a couple's disparate personalities within any relationship.

The Treatment of Bibi Haldar is a story regarding a woman Bibi Haldar, 29 years old orphan unmarried girl who bears the pangs of a mysterious disease. She has lived her entire life in desolation. It is a poignant story that focuses on the plight of this girl She finds herself stricken

to a grave syndrome but in the end she somehow gets pregnant, delivers a baby boy and her ailment is healed.

The Third and the Final Continent is the last story in the collection that moves from London to Boston and gives to the readers a different taste. Although the same emigrant themes the initial hurdles to settle, to adjust and after sometimes trying to be more native-- the story tells the readers the strange encounter of a Bengali commerce graduate who moves from Calcutta to London and then to Boston where he resides as a tenant in a house of an old woman known as Mrs. Croft. The narrator leaves her home and moves to a new apartment when his wife has come from India. She and her daughter Helen have made weekend visit to her. All the time there is the feeling of being alienated. This story encloses moving pictures of life. It is a story not of death but of new life not of loss but of gain and growth. Lahiri extends the idea of cultural disparities beyond the traditional conception of culture.

Lahiri's collection focuses not only on men and women's struggle to create connection but also about the loss of connection between people. Grief or an intense sense of loss can cause a breach in connection. Relationships that are built on a connection that is not mutual or stable have a minimal chance of success.. The characters are not able to shape their realities not because they don't have the ability but rather because they don't know how to place themselves in their world. The children in the book too seem to be searching for an identity.

The ending of each story comes much like the ending of any occurrence in real life – not quite hemmed in but with a feeling of closure and growth that gives “a sense of exile and the potential for -- and frequent denial of -- human communication that can be found in all of Lahiri's short stories.” (Brada-Williams: 2004: 454-55) In the stories, most of the characters are defined by isolation of some form or other like husbands is isolated from wives; immigrants are isolated from their families and their homes; children are isolated from their parents; and people are isolated from the communities in which they live. The lives in these stories end with a sense of loss. In their isolation, they feel that they are missing something vital to their identities. Lahiri seems to foretell that her stories will be about the hardships of communication and relationships. The book:

“...explores the ethnic character and history of a community as a reflection of a personal odyssey of displacement and as a search for self and community”. (Davis: 1997: 07)

Critics focus solely on the adult aspects for example marriage, sexuality, the immigrant experience and bridging the gap between Eastern and Western culture. The characters have left behind their Indian identity and face an ongoing struggle to adjust between the two worlds of the two cultures. Lahiri vividly exposes the estrangement and isolation that often afflict first- and even second-generation immigrants. Although the immigrant experience is central to her work, it is not her exclusive concern yet through her characters she suggests that there are “maladies” that trouble all of us.

Lahiri herself suffered from an identity crisis which enables her to write about identity crisis of expatriate communities. Her characters suffer from loneliness, alienation and longing for a lost world as she did. Her background is important for her writings too. Asha Chobey, an Indian critic remarks: “The personal life of Jhumpa Lahiri is the very proto-type of diasporic culture. Having spent more than thirty years in the United States she still feels “a bit of an outsider. Though she has confessed that her days in India are a sort of parentheses in her life, the fact she is at heart an Indian cannot be denied. The stories collected in her debut anthology *Interpreter of Maladies* deal with the question of identity.” (Choubey:2001:Postcolonial Web)

The power behind Lahiri's writing comes from the fact that "her stories record the experiences of both first and second generation Indian immigrants and majority of her characters, like her, have relatives in India but their home, in unambiguous terms, is North -Eastern United States". (Dubey: 2002: 22)

Lahiri's stories unlock the new gateway into the large submerged territory of "cross-culturalism". Khushwant Singh in his critical exploration argues," without striving to impress, without a witty twin of phrase, Jhumpa manages to hold the readers' interest. She reminds me of Somerset Maugham". Lahiri through the book, makes an attempt for new cultural synthesis that promotes cultural plurality. It is featured with a strong sense of identity to the narrators and their diasporic experiences.

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