



## THE CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF THE INDIAN DIASPORA: A REFLECTION OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S 'INTERPRETORS OF MALADIES'

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### ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri, a sort of representative figure for the Diasporans examines and defines the plight of the Diasporic people caught between two worlds with an ever increasing multiplicity of identities. Her novel *The Namesake* as well as the short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* provides the reader with pictures of the life of expatriates.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* depicts the displaced immigrant protagonists and second generation Indian-American characters searching for a way to fit into a community. The narrative is a collection of nine short stories concerned with the diasporic postcolonial situation of the lives of Indians and Indian-Americans. It underlines the centrality of cultural translation in the process of possessing and re-possessing the past and the present both chronological and spatial in a meaningful way. It also outlines a strategy of diasporic as well as gendered resistance towards existing colonial and patriarchal hierarchies in the post-colonial through the effort of imagination. My paper attempts to analyse the diasporic experience in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies* addressing the themes of immigration, collision of cultures, alienation, identity loss or identity crisis, ambivalence and marginalisation.

Keywords: Diaspora, ambivalence and marginalisation

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'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek meaning "to disperse" and is often used to describe any population which is considered 'deterritorialised' or 'transnational'. Diaspora is a term that addresses various issues like immigration, languages, multiculturalism, hybridity exile, repatriation, border, identity etc. James Clifford notes, of 'Diasporic language [which] appears to be replacing, or at least supplementing, minority discourse'. Robert Cohen describes diaspora as: the communities of people living together in one

country who acknowledge that the old country- a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore- always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions (5). Writers of Indian diaspora such as Salman Rushdie, Bharathi Mukherjee, Gayathri Chakravorthy Spivak, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, Sashi Deshpande, Sashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra and Vikram Seth have created waves in the west and made their impact on Indian literary scene.

Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian American author who won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Lahiri as a sort of representative figure for the Diasporans. She examines and defines the plight of the Diasporic people caught between two worlds with an ever increasing multiplicity of identities. Her novel

*The Namesake* as well as the short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* provides the reader with pictures of the life of expatriates. Lahiri's fiction is autobiographical and she frequently draws upon her own experiences and those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali communities. Lahiri examines her characters' struggles and anxieties to chronicle the nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behaviour.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* is a book collection of nine short stories which dealt with the lives of Indians and Indian Americans who are caught between the culture they have inherited and the "New World." It points out the centrality of cultural translation in the process of possessing and re-possessing the past and the present both chronological and spatial in a meaningful way. It also brings out a strategy of diasporic as well as gendered resistance towards existing colonial and patriarchal hierarchies in the postcolonial through the effort of imagination. The book manifests the themes of cross-cultural which create a natural opportunity to compare the presence of juxtaposed cultural values. Lahiri recounts the lives of Indians and Indian Americans who are caught between the culture they inherited and the world in which they now find themselves.

With respect to the treatment of the diasporic experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's work Aruti Nayar in her article "An Interpreter of Exile" rightly observes that:

Lahiri negotiates the dilemmas of the cultural spaces lying across the continents with a master's touch. Though endowed with a distinct universal appeal, her stories do bring out rather successfully the predicament of the Indians who trapeze between and across two traditions, one

inherited and left behind, and the other encountered but not necessarily assimilated (4).

Identity is an important factor of post colonial expatriate literature and Lahiri's characters are evidence for it. An Indian critic Asha Choubey writes about Lahiri's background in this manner. The personal life of Jhumpa Lahiri is the very prototype of diasporic culture. Though she has spent thirty years in the United States, she still feels as an outsider and she confesses that her days spent in India are a sort of parenthesis, that she is an Indian at heart cannot be denied. The stories collected in her debut anthology *Interpreter of Maladies* deal with the question of Identity and diaspora.

The first story, *A Temporary Matter* relives five days in the lives of an estranged young couple, Shukumar and Shobha settled in Boston. They exchange confessions after a long silence to cope with the failure in their marriage. They become exiles, not of countries and culture but of their still-born dreams. The absence of her husband at the time of her still-born child causes a communication breakdown in the relationship of Shukumar and Shoba. The lack of communication compounded by the loss of identity one feels in an alien culture, makes the couple avoid each other and find refuge in a place where the other does not frequent. Shukumar, unable to bear the pangs of being alienated reveals on his part that he had come back in time to hold the child for few minutes before the child was cremated. Their mutual confession brings them together in a flood of tears underlining the fact that cultural roots cannot be severed so easily. The story reflects the alienation and loneliness the emigrants face in a foreign land. It is true as A.K. Mukerjee comments, "The marriage bond, which is still considered sacrosanct in India, is gradually slithering down under the pressure of new needs under a different background" (280-81).

*When Mr. Pirzada Came To Dine* presents the cultural unanimity between an Indian family and Pakistani young man in a foreign country. Mr. Pirzada is from Dacca, then a part of Pakistan. He left behind his wife and seven daughters for a fellowship to study the foliage of New England and often suffers from the agony of their separation. His

fellowship was exiguous and he comes to 10 year old Lilia's home to eat with her parents and to watch the news of the Indo-Pakistan War. While dining with Lilia's parents he keeps his pocket watch "set to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead", "on his folded paper napkin on the coffee table" (30). Lilia remembers how her parents and Pirzada have watched the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, bloodshed and killing on T.V with sad hearts and shared their feelings of past and present displacement. This sort of identification, empathy and like-mindedness forms a strategy to reduce the alienated feelings that normally grip the immigrants. The children of the immigrants read the history and geography of America in schools and have assimilated their culture. These children carry with them the past history of 'origin' of their parents and grandparents. Lilia who is able to recognize a similarity between Mr. Pirzada and her parents, feels alienated when Mr. Pirzada returns to his homeland. She broods, "I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughter for so many months" (42).

In the title story *Interpreter of Maladies* the affluent American born Indians, Mr. and Mrs. Das are on a trip to India with their three children. Mr. Kapasi, an interpreter and tour guide takes them to the Sun temple at Konark. Mrs. Das and family groomed in American culture feel bored and lack curiosity: "... Mrs. Das gave an impatient sigh, as if she had been travelling her whole life without a pause" (47). But Mrs. Das suffers a malady that is deep-rooted, the secret guilt that her second son, Bobby was not her husband's. She feels Mr. Kapasi is the right interpreter for her malady and speaks out, "Eight years Mr. Kapasi, I've been in pain. I was hoping you could help me better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy (65). Kapasi considers it as his bounden duty to assist Mrs. Das "and so he asked, "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (66). This story stands exceptional among all other stories for its powerful narration and fascination of the third world people to the European life. The story shows how the everyday language of a common Indian becomes a western language. All characters are defined by isolation of

some form or another. Husbands are 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. In their isolation, these characters feel that they are missing something very important to their identities.

*A Real Durwanis* the story about Boori Ma, a feeble 64-year-old Bengali born woman sent to Calcutta after the partition. She is a self-appointed sweeper of the stairwell of a multi-storyed building and her services "came to resemble those of a real durwan" (73). She considers herself as 'an outsider', 'broken inside', and feels "burned like peppers across her thinning scalp and her skin was of a less mundane origin" (75). She narrates stories of her past such as her daughter's extravagant wedding, her servants, her estate and her riches. The idea of 'Imaginary home' is present in her story. She left a rich life style in Pakistan for a poor life style in India. She is fixed with her upper class identity and remains alienated from the West. This story focus on the plight of the lower class of the social strata and of the forced diaspora and political struggle. In exchange for her services, the residents allow Boori Ma to live on the roof of the building. Later she is suspected to be the informer to the robbers and is thrown out of the place when a few things of the locality are stolen in her absence. Jhumpa Lahiri underscores the impossibility of an exile communicating emotional pain and loneliness to others through the characterization of Boori Ma.

*Mrs. Sen* is a story which explores the life of an emigrant Indian through the European point of view. Mrs. Sen is an expatriate Indian Bengali housewife who is trying to reconstruct a mini India in her house. The story presents the real difficulties faced by Indian wives in an alien culture, without friends and family, struggling to cope with the new surroundings they cannot call their home. Being isolated and displaced from her home, she continuously reminiscence about her nostalgic memories of India. Bharati Mukerjee rightly claims in *Massachusetts Review*, "When an Asian man comes to America for economic transformation, and brings a wife who winds up being psychologically changed" (47). Mrs. Sen's mannerisms, cooked dishes

which she serves to Eliot's mother as a mark of Indian hospitality are despised by Eliot's mother. Mrs. Sen feels bad and insulted many a time by her remarks and always feels restless and uneasy.

Mrs. Sen's consciousness is always preoccupied with the thoughts of her home for "everything is there" (113), in India. It shows that diasporas construct imaginary homelands from the fragmentary odds and ends of memory. Mrs. Sen lives in some kind of 'past-present'. Homi K. Bhabha writes in his essay *The Location of Culture* 'The past-present' becomes the part of necessity not the nostalgia of living (Bhabha 938).

*The Blessed House* is the story that shows the adjustment of young emigrant Indians Sanjeev and Twinkle to a new culture and beliefs. It records the emotional and cultural clash between a Hindu husband and his dislike for his wife's fascination for Christmas artifacts. Sanjeev quarrels with Twinkle to remove the Christian symbols from the house. She is caught with the complications of an arranged marriage and the adjustments that must be made in a conjugal life. Twinkle, a representative of the second-generation female immigrants is influenced by the hybrid diasporic identities. This dynamic positive hybridity present in Twinkle makes her survival definite and gives her superiority and charm over other characters. Sanjeev is a displaced person but he wanted to save his original identity. Lahiri explores both the complications of an arranged marriage and the adjustments that must be made to accommodate a couple's dissimilar personalities within any relationship.

The story *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* presents Bibi Haldar a twenty nine-year old gripped by a mysterious ailment. *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* as told by Lahiri in an interview, is, "about a misfit, a young woman living in a rundown building in Calcutta, and she is in the care of her cousin and his wife....She is an epileptic". Though she longs to get married and beget a child no one is ready to take her as a wife and this frustrates her. She is isolated, marginalised which finally leads to displacement. Bibi herself unknowingly admits that her illness is not physical but something psychological. Her problem is solved when she becomes a mother before marriage. The following

words of Bibi signify the desperate efforts of an exile to conceal her pangs of loneliness and keep a smiling face, "Now I am free to discover life as I please" (170). The story appears to emphasize that it is the child or rather the reproductively of the mother and her independence and ability to survive on her own that gives purpose and meaning to life of a woman.

In the story *The Third and Final Continent* the narrator lives in India, then moves to London, and finally to America. The story depicts the hegemonic control still exercised by the European people over the third world people. Lahiri in this story makes it clear how the first generation migrants do stop brooding over their past, and try to fix their roots in an alien land. By ending on a cultural tone of social acceptance and tolerance, Lahiri suggests that the experience of adapting to American society is ultimately achievable.

*The Interpreter of Maladies* as they herald a new voice of Indo-Anglian literature with themes of diasporic human relationships. We find elements of identity crisis, alienation, exile, lack of love and care in varying degrees in every facet of relationship involving the characters in these stories. It presents a composite picture of the Indian abroad who longs for his roots as evident by the authors own view and writing.

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