

Indian Postcolonial Diaspora Experience in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies***Dr. Ambreen Safder Kharbe***Dept. of English, G.M. Momin Women's College, Rais High School Campus, Thane Road, Bhiwandi, (MS) India***Abstract**

Various forms of dislocation, such as Exile, Diaspora, and Migration, have been productively and extensively explored in the writings of postcolonial writers. The Immigrant experience, the question of identity and the expatriate experience continues to furnish remarkable material for fiction and can be traced in the works of various South Asian women writers too. Jhumpa Lahiri is also one amongst them. *Interpreter of Maladies* indicates interpreter of emotional pain and affliction. The nine stories are the examples of various aspects of Indian immigrants living in America. They explore themes of identity, the immigrant experience, cultural differences, hybridity, love, marriage and family. The 2000 Pulitzer-Prize winning volume *Interpreter of Maladies* further will focus about a failed relationship, complexities and nuances of Indian immigrants.

Key Words: Immigrants, displacement, self identity

Various forms of dislocation, such as Exile, Diaspora, and Migration, have been productively and extensively explored in the writings of postcolonial writers. The notion of Diaspora has been taken in a broader sense as liberating itself from all political domains and major religious and ethnic groups in the past. The Immigrant experience, the question of identity and the expatriate experience continues to furnish incredible material for fiction and can be traced in the works of various South Asian women writers too. Jhumpa Lahiri is also one amongst them. Travelling and adapting across cultures have turned into major issues and concern of the contemporary globalizing environment. The Diasporas settled in different countries are committed to the restore and maintain the value system of their homeland.

The term Diaspora came into use only with reference to the Jews who dispersed in

different parts of the world either forcibly or due to other reasons. Pradeep Anand says:

Diaspora is spreading of the seed when planted in different parts of the world, absorbs unique characteristics from the local soil. Every story about the Diaspora thus becomes a unique context, a coordination of space, time and experience, which someday will collectively tell the whole story of a Diaspora. (Anand 4)

Jhumpa Lahiri the great Indian Diasporic writer has three books to her credit. Her first work *The Namesake* (2003) reflects her personal experiences. In this story, the Calcutta born parents immigrated to USA faces the problem of rearing up of their children Gogol and Sonia, and the constant generational and cultural gap with their parents. Her second work *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) is a collection of eleven short stories deal with two separate cultures, and

how people deal with one other, and her third work *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) is a collection of nine short stories, reflecting different South Asian Communities.

Interpreter of Maladies reveals her admirable grasp of biculturalism and reliable style. Lahiri has very artistically dealt with the subject of dislocation including isolation, cultural displacement, and sense of identity and belonging with the fine details of both Indian and American cultures. Lahiri's stories describe universal sympathy, the breakup of identities, the alienation and sense of loneliness experienced by all immigrants, giving voice to their pain and peeping into their psyche.

Interpreter of Maladies is a collection of short stories comprised of characters of Indian descent living in the United States, particularly New England. There is a variety of plots within the collection that depicts a diverse society of immigrants. The characters ranging from children to adults and finally to older adults who try to make a sense of their home lives versus their school lives, others trying to find connection with their heritage and America, and finally older adults who continually struggle to accept their new lives and find difficult to survive. These characters react quite differently to their family, friends, and enemies, comprising an unbiased illustration of how varied Indian immigrants' personalities are despite their common ethnic background.

The stories usually begin with the mention of the first generation immigrants with their identities and cultural orientations firmly grounded in the Indian ethos and the next

generation struggling with their inherited cultural heritage and their new identities. The texts enact an ambivalence that the protagonists or other characters choose to or come to inhabit. They explore subject positions acting in two apparently binary discourses of the orient and the occident. The hybridity that results from the resultant synthesis redefines the subject positions. The texts explore human relationships that exist in the complex network of ethnicity, nationality, identity, cultural assimilation and rejection as well as hybridity in the Bengali community in the United States.

The first story *A Temporary Matter* presents the casual but systematic build-up towards a crucial revolution of a young and financially independent woman against an unbearable, loveless marriage. A story of husband and wife, Shukumar and Shoba whose life was filled with joy but after the death of their first-born baby their life took a drastic turn with both started to drift apart. Miscommunication or unexpressed feelings weigh on several characters, destroying their well-being. *A Temporary Matter* is the best example of secrecy taking its toll on a marriage. Shukumar and Shoba, lost in their own grief, cease communicating with one another. Blackouts became their companions which allow them the freedom to share secrets they have never shared. They now find it difficult to maintain scared relation of their marriage. The child was the only bond that tied them together as couple. The major themes are grief, alienation, and deception. In grief, Shoba stays away from the house as much as she could and on the other hand, Shukumar had withdrawn himself from the world and seldom leaves the house. In this

story, main plot directly revolves around the construction of the female identity rather than the male.

Lahiri's expression of the sense of alienation continues in *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* which presents the cultural unanimity between an Indian family and Pakistani young man in a foreign country. Mr. Pirzada is from Dacca, a part of Pakistan. He left behind his wife and seven daughters for a fellowship to study the foliage of New England. During his stay in New England he comes across an Indian family whom he visits very often. He comes to ten years old Lilia's home to eat with her parents and to watch the news of the Indo-Pakistan War. In the story Pirzada suffers from the agony of separation from his family, wife and seven daughters who are in his homeland Dacca. 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.

And yearning to be connected to their part of the world, it was Lilia's parents' destiny to search for the compatriots through the University directory every new semester. 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. But still, 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, feel alienated when Mr. Pirzada returns to his homeland.

Like Mr. Pirzada, the complexities of identity and belonging become negotiations and hazards of nationality and citizenship. The first-person speaker is a ten-year-old girl, Lilia, who finally comes to understand the pain caused by separation from one's family. Lilia is caught between the traditions of her parents and American culture. She does not understand her parents' complaints about the unavailability of ingredients for Indian food, or their lament that neighbors. On the one hand, Mr. Pirzada and Lilia can be read as universal that transcend history and geography and that connect the two Bengals; but equally easy, the connection is a broad sign towards the universalism of human feelings. This universally bridge of unity through age and gender.

Lahiri shows the effect of western colonialism in this story when Lilia tries to read about India in her school library, the following exchange occurs with her teacher "is this book part of your report Lilia?" "No Miss Kenyon". "Then, I no reason to consult it she said, replacing it in the slim gap on the shelf. Do you?"(33)

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. The protagonist Mr. Kapasi is an interpreter and tour guide who takes them to the Sun temple at Konark. But Mrs. Das and family groomed in American culture feel bored and lack curiosity. In this story Mr. and Mrs. Das both born and raised in America, although their retired parents have now moved to India. Soon after marriage as Raj becomes busy with his teaching assignments, life became dull and drab for Mina: "she was left at home all day with the

baby . . . Always cross and tired” (64). Her problems became worse when she conceived her younger son Bobby because of a sexual encounter with a friend of her husband who once happened to stay with them for a few days. She kept the secret for eight years before revealing it to Kapasi, the interpreter of maladies, hoping that he would help her ‘feel better’ by saying ‘the right thing’ or ‘suggest some kind of remedy’. She tells Kapasi that she is troubled by ‘her secret,’ though Raj, her husband, “doesn’t even suspect it” and thinks she is “still in love with him” (65). Kapasi, because of his typical Indian background and patriarchal ideology was unable to deal with the complicated and taxing situation.

The narrative focus is generally on the female protagonist: a lonely individual struggling to come to terms with her new environment, oppressive matrimonial or extra matrimonial relationships, an alien culture, social and economic insecurity or her natural support to survive with an identity of her own. Kapasi’s attitude towards his wife is similar to that of Raj towards Mina at a more distinct level: both ignore individual, emotional and physical needs of the wife condemned to the boring repetitive domestic backbreaking responsibilities. The problems for both the couples are caused by the nature of marital relationships dramatized in the story, which are unsatisfactory for the man as well as the women.

Mr. Das’s camera represents his inability to see the world clearly or connect with it because he views the world through his camera. Mr. Das misses the reality of the world around him, both in his marriage and

in the scene outside the cab. 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 Durwan is the story about Boori Ma, a sweeper who did not migrate to India from Pakistan for financial reasons but for political reason. A sweeper of the stairwell in an old building in Calcutta, became the victim of partition. In 1947, the South Asian subcontinent was divided in to two countries, India and Pakistan. The partition created a mass migration of Hindus and Muslims from India to Pakistan. During this mass migration, some people lost everything including their identity. Throughout the story, Boori Ma’s identity is attached to those keys that are stolen at the final stage of the story. Her past identity of a rich man’s wife of East Bengal is important than her past present identity as a sweeper of Calcutta city. She cannot forget her identity related with her first homeland. The idea of ‘Imaginary home’ is present in the story. She was forced to leave back her rich life style in Pakistan for a poor life style in India. She is thus fixed up with her upper class identity and remains alienated from the West. This story focus on the plight of the lower class casually in that selection of the social strata because of forced Diaspora and political struggle. In exchange for her services, the residents allow Boori Ma to live on the roof of the building. While she

sweeps, she tells stories of her past: her daughter's extravagant wedding, her servants, her estate and her riches. She cannot forget her identity related with her first homeland. As she claims: "Yes, there I tasted life have I mentioned that I crossed the border with just two bracelets on my wrist? Yet there was a day when my feet touched nothing but marble. Believe me, don't believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them" (71). The residents of the brick building hear continuous contradictions in Boori Ma's storytelling, but her stories are seductive and compelling, so they let her contradictions rest. At the end of the story, a basin is stolen from the building and Boori Ma is expelled from that building. The 'basin' incident is like the driving accident of "Mrs. Sen" symbolizing that she has been always alienated in West Bengal and her identity will be always attached to East Bengal.

Jhumpa's other story *Sexy* revolves around a lady named Miranda who gets entangled in an affair with an Indian only to realize the worthlessness of a relation that is not socially approved and accepted. The concept of love is purely physical for her; that's why she does not hesitate to glide into a relationship that has no future. Physical satisfaction starts giving her the way of the realization that acceptance of the body is altogether different from the acceptance of relationship. Initially she feels elated when her paramour Dev calls her sexy, "It was the first time a man had called her sexy, and when she closed her eyes, she could still feel his whisper drifting through her body, under her skin" (Lahiri, IOM 93). Her mirage gets blurred when she has to look after the child

of her roommate's cousin. The child becomes the vehicle that makes her realize the hollowness of her affair that would eventually result in nothing but pain and isolation. The child, like her lover, calls her sexy after forcing her to put on a glamorous silver cocktail dress. Her confusion requires an explanation and the explanation shatters her flimsy cobweb of illusions. The boy tells her that to him sexy "means loving someone you don't know" (Lahiri, IOM 107). The dawn of realization makes her decide the course of her drifted life and she preferred to opt out of an already dead relationship.

Lahiri focuses on the gender roles in this story, because Dev, the Indian lover cheating his wife, utilize the western fascination of Indian men to his own advantage. Cultural clash, broken marriages, Culture, tradition and search for identity are the major themes in the story. Lahiri deals most efficiently in the search for identity.

The sixth story of *Interpreter of Maladies* tells the story of Mrs. Sen, the wife of an academic, who looks after Eliot, an eleven-year-old boy, after his school time every day. A detailed study of her character proves her to be struggling in the process of adaptation to the new American cultural space. Posited in a luminal space, she has to confront the culture of the Other, and is therefore, on the verge of negotiating a new identity. Although – as a new and enforced immigrant in the United States - "White drumshaped lampshades flanking the sofa were still wrapped in the manufacturer's plastic" ; "Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence" (Lahiri, 124; 128) – Mrs. Sen has taken the very first steps of the

adaptation process, she like many other first generation immigrants is still too obsessed with her own cultural background and homeland values that she is too far from being assimilated. Her reaction to the threat to her ethnic identity and the culture of Other is simply an unconscious attempt to take refuge in the past and to avoid the present through as many different means as possible. Her daily activities also are arranged upon the theme of escape. While she prefers delaying her driving practices which are obviously the necessity of her new life, she steadily keeps at her special Indian-cooking daily practices and cooks vigorously despite the fact that there now exist only she and her husband to eat all this food. It is as if her cooking style and her interest in buying and having fish, which have associations with her idea of homeland, are her means of asserting her ethnic identity. However, her final act of taking the courage to drive in order to be independent from a seemingly busy patriarchal figure of a husband who is not always there to help can be regarded as a revolutionary act. Mrs. Sen has learnt that in order to survive in her new surroundings, she needs to open up herself to the culture of the Other represented symbolically by the car towards which she initially shows great fear – a fear much associated with the encounter between the Self/Other culture. Her first attempt to cross the boundaries fails but, no matter how traumatic the experience is, it at least makes her face the trauma and possibly release herself from the vicious cycle of escape and avoidance through being more open to the realm of the Other – what is definitely going to prove useful in crafting and negotiating

her new Diasporic identity and in encouraging her to embrace her new life in America.

The Blessed House is the story that shows the adjustment of young emigrant Indians to a new culture and beliefs. The best thing about the story is that it focuses on the fact that how adjustment and mutual understanding between the couple Sanjeev and Twinkle make a happy marriage. The story arrests our attention as it records the emotional and cultural clash between a Hindu husband and his dislike for his wife's fascination for Christmas artifacts. But in reality it is nothing about the religious divide but it is the subtlety of human feelings that makes up everything. After Sanjeev discovers his malady of possessive love, he "pressed the massive silver face to his ribs, careful not to let the feather slip, and followed her" (IM 157).

The Treatment of Bibi Halder is about a rural Indian girl living in Calcutta. She is very naïve and believes that marriage is a panacea for all maladies. The story is about how people help her finding a husband and how she is finally cured. Reading the story in the light of female identity-formation process, one can come up with the view that *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* can be in fact read as a commentary on the constructedness of the Indian notion of femininity and its possible burden on the life of the marginalized female subaltern in Calcutta, India. While Mrs. Sen lives in America and the threats to her identity are coming from the Other culture of her host land, Bibi Haldar's identity which is at odds with the culturally-constructed gender codes of her society is threatened by the Other

cultural codes of her home land. The process of Othering takes places everywhere and at all times; identities, therefore, are always in the process of being made and remade. Bibi's Otherness to the culture she has been shaped in, is emphasized from the very beginning of the story in the guise of her allegorical mental disease – a disease which becomes the source of her being Othered as it “confined her world to the unpainted four-story building” (Lahiri, 173). The source of this disease then, seems to be nothing but a departure from an adherence to the ethnic cultural codes. Anyone not clinging to these codes is doomed to Otherness – even in her own homeland. Bibi's disease is the result of her breaking of such codes both by her physical look; “She was not pretty. Her upper lip was thin, her teeth too small. Her gums protruded when she spoke” (Lahiri, 174), and the things she could not do; “Bibi had never been taught to be a woman” (Lahiri, 178).

Bibi's identity-crisis comes to surface when she wants to negotiate a new identity by embracing these gender codes of the Other. Despite the feminist community solidarity, this seems to be an impossible act as fitting into the ethnic cultural codes needs certain essential characteristics which are missing in Bibi. So that, all her attempts to embrace such codes result in acts of mimicry when in order to practice, she is urged by the other women “to engage in small conversations with nearby men” (Lahiri, 180). In such practices what is after all parodied and ridiculed is the very definition of the Self (The Self of Bibi's Community). This, however seemingly opens the way for formation of the final “hybrid” identity of

Bibi Haldar which soon leads to the treatment of her disease. Bibi, through negotiating between the Self and Other, becomes a mother without being a wife – a half-sate of both this and that. It is this hybrid nature of Bibi Haldar's identity whose subversive dimension arms Spivak's subaltern with an act of resistance – an act that melts the boundaries of Self/Other and initiates an act of negotiation between both.

And finally, *The Third and the Final Continent* is the story of an Indian immigrant who reminisces her first few weeks in America, thirty years ago. He had arranged a marriage but since he had to come to America immediately after the marriage, he could not get acquainted with his wife. Meanwhile, he rents a room owned by an old widow. When his wife arrives in America, Mrs. Croft calls her a perfect lady. This comment evokes a sympathy and love in his mind for his wife.

The Third and Final Continent shows 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. In this story, the narrator recounts his tale of leaving India in 1964 with a commerce certificate and the equivalent of ten dollars in his pocket. He sails on a cargo ship for three weeks across the Arabian, Red and Mediterranean seas to England. He lives in London with twelve or more penniless Bengali bachelors like himself. They live three or four in a room, and share the meals they cook together. He attends LSE and works at the university library. They have few responsibilities

beyond their jobs. They lounge around on weekends and meet more Bengalis who join for dinners. Occasionally one of them moves out to live with a woman his family in Calcutta arranged for him to marry. When he is thirty-six years old, the narrator's family arranges a marriage in Calcutta and after that he settles down in America. The bond between the landlady Mrs. Croft and the narrator is beyond explanation. Mrs. Croft liked him and called his wife Mala "a perfect lady". When he reads of Mrs. Croft's obituary, he says, "I was stricken... Mrs. Croft's was the first death I mourned in America for hers was the first life I admired; she had left this world at least, ancient and alone, never to return" (Lahiri, IOM 196). With a growing son, they attain contentment and happiness in this 'third continent' which is also the final for them. When he speaks of the difficulty in finding a home away from home in America to his son, he encourages him: Whenever he is discouraged, I tell him that if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer. I am not the only man to seek fortune from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (Lahiri, IOM 198)

In *Interpreter of Maladies* all the stories not only strike a chord with those who feel alienated and lonely in foreign land but also a chord to the appreciators of Indian culture. The nine stories in this collection focus on the characters belonging to different backgrounds. All the characters in the

stories are affected in some way or another by the weight of Indian culture. Three of the stories take place in India and six others involve the lives of Indian immigrants in the United States.

The focus is mainly on Southeastern Asians, Indians and Bengali immigrants, the way they balance and struggling to reach the resistant power and deal with displacement. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* can be considered as an excellent piece of diasporic writing. This short story collection includes the stories about the lives of immigrant Indians who struggle to adjust between the Indian traditions that they left behind, and the entirely different western world that they have to encounter every day. Regarding 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)

In all her stories the character's maladies are the consequences of their ineffective communication. Whether it be the relations between husband and wife or the feeling of being in exile, silence and marginalisation of the downtrodden society all the stories emphasize the power of communication for the individuals as well the society especially

in the case of immigrants who suffer emotional isolation and cultural displacement and that is the reason she made the short story *Interpreter of Maladies* a symbol of her own existence along with others of the Indian immigrant social group.

Lahiri could not escape her inheritance because it is within her genetic material and she subconsciously constructs a short story collection that juxtaposes her two social groups literarily, symbolically and rhetorically. She states:

I always say that I feel that I've inherited a sense of that loss from my parents because it was so palpable all the whole time I was growing up, the sense of what my parents had sacrificed in moving to the United States, and in so many ways, and yet at the same time, remaining here and building a life here and all that entailed. (Farnsworth: 2000: 18)

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. Lahiri's background is important for her writings too. Asha Chobey, an Indian critic remarks:

The personal life of Jhumpa Lahiri is the very prototype 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 n Indian cannot be denied. The stories collected in her debut anthology *Interpreter of Maladies* deal with the question of identity. (Choubey:2001:Postcolonial Web)

Lahiri thus uses her acute power of observation, together with her personal experiences, to create stories that transport readers to an imaginary landscape, exploring and exposing the frailties common to all of humanity and understanding the problems of immigrants.

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