

The major themes and techniques in Jhumpa Lahiri's narratives –  
'Interpreter of Maladies and 'The Namesake'  
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**Abstract**

Mobility and connectivity in geography from one place to the other across the globe has undoubtedly, taken a toll on the lives of fortune seekers both from intellectual as well as monetary aspects. This has given rise to multiple other issues right from identity as to who they are and where they belong to. These people who leave their homeland widen the gaps of their native culture and that of the country to which they have set their feet for greener pastures. They are severed from their 'roots', 'home', 'culture' and even their 'language'; they are constantly tussled between a sense of belonging and unbelonging due to their traditional baggage. A deep sense of yearning to get back home and grappling to those invisible roots of the native creates a sense of nostalgic and claustrophobic tendencies in the resident immigrants, also known as 'diasporas', especially the women who are supposed to be the carriers of culture in the social structure. Indian writings in English abound in these inherent themes and the female writers have dealt with from a diasporic perspective. Jhumpa Lahiri, a second- generation immigrant has delineated these themes with greater profundity and contemporaneity in her narratives. This paper aims to discuss the major themes employed in author's works and the techniques she has adopted to reach the readers.

**Key Words:** Mobility, fortune seekers, nostalgia, claustrophobic, profundity, contemporaneity

**Introduction**

The post-colonial era mushroomed a plenty of writers, men and women especially due to the rapid pace at which the migrancy boomed in leaps and bounds. Many migrated to the 'Third World' either to enhance their knowledge or to improve their economy. Their existential experiences are penned by these diasporic writers many of them being immigrants. Female writers like Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee, Bharati Mukherjee are some of the major diasporic writers who fall under the gamut of first generation immigrants. Jhumpa Lahiri is a second- generation immigrant with no 'lived experiences' of her native Calcutta. But getting a first-hand information from her parents and

visiting Calcutta to learn more about her native gives an authentic account of the psychological pains of these immigrants dislocated from India especially the women, in the American soil. In this paper we will be discussing her debut short story collection 'Interpreter of Maladies' and 'The namesake' and the recurrent diasporic themes which appear in them.

**India vs United States**

From a broader perspective, the author Jhumpa Lahiri gives the picture of the east and the west; the 'orient' and the 'occident' in both the narratives. The major concern is about the migration of the Indians with special reference to Bengalis and their perpetual sufferings due to their displacement and relocation

in an alien land. They are named as 'diasporas' meaning dispersed from the centre to the periphery in all respects. To put it in Adesh Pal's words a diasporic experience is that "The first generation has strong attachment with the country of their origin. From the second generation onwards ties with the homeland gradually get replaced by those with the adopted country. Food, clothes, language, religion, music, dance, myths, legends, customs of individual community etc. become the markers of identity. These are retained, discarded or adopted differently at different times and places" (pal, 2004).

The short story collection 'Interpreter of maladies' as well as the debut novel 'The Namesake' abound in the universal themes such as family, culture, bonding from one side and from the other themes like alienation, nostalgia, instability, identity crisis from the psychological and emotional side. Peter van der Veer states, "The theme of belonging opposes rootedness to up rootedness, establishment to marginality. The theme of longing harps on the desire for change and movement, but relates this to the enigma of arrival, which brings a similar desire to return to what one has left".

### **The universality of 'otherness'**

The fundamental idea of feeling estranged is replete both in 'Interpreter of Maladies' and 'The Namesake'. Some of the characters like Mr. Pirzada, Mrs. Sen in the former work and Ashima and Ashoke in the latter; all of them being first-generation immigrants experience a strong sense of otherness or 'outsideness' in America- Boston being the locale. The movement from one place to the other and the exchange of different varying experiences makes them feel 'foreign' and unfamiliar. A deep sense of

unhomeliness both in Mrs. Sen and Ashima and their anguish in adjusting to western culture baffles them. In the case of Mrs. Sen she fails to get adapted to the country of adoption but in the case of Ashima she tries to come to terms with the American life though in certain respect she is highly resistant to change for example her dress code, preparation of food and so on. She embraces the middle path of being both Indian and American. However, the author doesn't give such a via media path in the case of Mrs. Sen.

This is true even in the second generation; Gogol the main protagonist in 'The Namesake' feels this otherness when he meets the Rattcliffs, Maxine's parents whose lifestyle is different from his parents. He takes some time to get accustomed to it but in the due course starts enjoying it especially their adventure in the countryside home in New Hampshire. On the contrary, Sanjeev in 'This Blessed House' feels the 'otherness' more intensely due to the cultural variance in his wife, Twinkle who is a second-generation immigrant a product of America. Jhumpa Lahiri's focus is on the 'mindscape of characters' and the 'human predicament' in a diasporic set-up from a wider perspective. On the contrary, Moushmi, a Bengali by parentage when she marries Gogol is unable to be compatible in her marital relations and feels the sense of 'otherness' though she a Bengali by birth. Finally she abandons him for her French connection, Dmitri, a stark contrast which the author deals with in 'the Namesake'.

### **Name and Identity**

The very title of the text suggests candidly that this 'leitmotif' of name forms the crux of the storyline which runs through the narrative. The author brings

the traditional part of naming a new-born baby (Bengali) in the hospital for the purpose of issuing a birth certificate forms the central focus. They, Ashima and Ashoke await the arrival of the 'Bholanam' the good or the official name from their native Calcutta. The letter of Ashima's grandmother the much awaited is lost in transit forces them to give a pet name tentatively. But this name, Gogol who is the favourite Russian author of Ashoke neither represents an American name nor an Indian.

As a child Gogol doesn't realise the seriousness but it troubles him at the age of fourteen when a sudden realisation dawns on him that his name doesn't give him any identity. He decides to change his name to Nikhil which when shortened also gives an American identity, Nick. This 'dual consciousness' and 'dual identity' is deftly employed by Jhumpa Lahiri.

Talking about her own dilemma of name she says in her interview with Jeffrey Brown,

"It's what my world is, and I've always been aware of my parents came from Calcutta. I have found myself sort of caught between the worlds of left behind and still clung to, and also the world that surrounded me at school and everywhere else, as soon as I set foot out of the door" (pbs, 2008).

The character Gogol is a reflection of the authoress, Jhumpa Lahiri who faced a similar predicament due to her name which she has brought out in a male counterpart in the novel, 'the Namesake'. Since one's name is synonymous with one's identity this name theme is central through the text. Even when Gogol changes his name officially to Nikhil, he

is not comfortable with his near and dear. Perhaps the author tries to bring the aspect of his dual identity through his name.

The identity of community is denoted through the marriage of Gogol and Moushmi; they both are Bengali by lineage. This commonality gives them an identity of a sense of belonging and brings them together in wedlock. Moushmi parents try to find Bengali suitors for her which makes her redefine her in France.

While the second-generation immigrants associated so much importance to their identities and name Ashima, the first-generation woman doesn't give importance to such an identity. She doesn't feel the need to even address her husband's Ashoke's name. In the first chapter when she wants to address him she says, 'Are you listening?' Such is her culture that she doesn't feel the need to call him by name. The author contrasts Ashima with Gogol.

### **Marital and extra-marital relationships**

**One** of the major themes discussed by Jhumpa Lahiri in 'Interpreter of Maladies' is that of the institution of marriage and the problems allied to that in a diasporic set up. The first story, 'A Temporary Matter' discusses the problems faced by Shobha and Sukumar, both second-generation immigrants quite independent and inflexible in their ways. Their loss over their dead child creates a rift in their relationship and both make their confessions during a temporary power cut. The author gives space to communicate that small things matter a lot in personal relationships and this can end in drastic outcome like how both

Sukumar and Shobha are estranged finally.

In the title story, 'interpreter of Maladies' the storyline on a sense of guilt emerging out of Mina Das's extra marital relations and her keenness to wipe off through Mr. Kapasi, an interpreter of maladies'. Her oriental style of thinking gnaws her for eight years due to lack of communication with her husband. Her husband's trust in her adds to her woes; she tries to get solace in the company of a stranger, Mr. Kapasi. On similar lines, the extra marital thread runs in the story, 'Sexy' where an American girl falls a succour to an Indian married man due to the cultural variance and gets a rude shock when she realises that she is being cheated by Dev.

'This Blessed house' deals with the failure in marriage of a young couple Twinkle and Sanjeev drift apart due to their cultural background, he being a first-generation immigrant and she the second, an American product. Her Christian religious fervour and collection of artefacts exasperates Sanjeev, a clear indication of loss of native culture and difficulty in accepting trans culturalism.

A similarity is brought out in 'The Namesake' 'in the marital relationships of Gogol and Moushmi both Bengalis but due to multicultural impact they find it difficult to adjust and they fall apart in the end. They go back to their old ways due to the influence of the American soil; in Moushmi's case furthermore the French connection.

### **Alienation and Nostalgia**

The most important diasporic characteristic is alienation common to the fictional characters of 'Interpreter of Maladies' and 'The Namesake'. Characters like Mrs. Sen, Boori Ma in the

former text and Ashima the main female character in the latter fall in this bracket. Both Mrs. Sen and Ashima are culturally dislocated from their native, Calcutta and they are stifled in the new western culture in which they are relocated existentially after marriage. Mrs. Sen is totally a misfit in American soil; she feels out of sort and unhomely in every respect. She is caught in a time-warp unable to come to terms with the spatial relations. The juxtaposition of past and present is felt through the narrative to indicate that Mrs. Sen is a failure in adapting in American culture that she recreates a mini India inside her apartment. Her frustrations are indicated clearly when she expresses her woes to Eliot, an eleven-year boy whom she baby sits to ward off her loneliness. Her nostalgia is brought through the symbol of fish and her failure to adapt in the west is highlighted through her driving sessions.

On the hand Ashima also feels alienated when delivers her son with no family members around to usher in the new addition in her family in a strange place. She feels that living in a foreign land s like a 'lifelong pregnancy'. When they shift from one lace to the other she finds it difficult to adjust. During her son's 'Annaprasan' she misses her home, Calcutta and her family. She reminiscences like Mrs. Sen the missing Bengali community and relative-s, the spatio-temporal domains are discussed in detail in the initial chapters of the text. In the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter the intensity of alienation is heightened when Ashima lives alone on Pemburton Road without her husband and children. In the end the author has brought a change in Ashima unlike Mrs. Sen; she accepts the change in some ways and decides to hold her dual identity.

### **Inter- generational relationships**

There is a parallel running in the narrative related to the problems faced by the first and second generation, the parents and their children and the complexities due to their negotiations in the foreign country. The former carries their traditional baggage hence consider America as the country of adoption and the latter the other way around because they are American products not considering the customs and traditions of their homeland. There is a constant tug of war to follow one culture at home and other outside. This is exactly the predicament of Ashima and Ashoke and Gogol in the 'The Namesake'. The aspect of acculturation and assimilation in the due course creates a rift in their relationships.

### **The theme of life and death**

Yet another theme which runs parallel to the others in the novel 'The namesake' is that of life and death. Ashoke encounters this close to death experience while travelling in a train to his grandfather's place. In the second chapter he reminisces this when he holds his son in his arms he recalls the haunting memories of how he was rescued from the shattered train; a real miracle and a second lease of life from the jaws of death. Jhumpa uses this image of death once again, when Ashoke literally meets death suddenly in Ohio; a game changer in the lives of Ashima and Gogol in different ways.

### **Narrative Techniques**

Each writer has a particular style of writing a narrative, Jhumpa Lahiri has a unique style which carves a special niche for her in diasporic writings. Her narrative techniques abound in **imagery, symbolism, reminiscences, open-ending**

and so on to sustain the interest of the readers.

### **Reminiscences**

This particular style is employed in both 'Interpreter of Maladies' and 'The Namesake'. The major characters Mrs. Sen, Mr. Pirzada both feels out of place in their country of adoption, America. They mentally travel backward and forward due to their 'unhomeliness' since they haven't crossed many borders across the globe. They have come with the purpose of doing research and marriage respectively. They yearn to get back to their culture and home strongly due to many factors the main being alienation. In these narratives there is a juxtaposition of past and present; so, to say a flashback technique. The character Ashima also can be included in this list of alienation. The author has given more importance to the spatial rather than sequential aspects in her writing from a post-colonial perspective. Memory recall plays a vital role in this type of narration.

### **Symbols and motifs**

In the short stories of 'Interpreter of Maladies' Jhumpa has used aplenty of symbols to heighten the effect. The pocket watch which is ceremoniously set to the time in East Pakistan denotes nostalgia, the camera of Mr. Das in the title story 'Interpreter of Maladies' denotes the short sightedness of his nature in his marital relationships, the bunch of keys which Boori Ma carries linking her past memories of riches, the cocktail dress in 'Sexy' is synonymous with Miranda's relations with Dev, the Christian artefacts denotes 'cultural atrophy' in the lives of Sanjeev and Twinkle.



In 'The Namesake' there is the symbol of the short-story collection of Nikolai Gogol which reminds the rebirth of Ashoke from the train accident. Even after his death the book is alive when Gogol communes with it in the end; the gift his father had given on his fourteenth birthday. There is a memory link of the present with the past through the book.

The Pemberton Road home stands as a symbol of the memoirs of the family connection of Ashoke and Ashima with their family over a period of thirty years. In the end when Ashima sells the house and decides to go to Calcutta she feels a sense of nostalgia creeping in her; a home where she has grown fond of and full of memories of her life with her husband.

Apart from these symbols there are some motifs in the novel 'The Namesake' like discussions about naming which appears throughout the narrative. There is also the motif of riding in train right from the beginning When Ashoke meets with an accident and subsequently chooses America for his higher studies. There is Gogol travelling from New Haven to Boston to visit his parents. The story ends in the train when Gogol reads the book given by his father, a constant reminder of the past and the present.

Being a second- generation immigrant Jhumpa understands the predicament of the immigrants hence she finds it challenging to give a solution. Hence, she

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leaves the narration **open-ended**, to the guess of the readers. There is no message given by the author and solution to her fictional characters. Her story line is fragmented; it is cyclical with a correlation of the beginning and the end. Jhumpa employs spatial techniques rather than sequential, a link between time and space (geography) in her narrations. To put it in Homi Bhabha's words 'disjunctive temporality'. In other words, a notion of a broken mirror referring to the broken identity of the diasporas.

**First person narration** is yet another technique employed by Jhumpa Lahiri to mitigate the seriousness and also it serves as a point of view from the character's perspective eg. In the story 'When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine' the character Lilia, a ten-year-old girl and an American product is the narrator. This enables her to talk about Mr. Pirzada in a dispassionate point of view and do the narration. There is also the **third person omniscient narration** where the author's voice prevails in the background. This technique is found in both the 'Interpreter of Maladies' and 'The Namesake'.

Jhumpa herself being a second-generation immigrant straddles both the Indian as well as the American cultures. she creates her fictional protagonists with an **autobiographical** touch. She infuses her own predicament in presenting these characters true to life.

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