

**Alienation: Is it Patented to the ‘Orient’ or does it Entail the ‘Occident’ as Well? - A  
Diasporic Perspective**

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**Abstract**

“A rolling stone gathers no moss” goes the popular adage which in its true sense can be applied to the present-day man. Embracing transnational identities has indeed made man in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a rolling stone. Ambition to achieve many a goal in his life severs him from his homeland to migrate in search of a prospective future and in turn attain a better quality of life. Well while his future prospects are to a certain extent realized tangibly, it is the intangible which takes a toll to a greater extent. Man being a social animal in the bargain is socially estranged with no interaction with his community with its shared beliefs. In a broader perspective this contingency can be termed as ‘alienation’, a hidden curse on these diasporic communities in the ‘Third World’. On the other hand, it is not only the migrants who suffer from this due to estrangement from their native flavour but the American products too are victims of his isolated feeling and lonely existence. This paper aims to bring out instances from the diasporic narrations of Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘debut short story collection ‘Interpreter of Maladies’; how alienation is a part and parcel of the native Americans’ life as well.

**Key Words:** Alienation, rolling stone, tangible, intangible, estrangement, contingency.

**Introduction**

Wanderlust has become the watchword these days with the shrinking spaces across the globe. Abundance in the interconnectedness of spaces has motivated mankind to venture from place to place. This spatio-temporal context germinated the seeds of diasporic writings with many settlers sow new seeds and strike newer roots in different locations. Inter related problems have sprung up in the lives of these diasporic communities which have been penned by many diasporic writers. Jhumpa Lahiri is one among them to interpret these problems in her works. The Cambridge English

dictionary defines alienation as follows: the feeling that you have no connection with the people around you: Depressed people frequently feel a sense of alienation from those around them. Since the immigrants are disconnected from their native culture, society, communities with their shared faiths, beliefs, customs and traditions of their homeland this sense of alienation becomes predominant. Jhumpa in her narratives contrasts this alienating aspect in the American counter parts too in some of her narratives in ‘Interpreter of maladies’.

Mrs. Sen and Eliot’s mother in Mrs. Sen’s

The portraiture of the protagonist Mrs. Sen evokes a sense of alienation to the readers. She is a true representation of the plight of many Indian women who have migrated to America. It is generally due to their marital status they are forced to strike roots in an alien land. Taking the timeline of Jhumpa's narrations they are housewives who face this sort of loneliness, estranged from their homeland. Her longing to connect with her imagined homeland is clearly visible through the food she cooks and the accessories she uses to feel at home. The major symbol discussed throughout the narrative is 'fish' denoting her Bengaliness in the American soil. Loss of friends' circle, relatives and networking community living stems in the issues of alienation in Mrs. Sen's life.

Mrs. Sen's American counterpart in the story is Eliot's mother; Eliot being an eleven year old boy who Mrs. Sen baby sits to fill the gap during the daytime. Eliot's mother, a working woman sounded official in choosing Mrs. Sen as her son's baby-sitter. She poses a volley of questions and as a typical American is keen to know whether Mrs. Sen drove a car.

At the outset Eliot's mother is estranged from her husband 'living two thousand miles west'. Distance denotes isolation from her partner and bereft of companionship and Eliot deprived of his father's presence. Eliot's mother has an extra-marital affair with one of her male colleagues who she invited for dinner and spent night together in her bedroom. Her loneliness from her husband drives her to carry on such clandestine affairs in the presence of her grown-up son; also denoting her loose moral standards.

The taste of alienation has already caught up with Eliot at the tender age of eleven. It is subtly brought out by the author when Mrs. Sen asks Eliot whether he misses his mother. She expresses deeply, "When I think of you, only a boy, separated from for so much of the day, I am ashamed". (Lahiri 123). When Eliot answers that he meets her every night, she continues saying that "You are wiser than that, Eliot. You already taste the way things must be". (Lahiri 123) The readers are able to infer the pangs of loneliness not only in adults but also children, a vacuum in emotional bonding. Eliot experiences a double alienation due to the absence of familial bonding as well as long hours of separation from his mother makes him a loner. Both Eliot and his mother taste their quota of loneliness.

Eliot's mother's unfavourable attitude in her social interactions is again a pointer towards her disinterest in socializing with her fellowmen. On Labor Day when her neighbourhood make merry drinking and dancing, Eliot's mother calls and makes a complaint on noise pollution. Eliot's perception regarding his mother's apathetic attitude towards community living and compares Mrs. Sen's yearning for the same amazed him. Eliot's mother is not socially inclined that they were not invited for the Labor Day's merriment. Her spirit to participate is low and on top of it, "When by evening, the crowd on the neighbour's deck began dancing, she looked up their number in the phone book and asked them to keep it down" says Jhumpa. (Lahiri 116)

Miranda in 'sexy'

The narrative 'Sexy' focuses on not only on the aspect of alienation but also throws

light on the dwindling moral standards in the American milieu. There is a parallel running between Miranda, an American girl cheated by a married Indian man, Dev and Laxmi's cousin who is cheated by her husband. Miranda a twenty-two-year girl befriends Dev in a departmental store with no clue on his marital background and culture. She is innocent and Dev takes advantage of the cultural differences, keeping her in dark regarding his marital status. Miranda's loneliness and Dev's understanding brings them close to each other. Dev's wife's absence for six weeks and his need for company can also be attributed as a common cause to draw him close to Miranda.

Miranda speaks her core feelings to Dev why she shifted from Michigan to Boston. Dev who is sailing on the same boat shows his empathy and approves her changing place. Jhumpa reinforces this idea through these lines: "I know what it's like to be lonely," he said, suddenly serious, and at that moment Miranda felt that he understood her—understood how she felt some nights on the T, after seeing a movie on her own, or going to the bookstore to read magazines or having drinks with Laxmi, who always had to meet her husband at Alewife station in an hour or two". (Lahiri 89).

Miranda's picking up an interest in learning Bengali alphabets thinking that Bengali is a religion, acquiring a taste for chicken tandoori in the Indian restaurants, visiting Indian video shops to know more about Madhuri Dixit go down the drain when she awakens to the reality that she can't marry Dev. She clearly comprehends the mind of Dev and his intentions through a seven-year old boy, Rohin. Embittered she keeps away from Dev's company to

accept her lonely existence in the vast, wide world.

Mrs. Croft in 'The Third and the Final Continent'

The whole narration is from the point of view of the narrator in the story who moves from England to America for a full-time job in the MIT library. The narrative is set in the mid 60's when American immigration started and many Indians migrated to this third world. The narrator gets quickly adapted to the American environs, gets married to a girl in Calcutta as per norms of the society. To fill the gap till his wife's visa clearance he stays as a tenant in an American woman's house for six weeks.

Jhumpa makes a special reference to this American lady, a hundred and three-year-old person living all alone in her house. Even at that age she wants to be self-reliant both monetarily and in performing her chores like heating up her soup. Though her daughter replenishes her stock of soup every week she dissuades the narrator from helping her mother saying, "I wouldn't if I were you. That's the sort of thing that would kill her altogether". (Lahiri 188). The narrator is totally taken aback when he comes to know Mrs. Croft's age and suddenly there is a welling up of empathy and respect towards her. He reminisces his mothers' mental condition when she becomes a widow shattered completely, shrunk in her own shell unable to get over the loss. Whereas Mrs. Croft, a widow for forty years has raised her children teaching piano and on top of it learning to bear the loss boldly. Her lonely existence doesn't irk her on the contrary it emboldens her to become a stronger person in a positive way. Jhumpa

writes regarding her alienation: "That this person was a widow who lived alone mortified me further still". (Lahiri 187)

Jhumpa juxtaposes Mrs. Croft with Mala, the narrator's wife living in Calcutta, also alienated due to her loneliness. She is separated from her husband even after marriage due to geographical distances. She writes to her husband: "Here I am very much lonely" (Lahiri 189). When the narrator after six weeks vacates his accommodation, he expects some display of emotions from Mrs. Croft but she is cold in bidding goodbye. Perhaps a pointer that she won't miss his company or maybe she doesn't mind being on her own, alone.

#### Discussion

All the three narratives analysed above bring out the characteristic of alienation in the lives of the American in their native milieu. The first one on Eliot's mother exposes the social alienation where she shuns the company of her own fellow countrymen in her neighbourhood. This way she is socially alienated. In one other way she is estranged due to her divorce which again strips her of familial companionship resulting in single mother syndrome.

In the case of Miranda her lack of companionship compels her to befriend Dev, different in culture and nationality. Being an American the realization that a married Indian man holds on to his wife and family irrespective of any situation. In this respect she is culturally alienated apart from her loneliness in life.

Mrs. Croft is the pinnacle of this condition since she bears loneliness for forty long years due to her widowhood and familial duties. Her spirit of survival and strong sense of commitment take over her feeling

of loneliness. Mrs. Croft is socially alienated, considering her age and limited mobility she is way behind in keeping with times. The irony is her widowhood and lack of company at home doubles it to that extent her loneliness becomes her companion.

#### Inferences

There is a common thread which runs through the alienating factors in the lives of these protagonists though they belong to the American soil and hence don't suffer from cultural differences. Eliot's mother is alienated because of her status as a divorcee; her demeanour in bonding with her community is absent. She holds on to her personal spaces rather than interacting with her neighbours, reflects on her apathetic attitude.

Taking Miranda, the author delineates her innocence and ignorance on Indian culture. She is trapped by the friendliness of Dev who serves as a spring in her deserted life. Lack of companionship and not knowing the implications of befriending an Indian, married man indicates her alienation due to culture in a way. Miranda saves herself from being caught in the mire in continuing her relationship with Dev in the end.

Last but not the least, Mrs. Croft lives in perennial alienation, the contributing factor being not only her widowhood but also her confinement at home due to her age and lack of inclination to be in touch with the outside world. This again highlights social alienation with one sort of withdrawn attitude like a horse with blinkers.

#### Conclusion

The words of Sanjay Kothari who writes about alienation- "it's his mother Ashima who quietly yet boldly embodies this trans-continental burden of living in a new culture/country without a network of friends and relatives, without a safety net." Though Gogol is the main protagonist in the novel, 'The Namesake'; it is Ashima who bears the brunt. Akin to these words, the female protagonists Eliot's mother, Miranda and Mrs. Croft though they are American products show signs of alienation. Whether it is an American or Indian the need for companionship is one

and the same. The following words of the author Jhumpa substantiate this point of view. Loneliness doesn't begin to address the feeling for that kind of "acute isolation," as Lahiri puts it. And this loneliness is rooted in reality, not fiction. The instances drawn from Jhumpa's narratives give a deeper dimension. Whether it is a divorcee or an unmarried woman like Miranda or an old, widowed woman like Mrs. Croft they all sail in the same boat as loners. They represent a microcosm of a macrocosm in the American soil.

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