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CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT AND IDENTITY CRISIS: A STUDY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S
'INTERPRETER OF MALADIES'

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ABSTRACT

Born to Bengali parents in July 1967, in London and with her family's move to Rhode Island, Jhumpa Lahiri began life in the U.S.A. She grew up in the background of traditional Bengali culture. From childhood, she often accompanied her parents back to India-particularly to Calcutta (now known as Kolkata).. She observes that her parents retain a sense of emotional exile and she herself grew up with conflicting expectations. In her work, Lahiri, is a second-generation immigrant, reflects on the Indian diaspora and creates a narrative that reveals the inconsistency of the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of diaphora.

Keywords: Diaspora, Cultural, Identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri (whose real name was Nilanjana Sudeshna) is one of the emerging stars on the Diaspora sky in the present time. She was born to Bengali parents in July 1967, in London. Later on, with her family's move to Rhode Island, she began life in the U.S.A. She grew up in the background of traditional Bengali culture. From childhood, she often accompanied her parents back to India-particularly to Calcutta (now known as Kolkata). Lahiri, like many immigrants, is a second-generation immigrant. She observes that her parents retain a sense of emotional exile and she herself grew up with conflicting expectations. Her abilities to convey the oldest cultural conflicts in the most immediate fashion and to achieve the voice of many different characters are among the unique qualities that have captured the attention of a wide audience. The fact that Jhumpa Lahiri is the child of Indian immigrants and that she also crosses borders when she migrates from England – where she was born to become an American citizen, makes her both a migrant and diasporic writer. In her work, she reflects on the Indian diaspora and creates a narrative that reveals the inconsistency of the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of diaphora. Lahiri became the first American of Asian descent to win Pulitzer Prize in 2000, the highest literary award of America for her debut collection of "Interpreter of Maladies", sub-titled "Stories of Bengali, Boston and Beyond."(1999).

In an interview, when she was asked what distinguishes the experiences of Indian immigrants to the United States from those of their American-born children, she answers:

“The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. The older I get, the more aware I am that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways-----superficial ones, largely---- I am so much more American than they are. In fact, it is still very hard to think of myself as an American. For immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin, is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. The feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged bothered me growing up. It bothers me less now.” (Lahiri 2008)

The first story of the collection “Interpreter of Maladies” titled “ A Temporary Matter” describes the conflict that a second-generation couple of Bengali origin suffers and how a cultural tradition of Bengal saved their marital bond from split. Both Shoba and Shukumar, though married to each other, are physically united but spiritually distanced. Although pregnant, Shoba engages herself in her proof reading job and also prompts her husband to go and attend a conference in Baltimore. Things take a different turn when Shoba suffers a miscarriage and Shukumar holds the dead child to his chest despite getting to know that his wife had persuaded the doctor not to reveal the sex of the child. The mechanism of materialistic life has blinded them to the real issues of life. Shukumar broods on how he and Shoba “ had become experts at avoiding each other in their three bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible.”(IOM,5). The situation changes when the electricity department announces a power cut for five days, forcing the intimacy of darkness on them. During these power cuts, Shukumar and Shoba start telling each other something they had never shared before. Their confessions do not communicate their real emotion, but still break the ice. Shoba’s revelation, on the last day of the power cut, of her plan of living separately shocks Shukumar. In order to hurt Shoba, he deliberately reveals the fact that their child was a male and he had held it close to his heart. Somehow this revelation brings them together in a flood of tears underlining the fact that cultural roots cannot be severed so easily. In addition to this, it may also help them re-locate their lost identities.

The second story “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, presents theme of cultural displacement leading to the quest for identity. The story is written from the third person point of view. Lahiri presents how geographical and historical concurrences may change one’s identity. She also posits that politics can change the identity of a whole society. The narrator is a seven year old girl Lilia. Mr. Pirzada is an Eastern Pakistani immigrant. He is a lecturer of Botany at Decca University and comes to Boston on a fellowship of the government of Pakistan to study of the foliage of New England. The story has the Indo-Pak war of 1971 as the backdrop. During his stay in Boston, political unrest starts in Decca owing to the struggle for autonomy by Eastern Pakistanis. Living in an alien culture, cut off from their homeland, Lilia’s parents have a yearning to associate with their compatriots. On the basis of cultural proximity, Mr. Pirzada is invited by the narrator’s parents. Lilia as a small child believes Mr. Pirzada to be an Indian, but is soon corrected by her father. Even then, her young mind is incapable of imbibing this distinction- “It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same.”(IOM,25). During the pandemonium in Decca, created by Pakistani army, everything collapsed. Mr. Pirzada could not contact with his wife and seven daughters. Jhumap Lahiri has posited two different aspects of culture. It is cultural affinity that creates a bond between Mr. Pirzada and the narrator’s family in the country overseas, on the other hand, clash of culture and language parted the human beings forever in the same geographical region. Lahiri shuns the fanaticism to gain dominance over culture and language. The story ends with the return of Pirzada to Bangladesh and his subsequent reunion with his family that is celebrated in America by the narrator’s parents. Lilia and her parents have different notions of identity; for Lilia, race is the identity whereas her parents consider culture and religion as the root of one’s identity.

In the title story, "Interpreter of Maladies", there is a welcome shift; Lahiri does not place the action in Boston; she brings her characters-first generation Indian-American couple –Mr. and Mrs. Das, from New Jersey to Konarak in Orrisa. The couple are accompanied by their children-Tina, Ronny and Bobby who have never been in India before. They are taken around by Mr. Kapasi, a tradition-bound tourist guide cum an interpreter to a Gujrati Doctor. In his story we observe the culture-the cultures of East and West clash. The family look Indian but dress as Americans do. Mr. Kapasi presses his hands together in greeting, but the Americans Mr. Das like a typical American squeezes his hands. Mr. Das and his wife Mrs. Mina Das were born in America. Their parents lived at Asansol in India and the young couple visited them once in two years. Like the Americans, Mr. Das refers to his wife by her first name when speaking to the little girl. Mrs. Mina Das, like the American women, clip her hair short and her dress is also exactly like theirs. On the way to Konarak, when the children see some monkeys, they shout 'monkeys'; but Mr. Kapasi says immediately, 'We call them the hanuman'(IOM,47). Yet another cultural change we notice is that "Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, and not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves."(IOM,49). While Mr. Das seems to be more attached to India, Mrs. Das is indifferent in her attitude towards this country. Her hostility arises mostly because of the hot climate here: "I told you to get a car with air conditioning", Mrs. Das continued. "Why do you do this, Raj, just to save a few stupid rupees. What are you saving us, fifty cents?"(IOM,49). In this manner the mental conflict runs here on two levels – one, in the personal relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Das and the other, in the too brief embryonic emotional exchange between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das. Mrs. Das suffers from a malady that is deep-rooted, the secret guilt that her second son, Bobby was not her husband's. She finds 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."(IOM,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?"(IOM,66). The sense of displacement arises out of a search for identity, but the distancing from one's culture results in loss of identity, thus representing broken, fragmented self image. There is a sense of disintegration depicted in the story, a tension between wanting to belong to the new society and yet wanting to retain the old culture.

The next story "A Real Durwan" explores the story of an old sweeper lady, Boori Ma, becoming a victim of the conflict of class and culture. Once a member of an affluent family, Boori Ma lives her life on mercy away from her husband and four daughters. Boori Ma is a victim of partition and her plight raises the question of space in a globalised world. The old and helpless woman who lives near the stairs ultimately is alleged to have a hand in the robbery that takes place in the building. The author presents the predicament of a displaced old lady whose goodness costs her heavily. The difference of the civilized lot of mankind reveals their mercenary attitude towards the old and the aged and straitjackets their cultural ethos. The story brings to light people's utilitarian motive, which blinds their conscience and creates class distinctions simply on the basis of their vocation. The story deals with class conflict, and the gaps between the haves and the have-nots.

The fifth story of the collection entitled "Sexy" deals with a brief adulterous relationship between Miranda, a white lady and Dev, a Bengali immigrant. The story presents the cultural displacement of the immigrants and the feeling of exoticism of the Native Americans towards South Asian immigrants. Miranda's consciousness of her racial identity and cultural differences is based on the colonial notion of cultural stereotype of third world countries. She imbibes this stereotypical notion after her encounter with the neighboring Dixit family during her childhood. Her childhood experience of birthday party at Dixit's house was frightening as she minutely observes the cultural differences: "Miranda remembered a heavy aroma of incense and onions in the house, and a pile of shoes heaped by the front door. But most of all she remembered a piece of fabric, about the size of a pillowcase, which hung from a wooden dowel at the bottom of the stairs. It was a painting of a naked woman with a red face shaped like a knight's shield. She had enormous white eyes that tilted toward her temples and mere dots for pupils. Two circles, with the same dots at their centers, indicated her breasts. In one hand she brandished a dagger. With one foot she crushed a struggling man on the

ground.”.... “It is the goddess Kali”, Mrs. Dixit explained brightly, shifting the dowel slightly in order to straighten the image.”(IOM,95-96). Interestingly Miranda’s changed attitude towards Indian and Indians is also due to her fascination for India. She wants to learn about Indian culture from her Indian lover. When she makes love to Dev, she fancies “deserts, and elephants, and marble pavilions floating on lakes beneath a full moon.”(IOM,96) She visits an Indian restaurant and relishes Indian food. Miranda’s pursuit of Dev is her quest for love. Dev’s words “You’re sexy”, uttered in the Mapparium present Dev’s erotic feelings, sans love, towards Miranda. Moreover, the same words “You’re sexy”, innocently repeated by Rohin, the seven year old, highlight the undercurrents. But the meaning of the words “loving someone you don’t know”(IOM,107) spoken by Rohin, whose mother undergoes the trauma of her husband’s infidelity, make Miranda realize the immorality of her adulterous relationship. On the other hand, Dev is presented as a culturally displaced character who, in order to assimilate into American culture, sheds his cultural values of fidelity in marital life.

The story “Mrs. Sen’s” depicts the conflicts of a lady who tosses between her past and present, and finds her life full of boredom and ennui. Though the wife of a mathematics professor she whiles away her time by accepting the job of a babysitter. The story brings to light Mrs. Sen’s qualms of conscience and her wild craving for fish, which connects her to the typical Bengali lifestyle. If Boori Ma’s existence is at stake because of space and time, Mrs. Sen’s intimidated because of the excess of the two. This is the reason she accepts to take care of Eliot and seems to lessen the ennui by making him participate in all her routine affairs. Mrs. Sen seemed to extract delight from whatever was related to her and her country. Lahiri records Mrs. Sen’s satisfaction in the following lines: “Two things, Eliot learned, made Mrs. Sen happy. One was the arrival of a letter from her family. It was her custom to check the mailbox after driving practice. She would unlock the box, but she would ask Eliot to reach inside, telling him what to look for, and then she would shut her eyes and shield them with her hands while shuffled through the bills and magazines that came in Mrs. Sen’s name.”(IOM,121) For Mrs. Sen, home always denotes India, not her apartment in America. Mrs. Sen’s bold assertion of India as her home, prompts Eliot to observe the cultural differences between the two countries. Mrs. Sen’s question to Eliot whether the people of the neighborhood would come, if she screams, vividly differentiates the societal proximity in India with that of social aloofness in America. Eliot sympathizes with Mrs. Sen for her isolation from her culture owing to the geographical distances.

Clash of cultures becomes more apparent in the story, “The Blessed House”. Here Lahiri has projected two different aspects of the lives of Indian-Americans through Sanjeev and Twinkle. They fail to effectuate a harmonious relationship because of their rigid religious faiths. The new house, they have moved into, contains paraphernalia left behind by the former Christian owners. Twinkle shows an obsessive fascination for the Christina objects, which offends Sanjeev. Sanjeev’s consciousness of his religious identity problematizes a petty matter into a marital discord. The opening scene presents their two different approaches regarding their identity. While discovering Christ’s statue, Twinkle is ecstatic, whereas Sanjeev’s response is contemptuous as he terms it, “idiotic statue”(IOM,136) Sanjeev represents attitude of ‘culturally other’. He views the Christian objects as menace for his Hindu identity and asserts, “We’re not Christian.”(IOM,136) Twinkle responds to Sanjeev in a persuasive manner, “We’re not Christian. We are good little Hindus.” Sanjeev’s perspectives to keep the statues in the house are on the basis of the compatibility of two different religions and cultures. Sanjeev’s marriage to Twinkle evinces that as an immigrant, he wants to preserve his Bengali identity. In order to accomplish his glorified vision of cultural preservation, he ties the knot with Twinkle, assuming her the embodiment of Indian culture. Sanjeev’s vision of Twinkle as a preserver of Indian culture is based on his patriarchal notion of the perfect Indian wife. But Twinkle’s behavior is subversive to the patriarchal notion of an ideal Hindu wife. The sole connection with Indian culture and tradition is her arranged marriage. But this link also seems to be frail as she does not submit herself to Sanjeev as an ideal wife is expected to do in an arranged marriage.

“The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” describes the class conflict of an individual only because she suffers from some ailment. Bibi Haldar lives with her elder cousin and his wife who exploit her and make her feel low because of her illness. Bibi discharges her duties without any payment except food and dress. Bibi’s personal

wishes are thwarted. She often feels discarded as she live and sleeps in the store-room “wearing cracked plastic slippers and a housecoat whose hem stopped some inches below the knee”(IOM,159). Deprived though of the basic amenities, her heart bubbles for a companion though it doesn't materialize till the end of the story. Bibi's wish of getting married fails, though she bears a child of an anonymous father. Her ailment, because of this event, gets cured much to the chargin of everyone and to her own bewilderment. Lahiri records Bibi's helplessness at the callous culture and class conflict. The author narrates: “For her services, Bibi received no income but was given meals, provisions, and sufficient meters of cotton at every October holiday to replenish her wardrobe at an inexpensive tailor. At night she slept on a folding camp-cot in the cousin's place downstairs.”(IOM,159)

The last story, “The Third and the Final Continent”, also shows sparks of class and cultural conflicts. The story shuttles from London to Boston. The story is written in first person narrative voice. The narrator is a Bengali immigrant who initially faces the problems of adjustment in an unfamiliar culture. The narrator hires a room in Mrs. Croft's house. Mrs. Croft, an elderly woman of 103 years old, exemplifies American nationalism and old American values. She is proud of the fact that her country has sent men on the moon. She adheres to orthodox values and does not permit her elderly daughter to chat with the narrator. The narrator reminisces about the early days of his arranged marriage. Both he and his wife were as alien to each other as they were to American culture and atmosphere. The narrator is sad at the death of Mrs. Croft, about which he comes to know through an obituary published in a newspaper. The narrator's concern that his son should imbibe Indian values and culture embodies the concern of thousands of immigrants who want to preserve their cultural heritage in their future generation.

In short, in the collection, “Interpreter of Maladies”, Jhumpa Lahiri subtly presents the universal saga of a section of humanity that is loss of identity, the sense of belonging and cultural displacement. Her characters are expatriates from South Asia who want to connect either to their host country or to the country of their origin. But in doing so, they suffer from a sense of alienation from both countries. The prominent feature of Jhumpa's oeuvre is generational conflict between immigrants. The first generation's urge to stick to their roots is in contrast to the second generation's eagerness to merge with the host culture. The second generation carves out a different identity which has to be understood on the basis of their psychological assessment. The stories revolve around the difficulties of relationships, communication and a loss of identity for those in Diaspora. No matter where the story takes place, the characters struggle with the same feelings of exile and the struggle between the two worlds by which they are torn. Her prose encompassed and embraced heart-weary culturally displaced beings and their dilemmas. The stories deal with the always-shifting lines between gender, sexuality, and social status within a Diaspora. Whether the character is a homeless woman from India or an Indian male student in the United States, all the characters display the effects of displacement in a Diaspora. Some are homesick may are lost in the 'new world'. With the characters poised between the old world of India and the perpetual unnerving newness of America, Jhumpa Lahiri debut story collection displayed a commendable grasp of biculturalism as well as a realistic elegance.

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