

Loss of Identity, Clash of Culture & Displacement in *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract

Indian diasporic writing made its landmark entry with the writings of Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, and Hari Kunzru who have all made their names while residing abroad. One of the important aspects of these writers is that they write predominantly the experiences of migration. They have given more poignancy to the exploration by dealing not only with a geographical dislocation but also a socio-cultural sensibility to their homeland. Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most eminent and accomplished writers of Indian Diaspora. She occupies a significant place in world literature. Her works deal with the themes of immigration, displacement, loss of identity and clash of cultures. Born in London, Lahiri moved to Rhode Island as a young child with her Bengali parents. Although they have lived in the United States for more than thirty years, Lahiri 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 voices 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 diaspora.

Keywords: Migration, Diaspora, Identity, Cultural Displacement, Alienation

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Jhumpa Lahiri has been acclaimed a dominant diaspora writer depicting the complexities of immigrant experience in diaspora in her short stories. Through her short stories, Jhumpa Lahiri addresses sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants with themes such as marital difficulties, miscarriages and the disconnection among the immigrants. *Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of nine short stories. It is about the experiences of Indians who live in an alien country and how they are deeply crushed under the burden of alienation and rootlessness. The collection attempts to be simultaneously both an anthology of outstanding short stories and virtually a casebook on relationship between the sexes. Lahiri's subject is the loneliness of dislocation, 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 interested into their complex psychoses.

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 and after the death of their first-born baby both started drifting apart. Each one felt uncomfortable in each other's presence and a forced blackout for eight consecutive nights to repair damage done by an ice storm made them unmask their faces and start conversing and confessing their deepest fears and thoughts. Her act of walking out of such a marriage is an assertion of independence, identity determination and capacity to choose her own way of life and to get rid of the emotional and physical stress. The title of the story does not refer to the temporary power failure alone. Their stillborn child has created distance between them. Shoba is incapable to deal with her pain and frustration at losing her baby and projected her anger and frustration on her husband because he was absent during her labour. Shukumar was not there by her side at the time in the hospital as he was attending an academic conference in Baltimore that he "hadn't wanted to go to . . . but she had insisted" as it was "important to make contacts". However, he had come back in time to hold the child for few minutes before the child was cremated. Shukumar was neither indifferent nor irresponsible towards Shoba or the child; rather he looked forward towards being a father. They lost touch with one another in their relationship; Shoba silently blames Shukumar for the tragedy. Within six months of the incident "he and Shoba become experts at avoiding each other in their three bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible". Jhumpa Lahiri's modern approach is evident in her themes as well as narrative style. The power cuts in their area, force them to spend time together by candlelight. The power cuts for a notified

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duration form the ‘temporary matter.’ Shoba’s problem is her inability to deal with her anger and frustration of losing the baby for whose arrival she plans elaborately. The child was the only bond that tied them together as couple. The poignancy of the situation is revealed when he tells his wife that the baby was a boy and describes him for the grieving mother. He says that he had not told her because she wanted the sex of the baby to be a ‘mystery’ and now in their shared grief they “wept together, for the things they know new”. Thus, their separation is over and they are able to regard their gap as ‘a temporary matter’. This clarification is much more a satisfying ending. The theme of the ‘temporary matter’ means that it is their separation, and not their marriage, that is temporary.

When Mr. Pirzada came to dine is a story about a Pakistani (Bangladeshi) man, who is to dine with an Indian family in 1971, when a war is going on in Pakistan. The story is set in North America and is told from the point of view of a ten-year-old Indian American child, Lilia. The story begins with Bangladesh’s War of Independence of 1971 and a brief commentary on the history of the partition. The narrator belongs to Hindu family and is an Indian Bengali; Muslim Pirzada is a Pakistani Bengali in the process of becoming a Bangladeshi. The contradiction of their different citizenship plays a vital role in the story, especially when balanced against the linguistic and cultural oneness of the Bengali community. 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. The war finally ends in December 1971 and Pirzada goes back to Bangladesh in January 1971. Several months later Lilia’s family receives a card and a short letter from Mr. Pirzada who says he has been reunited with his family. Therefore, Mr. Pirzada’s temporary migration comes to an end he does not return to the United States and Lilia’s family does not see him again.

Interpreter of Maladies indicates interpreter of maladies. This is the story of an Indian-American couple, Raj and Mina Das who comes to India along with their three children. They hire a tour guide, Mr. Kapasi. Besides working a guide, he also works as an interpreter in a doctor’s office. Mina Das, the wife, dubs his job of interpreter of maladies as “romantic”. This arouses a feeling of romanticism in Mr. Kapasi, he begins fantasizing about her. Mina Das reveals a long kept secret to Mr. Kapasi. Mina Das reveals this secret to Mr. Kapasi hoping that he might provide a remedy for this. Probably she read too much into his profession. The thematic conclusion is also clear in order to overcome the maladies, one has to interpret them and seek refuge within one’s own self. Most of the Characters are suffering from psychological or social diseases. Mr. Kapasi thinks he and Mrs. Das have a connection because he recognizes her

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situation, the isolated wife and troubled marriage from his own life. Mrs. Das has shared this secret with Mr. Kapasi in the hope that he, being an interpreter of Maladies, should be able to suggest a remedy to her also. In this story, Mr. Kapasi plays the role as a cultural broker, tour guide and interpreter for a doctor. As a tour guide, he shows English speaking Europeans and Americans the sights of India, and in his work as an interpreter, he helps the ailing from another region to communicate with their physician. The common thread throughout the stories in this collection is the same kind of malady that the Das family suffers. 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. 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.

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, who was deported to Calcutta after partition. 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. To the tenants, the partition and its trauma are things of the past and they listen with surprise to the old woman's narrative of loss and homelessness. Jhumpa Lahiri underscores the impossibility of an exile communicating emotional pain and loneliness to others through the characterization of Boori Ma.

In "Sexy" Miranda, an American, develops an extramarital relationship with a married Indian, Dev. She is attracted to Dev for his age and his race. He is interesting, mature, wealthy, and complementary to Miranda in a way that she has not known before. But the relationship shatters for more than one reason. It happens not only because Miranda realizes that she cannot expect more than physical fulfillment from Dev but also because of the definition, that Rohin, her Indian friend Laxmi's cousin's child gives to the term 'sexy'.

The Treatment of Bibi Haldar 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 and she is an epileptic. The absence of a man in her life to protect her frustrates her. Bibi herself unknowingly admits that her illness is not physical, but something psychological. Her problem is solved when she becomes a mother before marriage. Bibi has suffered from a strange unknown disease, and while numerous possible treatments have been suggested, none has proved to be useful. Bibi longs for

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a normal life in which she can have a husband and bear children. Yet, her attempt fails as nobody agrees to take the sick Bibi Haldar as a wife. The twist though comes at the end of the story when Bibi, who has led a life of loneliness and isolation on the roof of the building, gets pregnant and, gives birth to a son, finally yet strangely cured. The lonely, neglected and underprivileged girl had neither the physical attributes nor the social/financial status or concerned relatives to find a husband for her. In addition, she suffers, since early childhood, from a mysterious malady that could not be diagnosed despite the best efforts of her father and others.

The Third and the Final Continent is the final story in the collection, told by a male narrator. It presents a contrast of attitudes and culture between two women whose husbands die early leaving the families to fend for themselves. The narrator's mother was completely debased by the death of her husband. Physically, she did not commit sati (self-immolation) with him, as an orthodox patriarchal/feudal ideology would have expected her, back in the nineteenth century when Mrs. Croft was born but symbolically she died with him, losing completely her sanity reason and dignity. The narrator thinks that he and his wife became Americans but still attached with South Asian food and Indian tradition. The narrator wants his son to retain his Indian culture. Eating rice by hand and speaking Bengali are two important symbols in this story, which proved the original nationality is still important for the migrant.

Thus Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* can be considered as a 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.

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