

Merging Identities: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's characters in her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* keep wandering between the two worlds- one in their homeland and the other in the country where they choose to live and die. Lahiri records the emotional journey of characters seeking love and searching their identity beyond the barricade of nations, cultures, religions and generations. Mr. Kapasi is an interpreter of maladies and the malady of Mrs. Das is to be an unfamiliar person to her family's culture, as Lahiri herself is an erudite interpreter of maladies- both social and emotional. Since, Mrs. Das is undertaking a second migration, she turns to be an interpreter like Mr. Kapasi whose job interests her so much. The characters' longing to belong to either or both the habitats, their urge to de-stress the distress of alienation by searching an identity in their native heritage add value to the writer's creative intensity. She illustrates her characters sprouting in the centre of a new crossbreed culture, the Indo-American awareness as Lahiri herself, the true representative of the second generation Indian in America.

Keywords: Post-modern anxiety, Identity politics, Diaspora, Exile, Maladies.

In the world today, the forced and voluntary migrations are seen as a part and parcel of the post-war, post-colonial and post-industrial experience. The 1980's and after has created a typical post-modern anxiety with the advent of Salman Rushdie as an influential diaspora writer. This paper is conceptualized around a series of topics like post-modern anxiety, identity politics, national and self-definition, the problem of exile and diaspora, with special reference to Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories titled *The Interpreter of Maladies*. Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to a new age of East Indian writers of narrative fiction that includes Arundhati Roy, Raj Kamal Jha and Pankaj Mishra, who have broken away from Salman Rushdie's magic practicality and embraced truth. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* being published in 1999 from three subsequent places such as USA, UK and India offers her not only a distinctive place but also opens the gate way of winning the coveted Pulitzer prize the next year and makes her live in the pile of admiration. As the stories are set in Bengal, Boston and beyond Lahiri, the real interpreter of maladies usually accepts the characters to focus on the discrimination, differentiation, injustices and inequalities through incidents that happen to each immigrant in his/her daily life. Such an assessment of life often compels her to become nostalgic about the nation of living at present and the nation of her parents.

Jhumpa Lahiri's identity beyond nation, politics and historiography affects her tone through the short stories as all of them are rooted through indigenous culture and narrative traditions of India. In other words, what Jhumpa Lahiri attempts to create a specific space in literature as a diasporic writer with the issues of the post-colonial era authenticates her search for the self and national identity merged in two cultures and two nations as both of them are the metaphors of her own creative consciousness. Though Lahiri is not born in India, yet she has visited Calcutta (Presently Kolkata) several times with her parents and stayed at ancestral home and with other near and dear relatives even for months, which sanctions the core, the root and the background of the stories. She admits in the pages of "Fine Art": "I went to Calcutta neither as a tourist nor as a former resident – a valuable position, I think, for a writer" (Melwani 1). Thus Calcutta acts as the central perspective, an essential combination of distance and intimacy of her writing. Her first stories are set in Calcutta but majority of stories are in American setting. She further details:

Still, though I've never lived anywhere but America, India continues to form part of my fictional landscape. As most of my characters have an Indian background, India keeps cropping up as a setting, sometimes literally, some times more figuratively, in the memory of the characters (Melwani 1).

In this manner, Lahiri continues to tell nine tales in the Pulitzer Prize winning volume bridging the distance between the home and host country. Another important aspect of Lahiri's story is to put troubles to the characters and to save them after letting them suffer a lot both physically and psychologically, which makes Jhumpa Lahiri the real interpreter of maladies. Present-day maladies for Lahiri are undoubtedly human follies and foibles come to them at a particular time consciously and unconsciously for which not only their course of life but also the entire story is changed all of a sudden that vehemently requires an immediate resolution lest the story would go astray. As a timely interpreter of contemporary maladies, Lahiri unearths the truth at such a significant situation, time and circumstance that the maladies turn in to the melodies of life, tragic tales automatically change their course to comic and then the eager readers become gentle learners. To begin with the first story, *A Temporary Matter* which is really a temporary matter of five days as it is noticed that electricity would be cut off for an hour at eight in the evening. There appears sudden change in life for Shoba and Sukumar who have to bear the trouble and the story develops centering round the power cut. Here Lahiri takes Sukumar from India and Shoba from America to examine how the power failure solves their problems in marital life and makes both of them confessional that strengthen the relationship later on. One thing is obvious that Lahiri never goes beyond time because the problems she creates for her characters are all time – bound, place – bound, space – bound and relationship-bound. Secondly what Lahiri usually wants to say is that problem of life is never permanent, indeed a temporary matter. Therefore, life should be continued through light mindedness as nothing makes life more serious than doubt, misunderstanding and communication gap.

Flashback is another literary device that runs through the by lanes of memory of the short story writer and as a result, Lahiri takes the protagonists back to recall how Shoba's mother, their only guest since September who comes from Arizona to stay with them for two months after Shoba returns from the hospital. She is too a helpful woman who cooks dinner every night, drives herself to the super market, washes their clothes and puts them away. She is rather a religious woman who sets up a small shrine to worship a framed picture of a Goddess with a plate of marigold petals on the bed side table in the guest room and prays twice a day for a healthy grandchildren next time. She is too polite to Sukumar but not friendly to him because the question rings in her mind about the present relationship between Shoba and Sukumar. However, there is no such bitterness in the relationship except a little communication gap due to lack of interaction. It is the power cut that unites both of them again and they share their supper together before the house goes black. Lahiri in her skill steers

the story in such a manner that there appears renewal of love, unity in diversity and a new kind living with cordiality between Shoba and Sukumar.

In the dinners of first night of the power failure, both Shoba and Sukumar prepare meals, serve themselves and stir the rice with their forks to extract bay leaves and cloves from the stew. It seems that Jhumpa Lahiri takes privilege to rely on her Indian blood and gene through Shoba; "It's like India", Shoba said, "watching him tend his makeshift candelabra." Sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch. I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark. The baby just cried and cried. It must have been so hot (*Interpreter of Maladies* 117).

As an outcome of confessional attitude, Lahiri leads the story from lovelessness to love between Shoba and Sukumar. What Lahiri writes to convince Shoba at the end of the story, is neatly described in these lines; "Our baby was a boy", he said." His skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighed almost five pounds. His fingers were curled shut, just like yours in the night (*Interpreter of Maladies* 22).

Thus Lahiri hopefully takes the story to a happy and successful ending that the couple realizes more and more and their realization ends in weeping together, which confirms togetherness, a strong bond and a close relationship without being separated from living.

In the second story, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," Jhumpa Lahiri keeps herself at the center of the story in disguise of Lilia, a ten year old girl who acts as the narrator of the story. The story writer deals with a number of aspects such as the partition story of Bengal in 1971, poverty, civil war in Pakistan, Hindu-Muslim riots, Bangladeshi's infiltration into India Indo-Bangladesh war and so on accumulating the conversation between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents. In the opening of the story, Lahiri identifies Mr. Pirzada, a scholar, and a botany lecturer at the university from Dacca is in America for the year, 1971 as he has been awarded a grant from the government of Pakistan to study the foliage of New England. Lahiri brings the partition story of Bangladesh from Pakistan and its impact on social life due to atrocity by Pakistan army. Lahiri details the horror of the civil war of 1971. In March, Dacca had been invaded, torched, and shelled by the Pakistan army. Teachers were dragged on to streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped. By the end of the summer, three hundred thousand people were said to have died (*Interpreter of Maladies* 23).

This has disheartened Mr. Pirzada and it remains ambiguous for him to ascertain the life or death of his family. His family in Dacca consists of his wife and seven daughters between the ages of six and sixteen living in a three-storeyed building. The irony Lahiri knits in the story that all the daughters of Mr. Pirzada bear names begin with the letter A such as Ayesha, Amira, Amina, Aziza etc and their ribbon tied braids naturalize the story in its progress and the reality appears there to confirm the minds of the readers that Lahiri is assembling four cultures in one. Another thing is justified from the Indian parents that they have accepted Mr. Pirzada as "Atithidebobhaba" as the guest is like God. Side by side, Lahiri is conscious enough of story writing by bringing the Indian culture and liberalism to accept all as relatives. Mr. Pirzada being a Muslim is cordially received by a Hindu Bengali family. Lahiri's subsequent observation of people from different culture and land is leading the story to a climax and as a writer she knows that the story can't reach at a climax unless the problems of a newland are heightened for the foreigners.

Jhumpa Lahiri's third story is the title story, which begins with the conflict between Mr. and Mrs. Das about their little daughter's complain of toilet going and neither of the parents is prepared to lead their daughter to the toilet. Lahiri's beginning of the story is a kind of reiteration of diaspora problem and experience in which it has been seen that the couples do not have love and affection between them nor do have filial love for their children. Lahiri is more amusingly and delightfully interpreting the maladies of the American family life and her role as the interpreter of maladies not only in this story but also in other stories of this volume is remarkable as well as incomparable. The story as well as the characters in their journey motif from Hotel Sandy Villa to Konark, khandagiri

and back on a dry, bright Saturday in mid-July heat is indeed an ideal weather for sightseeing. Lahiri's selection of both time and space is always interesting and enjoyable for the readers. In the progress of the journey, Lahiri adds another important character, Mr. Kapasi who is a tourist guide to the centrality of the story and story writer wants to fulfill her desire by disclosing the secret of life before completion of the story. Besides, Lahiri's study of human psychology before revealing the truth needs a friend very often close and intimate because it also requires a definite time and space how to reveal and where to reveal the secrets of life. To Lahiri, her short story is the best medium to do so.

Like other Bengalis, Lahiri's fondness for Odisha relies on Odishan landscapes, history, culture, tradition, myth and mythology. On reaching Konark at two – thirty, Lahiri leads her characters to move round the Sun Temple, the thirteenth century world famous wonder. She elaborates the temple in three full scape pages detailing its construction, history, symbols, teachings from the stone curving pictures and sculptures.

A woman of only twenty eight seeks remedy for her malady who loves neither her husband nor her children, who has already fallen out of love with life. This confession depresses Mr. Kapasi. Here appear two kinds of remedies. At one hand, Mr. Kapasi has the talent to interpret the secrecy to Mr. Das or he must suggest any remedial steps from his experience to cure the psychological disease that Mrs. Das has been suffering from eight years. On the other hand, Lahiri is the best interpreter who wants to unearth the secret matter before the readers who are the best doctors.

Jhumpa Lahiri's fourth story "A Real Durwan" is about Boori Ma, a sixty four year old sweeper of the stair well who has been deported to Calcutta after partition of India from Pakistan. Lahiri's vision of her characters reaches at any corner of society that she wants to take all kinds of people with her. In other words, Lahiri never leaves her characters to be marginalized nor to be isolated from her readers. She rather deals with all kinds of people and takes them up to her stories so that the eyes of the selfish society can easily be cleaned and their hearts can be filled with sympathy for the neglected, suffered and down trodden class. This story while delineating easy time and hard time during partition and after, creates a consensus that how people struggle for existence after being victimized by changing their nativity, location and geography. Indeed, the partition story is a turmoil for certain people who later live like the worst sufferer despite their home, family, relatives and so on. Boori Ma is the embodiment of such turmoil.

Lahiri's fifth story in this collection, 'Sexy' opens with a conversation between Laxmi and Miranda who are working together for a public radio station in the fund – raising department and spending all day on the phone. This is an American setting. In their conversation, they talk about Laxmi's cousin's husband who after boarding a plane from Delhi to Montreal falls in love with a woman and gets off with the woman at Heath row instead of flying home to his wife and son. Thus develops the story with incest and infidelity for which Laxmi has no other way to help her cousin except consulting her over phone. Here Lahiri wants to show how the Indians break off their family in America and change their life to figure things out. Lahiri's intention lies in figuring things out – the things that has made Lahiri the real interpreter of maladies. The tragedy of the family life begins with extramarital affairs may be one of the cultural activities of American living but Lahiri's projection of ruins in traditional family values as it is a bond for ever for an Indian counterpart is the prime motive of this story.

Miranda's relationship with Dev, a Bengali staying in America with his wife further gains sustenance what Lahiri plans to proceed the story to her own intention. Miranda listens each conversation between Laxmi and her husband that strengthens the family but continues the same sex game with Dev who is another Indian woman's husband. In order to bring Bengal in to her story, Lahiri not only takes Dev from Bengal but also points out Bengal in the map printed in an issue of "The Economist," a magazine. It is surely Jhumpa Lahiri's interest in India that as an American writer, she can never forget the blood and origin.

Lahiri's seventh story "This Blessed House" is a development through love – hate relationship between two young couple – Sanjeev and Twinkle who have moved to a new house at Connecticut as Sanjeev, an engineer is posted in a firm near Hartford recently. Twinkle, the newly married wife feels the house a blessed one because she gets a collection of Christian symbols, idols and religious ingredients from different corners of the house and therefore she hopefully searches more and more while exploring the rooms one after another. It rather wonders Twinkle as Lahiri writes in the very beginning of the story: "Guess what I found" (*Interpreter of Maladies* 136). Of course, Lahiri not only tries to make her readers present a new story from her finding but also follows the same trend of diasporic upheaval between America and India with her religious attitude connected to both Hindu and Christian mentality as the story must be considered as the blending of the two higher religious ways of the world.

Lahiri's eighth story, "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" is about the worst suffering of an individual, Bibi Haldar who is hailed from not Calcutta but a vicinity nearing to Calcutta. The maladies Lahiri is trying to present in this story are none other than a kind of malady quite new and different from other stories that Bibi suffers from epilepsy, a fatal disease in her twenty nine years deprived of parental care like others. Losing her parents in her infancy, she is now living with an elder cousin and his wife on the second floor in a rented apartment of an un painted four – storeyed building. Lahiri while ruminating over her recollections during her Calcutta visit listens about such an entity that she is trying to give a fine shape to this story with an Indian background, faith, belief, superstition, marriage, custom, dowry system of all types of social concerns centering round a serious patient and the possible ways of her treatment that she undergoes there upon. Such kind of exploration seems to be rare and unique in this contemporary society now-a-days that Lahiri as a writer has a possible way of interpreting every condition of human life each time she makes an attempt to do so.

The final story of this collection "The Third and Final Continent" is such a story of nationalistic point of view that has given Lahiri the ample scope of winning the Pulitzer Prize in the USA. From the title, it is obvious that Lahiri refers to America, the continent of her present living and she wants to continue living in this country, which is unarguably the final continent. However, she does not neglect to distinguish the other two continents of her association. With her diasporic envision, she records the personal documents of her parents in such a way that one can easily taste the delicacy of her approach from roots to routes and envisage how her father as a librarian finally accepts America coming from Calcutta (India) en route to England during 1960s. She, moreover, depicts how an unemployed youth struggles for living by exploring the unexplored space like the astronauts on the moon. Portraying her father as a hero, Lahiri brings co-relation between earth and cosmos citing the ascendancy on the moon by the two American astronauts in 1969 and that day is declared as a national holiday by Nixon, the president. As the story is written in the first person narration from her father's perspective, Lahiri perhaps wants to get utmost satisfaction by presenting this autobiographical description as the last piece of her first collection. She begins the story with her father's journey to England as a penniless bachelor who is struggling to educate and establish himself abroad. But later he is able to save enough money. His marriage is arranged when he is thirty six in 1969 and at the same time he is offered a full-time job as a librarian at MIT and the salary is generous enough to support a wife. He flies to Calcutta first for his wedding and after a week to Boston to join his new job. Lahiri mentions America, the ambition of her father as the third and final continent. Here begins the American life for the narrator who never looks back. The narrator is a tenant of Mrs. Croft, a hundred- and three-years old lady who feels much pride in the achievements of the astronauts to land at the moon, which is often splendid for the age-old woman. Lahiri extols this American achievement, her inclination for America and her association of this national pride with her father's beginning of American living sanction a merging identity that is reflected in the conversation between the narrator and the land Lady. Similarly, we see a lot of instances of dual national identity and

culture that Lahiri never develops her story without Indian prospects. In this story, she tries to decorate her parents who are hailed from Calcutta, a Bengal backdrop, Bengal culture, custom, food and way of living. Besides, Lahiri details about her parent's marriage, later their background of American living, birth of a son (not any daughter) what she intends to keep hiding herself from the story that the readers may not treat it as a personal record or an autobiographical document. However, the story resembles her own family aspects that are raised in America.

To conclude, one can easily observe that Lahiri is the best conclusion of her own stories. As a typical diaspora writer, she is often bewildered by the distance away from her own roots, culture and tradition. Even when she strives to integrate with her new environment, she remains attached to her ancestral customs, traditions and culture. She always tries to create a new space to live in other than the past and the present nation. Her third space ultimately offers her to live in a mixed or blended culture and identity that is definitely a merging identity. Therefore, Lahiri as a writer can be interpreted as a conscientious embracer of both the homes-lived and actually living at present.

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