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Isolated Voices in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract

People living all over the world belong to different religions, follow different cultures and speak different languages. If people of one nation go to another nation for their livelihood or education, they have to adapt themselves to the changing situations and places lest they should experience untold sufferings. Life throws all a lot of challenges, both simple and complicated, and it is up to all to rise and perform, take decisions that can be sometimes satisfying, and sometimes disturbing, and walk through it as if none were affected by it. It is not an easy thing to do. It is never easy to answer his heart as the questions surface and resurfaces time and again. Life is not a bed of roses to live easily. Lahiri is an Indian by birth but she has America as her permanent dwelling place. Hence, she has faced a lot of problems as an immigrant which she tries to show in her work. Hers are perfectly placed words lining themselves into elegant sentences whose subject matter: family, mothers and daughters, assimilation, alcoholism, children, marital love and touch us all.

Keywords: Immigration, Assimilation, Melting Pot, Communication Barriers

Life throws all a lot of challenges, both simple and complicated, and it is up to all to rise and perform, take decisions that can be sometimes satisfying, and sometimes disturbing, and walk through it as if none were affected by it. It is not an easy thing to do. It is never easy to answer his heart as the questions surface and resurfaces time and again. Though life is not a bed of roses to live easily, it is full of ups and downs. People living all over the world belong to different religions, follow different cultures and speak different languages. If people of one nation go to another nation for their livelihood or education, they have to adapt themselves to the changing situations and places lest they should experience untold sufferings.

Certainly America is a dream of almost all people in the world. Many would like to come and live there because they get inspiration on the American way of living. Because most of them will think like John Keats' words, "Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter" (11-12). Immigration has been a boon as well as curse for the United States. The country is exceptional status as a "nation of immigrants" is being challenged by globalization. This is wonderful that the newness of the new country is exciting and pleasant. The immigrants may feel excited about being there, and the new opportunities that are waiting for them. Moreover, most of the characters in the short stories of *Interpreter of maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* move to U.S. with their husband after the heels of arranged wedding in Calcutta. At the beginning they keep smiling for everything in the new country.

Initially, the problems may start occurring because of language and communication difficulties or because of differences between the immigrants' native culture and those there in the United States. At this point, they may start to feel impatient, irritable, frustrated, anxious, sad, discontent, and to think that this new country may not be so wonderful after all. Americans may seem abrupt, rude, or too different from the people from their native land, and their culture may seem a mass of new rules that are difficult to learn. They may also feel homesick for their home country. However the stories *Interpreter of Maladies*, *Mrs. Sen* and *The Treatment of Bibi Halder*, resemble the conflicts and struggles of Bengali Immigrants. The characters, Mrs. Das, Mrs. Sen and Bibi, of these stories visualise their struggles to accept the adopted culture and also explore their longing on their home country. Mother Teresa rightly expresses about the people,

There is no great difference in the reality of one country or another, because it is always people you meet everywhere. They may look different or be dressed differently, or may have a different education or position. But they are all the same. They are all people to be loved. They are all hungry for love (11).

At the next stage, many immigrants start comparing their old culture with our new one, and deciding which practices seem better. Essentially, Indian culture is a spiritual culture and Indians are proud of their cultural heritage. Even though the people migrate to America, some of them will follow their native culture only. Jhumpa is the best instances for this; she

reveals her traditional Bengali culture and compares that with American culture through the narration of her female characters in her works.

In the case of the Indian diaspora, the idea of return is not physical, as well as a cultural phenomenon. Apart from the important ingredients connected with the rootedness, there is ethnic identity, language, food, religion, costume, culture, rituals act as symbols to be linked with the home country. In USA, each immigrant endeavors to retain his or her individual ethnic identity rather than to imp into 'melting pot'. The American concept of 'melting pot' is contradicted with the notion of 'vertical mosaic' of different ethnic, languages, regional and religious groups. Regarding the Indian language, the different languages like the Bengali, the Hindi, the Kannada, and the Telugu etc bind the immigrants with the native India.

Moreover the food symbolises immigrants' shared roots. Lahiri uses food and dining as a vehicle to display the deterioration of familial bonds, community, and culture through the transition from Indian to American ways of life. This is most evident in the short stories *A Temporary Matter*, *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, and *Mrs. Sen's*. Indian Bengali food like rice and fish, South Indian dishes like idly, dosa make the immigrants adhere to their original root in India. Next to this, Indian women traditionally wear sari and salwar kameez and sometimes western dresses to work. Indian men adopt the western mode of dress and very meager number of men from urban area dress traditionally dhoti. Cultural performances and religious festivals are presented in the music, arts, Dipawali, Durga puja etc. These are beautifully depicted by Lahiri in her short stories.

Consequently the immigrants will have a better understanding of their culture and realize that it is neither all good nor all bad. Everyone in a family must adjust many things in the new country. They will have accepted America as their home, and have learnt to adjust to the differences in culture there. The characters struggle at first more and later they understand their adjustment to live there and change themselves to live there as Americans. However they to learn how to live there by crossing many insults only.

While some of the ideas of American life may be accurate, others may be exaggerated or unrealistic, and they may feel quite a bit of surprise as they learn the reality of living there. The immigrants may have heard that life in U.S. is very easy compared to that with other countries. In some ways it is, since Americans enjoy a high standard of living, but many Americans work long hours. Life there can be very fast paced in comparison to some cultures. Most immigrants said that they experienced culture shocked in their first few months in United States. At the same time they had a hard time adjusting to cultural differences. The work ethic is very strong in their country, and the business arena can be a competitive one where productivity is expected. In U.S., a typical workday means 8 hours of working, with the noon break, and occasionally a ten minute break during the mid-morning or afternoon. Shakespeare explores, "Let every man be master of his time" (Macbeth).

Many Americans are forward thinking and believe that people can control their own destiny by working hard and planning for the future. They always follow certain proverbs

like “Time and tide wait for no man” (362) and “Money makes a man” (355). They also value their time, especially even their private time and feel that “time is money”. They admire people who show up to work early or on time, and who manage their time well. Moreover, some businesses have longer hours, and expect employees to put in overtime routinely. Even in *The Interpreter of Maladies*, the male characters portray themselves as working machines. As well as in some of the businesses, they will offer good benefits to the workers such as vacation days, medical and dental insurance, and other options; and employees who work hard are often given promotions or raises as time goes on.

Freedom of religion is a tradition in our country, and some people will probably meet others with a variety of religious beliefs. As the people live in U.S., they will learn that it is a diverse mix of ethnic origins, religious beliefs, and social class. Because most of the Americans do admire the person of any background who takes the effort to learn about their culture and who works hard. They will find that being there will help to increase their own knowledge of different types of people, and that there will be many new friends there interested in learning about them and their country of origin as well. In the story *This Blessed House*, Sanjeev and Twinkle, a newly married couple, are exploring their new house in Hartford, which appears to have been owned by fervent Christians. They keep finding extravagant Biblical kits hidden throughout the house. While Twinkle is delighted by these objects and wants to display them everywhere, Sanjeev is uncomfortable with them and reminds her that they are Hindu only, not Christian. This argument reveals other problems in their relationship.

If an immigrant used to spend time with friends and neighbours when he was in his country, it will be a different thing for him in America. Most people there are very private besides, they are too busy. They have no time to spend talking to neighbours. Loneliness will be immigrants’ symbol of living. It’s true that in the stories *A Temporary Matter*, *When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine*, *Sexy*, *This Blessed House*, *The Third and Final Continent* and *A Real Durwan*, express the sufferings of loneliness in immigrants’ lives. The pathetic isolated portraits, Shoba, Mr. Pirzada Lillia, Boori Ma, Miranda, Twinkle and Mala, pour their miseries through their silence only. Donald Walters rightly exposes, “Happiness is an attitude of mind, born of the simple determination to be happy under all outward circumstances” (8).

Driving is the most challenging part for lady immigrants who never have experience driving in their home countries. In America, another notable thing is everybody has a car and driving is a must to everyone especially to people who are in the country areas where buses, trains and other public vehicles are not available. It is a must to be able to drive to go to work or to go to places you need to go. It is not an easy thing to be in the steering wheel for the first time surrounded by fast moving cars and with speed limit to maintain. It takes time to gain courage and confidence on the road. It is true in the case of Mrs. Sen. She struggles to learn driving in the story *Mrs. Sen’s*. At the end of the story, Mrs. Sen attempts to drive to the market without her husband, and ends up in an automobile accident.

These stories are evident in the incredible amount of differentiating cultures present in the United States, helping the country become a multi-cultural Mecca of Americans. Though America is best to live, one cannot forget his home country. Living in abroad is not so difficult as well as easy. Adjustment is essential to live everywhere. Some can adjust the situations and surroundings and make their life easier, but some cannot. Through these stories, the readers may find that although America is fashionable and make comfortable to lead the people's life, the characters yearn back to return their birth country. This kind of attitude is beautifully described as "East or west, home's Best" (347).

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