

CRISIS OF IDENTITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S INTERPRETER OF MALADIES AND THE NAMESAKE

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Abstract

The extensive diaspora that has been taking place for over the last two centuries at various levels *has resulted in multi-cultural societies today. The Indian diaspora in the last century was in the main a personal choice of individuals They went to the western companies particularly the U.S. for academic pursuits or economic gain and settled there. They have left behind the land of their birth and have made foreign lands their home but they have not severed relationship with their homeland and given up their birth cultural roots. As a result. they face clash of opposing cultures and are afflicted with a feeling of alienation and a crisis of identity. Subsequently. they make attempts either to form a separate identity as a racial group or to get assimilated and accultured. All this is reflected in the writings generally called expatriate writing or writing of the diaspora. These terms are now used synonymously and as interchangeable ones. This paper makes a humble attempt to analyse Jumpa Lahiri's two books -- 'Interpreter of Maladies' (a collection of nine short stories) and 'The Namesake' (a novel) in the context of expatriate or diasporic writing.*

“Jumpa Lahiri's elegant stories tell the lives of Indians in exile, of people navigating between the strict traditions they've inherited and the baffling New world they must encounter every day.”
(Introduction to Interpreter of Maladies)

Born of Indian (Bengali) immigrant parents in 1967 in London but raised in the US, Jhumpa Lahiri is a second-generation expatriate who deals with the dynamics of migration in her works. She lives in the US now and considers herself a product of three countries. Her frequent visits to India, particularly to Calcutta (now Kolkata), accompanying her parents, helped her observe life in her native land. Naturally her writing focuses on the strong ties that linked her to three countries and made her feel standing at a cross-road of culture. As a non-native, she feels herself an outsider in the US and stands, to use Kanaganayakam words, “On the cusp created by the

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intersection of two cultures, which one identifies as the space of the exile” (p. 205). Jhumpa Lahiri is a second-generation immigrant, yet she felt she belonged nowhere. As she has frequently confessed, she did not belong in the US where she felt like an outsider because of her appearance and language. At the same time, she felt equally like a stranger in India because, as she admitted to Vibhuti Patel in an interview, “I didn’t grow up there (India)... we were clutching at a world that was never fully with us.”

Like most expatriate writers, Jhumpa portrays only what she has experienced. Her Indian heritage forms the basis for her short stories in which she deals with questions of identity, alienation and the plight of those who are culturally displaced. She vividly shows the estrangement and isolation that often afflict the first even the second-generation immigrants. As she said in a press conference in Kolkata, “No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile whichever country I travel to, that is why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile.”

Jhumpa’s writing is characterized by her plain language and her characters, often Indian immigrants to the US, navigate between the cultural values of their homeland and their adopted home. Her fiction is autobiographical and frequently draws upon her own experience as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. She examines her characters’ struggles, anxieties and biases to chronicle and nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behaviour. In short, her stories revolve around individuals who face the crisis of identity and, as Turner would say, are ‘transitional beings’ or ‘luminal personae’ (p. 95). “With their dual personalities some attempt to assimilate and integrate while others are never able to break the umbilical cord that binds them to their homeland” (Nityanandam, p. 13).

Until the publication of her second collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), Jhumpa focused mainly on the first generation of Indian immigrants to the US and their struggle to raise family in a country very different from theirs. Her stories describe their efforts to keep their children acquainted with Indian culture and traditions even after they have grown up in order to hang on to the Indian tradition of a joint family in which the parents, their children and the children’s families live under the same roof. The psychological dislocation that the immigrants often suffer can cause their children to feel a similar sense of alienation. Although

Jhumpa's parents had ultimately adjusted to living in the US, they must have frequently longed for their mother country, giving her the opportunity to observe at first hand the painful adjustment of immigrants to life in an adopted country. Jhumpa uses her acute powers of observation together with her personal experience to create stories that transport the readers to an imaginary landscape, exploring and exposing the frailties common to all of humanity. Her narratives weave together not only the stories of immigrants but also those of their children who feel that they belong neither in one place nor in another. Jhumpa's debut collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* was published in 1999. It won the Pulitzer Award in 2000 and brought her immediate fame and recognition. It was translated into various languages and won her a host of other prizes and awards like the Pen/Hemingway Award Yorker Debut of the year Award, Addison Metcalf Award, O. Henry Award, Louisiana Review Award etc. The book was also nominated for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Jhumpa had published a few short stories before the publication of *Interpreter of Maladies* and had been the recipient of awards, proving that her literary talents were already recognized in the literary world. This is also proved by her being listed in 1999 as 'one of the best writers under 40' by the New Yorker. Her story '*The Third and Final Continent*' got the magazine the National Award for fiction.

Almost all of her early stories dealt with the crisis of identity and had for their theme a sense of longing and loss. The protagonists of her early short stories seem precursors to the ones that were to follow. The stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* address sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants to the US with themes such as marital difficulties, miscarriages and the disconnection between the first and the second generation of the immigrants. Jhumpa Lahiri once said, "When I first started writing, I was not conscious that my object was the Indian-American experience. What drew to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life."

Although each of Jhumpa's stories has its own self-contained plot and characters, they are linked in ways that bind the collection together as a complete entity. All stories in the collection revolve around people who are either Indian in India, Indian in the United States or Americans of Indian descent. The immigrant experience is central to her but it is not her exclusive concern. In the title story of the volume *Interpreter of Maladies* she suggests, through her characters, that there are

'maladies' that trouble all of us. The stories can be separated into distinct groupings and associations, based on their relation to Indian culture. The first and most obvious groups of stories are the two that are set in India itself and concern only Indians in India. In *'The Treatment of Bibi Haldar'* and *"A Real Durwan"*, Jhumpa explores the elements of Indian society that have not been muted or changed by association with the outside world. Both of the central characters- Bibi Haldar and Boori Ma- have characteristics and experiences that are peculiar to Indian society, many of which could not exist anywhere else. Both the women are subject to the repressive mores of an Indian society that appears to render them powerless. These two stories can be linked with the only other story set in India - *Interpreter of Maladies*-which portrays an Indian who comes into contact with an American family of Indian descent. The story not only illustrates the main theme uniting the stories, the 'maladies' that afflict Jhumpa's various characters but also bridges the geographic divide between the subcontinent of India and the continental North America. Mr. Kapasi does not understand the tourists in his taxi who look Indian despite their foreign mannerisms and behaviour. This confusion immediately points to one of Jhumpa Lahiri's major themes – that of disjunction between cultures. Through this story she is able to deepen the connection between her narratives.

Another grouping concerns the first-generation Indians who are inevitably alienated from American culture because they have left the land in which they were born and raised. Mrs. Sen of *Mrs. Sen's*, while still quite young, is made to seem old because she cannot adapt to life in America. She is a completely displaced person who yearns only for India and makes no attempt to assimilate. In a similar way Mr. Pirzada has been in America doing research for some years but he is completely absorbed by what is happening in the war in his homeland where his wife and children still reside.

The largest grouping of stories centers on marriage and relationships, particularly the arranged marriages that underpin Indian society. *'A Temporary Matter'*, *'Sexy'*, *'This Blessed House'* and *'The Third and Final Continent'*, while portraying memorable characters struggling to adapt to American culture, dwell on the intricacies of marriage and the difficulties that all individuals have in adapting to life as a family.

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel *The Namesake* was published in 2003. She once again received enthusiastic reviews. On the publication of *Interpreter of Maladies* the reviewers had hailed her

as ‘a precocious debut’ who had ‘extraordinary talent for empathy’ without any exoticization of either country and ‘with a fight for inhabiting the emotional space of her characters.’ On the publication of *The Namesake*, the reviewers hailed her as a ‘writer of uncommon elegance and pose.’ In *The Namesake* Jhumpa’s concerns are the same as in *Interpreter of Maladies* but the development of the writer is obvious. While all the stories except *This Blessed House* in *Interpreter of Maladies* were written from a woman’s point of view, the novel is written from a male perspective which she admits is interesting and certainly more challenging.

The story of *The Namesake* spans over thirty years in the life of the Ganguli family. The Calcutta-born parents, Ashoke and Ashima, emigrated as young adults to the United States where children, Gogol and Sonia, grew up experiencing the constant generational and cultural gap with their parents. Jhumpa Lahiri once admitted, “*I always felt so embarrassed by my name ... you feel like you’re causing someone pain by being who you are*”. Her ambivalence over her identity was the inspiration for the ambivalence of Gogol, the protagonist of the novel *The Namesake* over his unusual name. As in her short stories, so too in her novel, America is a distinct constant presence even when India continues to be part of the fictional landscape. “Lahiri’s use of two names and two identities for the protagonist becomes the perfect metaphor for the diasporic experience” (Nityanandam, p.14).

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