

## Rooting the Rootless in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies

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### Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri in Interpreter of Maladies represent the Diasporic attitude in which he express that none of the human being is permanent denizen of any particular place but each and every human being are changing their place with due course of time by economic, civic, educational, political, cultural and religious basis. Lahiri as the omniscient observer applies the predicament of her characters to interpret of maladies growing into immigrant life. She also attempt to cope up with the dynamic of culture as well as Diaspora in each situation. Her stories are caught up representing alienation, exile, isolation and up-rootedness.

**KEYWORDS:** Diaspora-to disperse, Denizen-Citizen, Predicament-Embarrassing Situation, Exile-barred from one's native country.

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**Introduction:** Etymologically, the term 'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek composite word "dia" and "speirein" literally meaning "to scatter", to spread or "to disperse". It was originally used to refer to the dispersion of jews after the Babylonian exile in 586 B.C and to the aggregate of jews or jewish communities scattered in exile outside Palestine. In current Parlance, however the term is apply to describe any group of people who are so dispersed and so are the people of Indian Sub-Continent.

The term Diaspora was used for the Jews exiled from their homeland. Naturally, such a community has scattered and isolated existence, and has the ailing experience of cultural alienation and agony of being toned between two cultures, alien to each other, one abandoned and the other adopted. The diaspora situation presents hybridity, a dialogically interlinked plurality of social voices or "Heteroglossia" (Kerr,377). Here comes up conjoining of "ethnic" identity with that of the national culture which is not an attempt at assimilation within the dominant culture, but the preservation of an imagined homogeneous ethnicity attached nostalgically to a distant homeland. Here is evolved a unique in between sensibility created from the conjoining of the two cultures (ibidem, 378). Diaspora protagonists are divided between the two cultures-their native culture and the acculturated one. Their nostalgia implies the contra-acculturation as they become unable to resist the temptation to celebrate their native cultural practices.

The culture is characterized by being a post-scacity society (meaning that its advance technologies provide practically limitless material wealth and comforts for everyone for free, having all but abolished the concept of possessions) by having overcome almost all physical constraints on life and by being an almost totally egalitarian, stable society without the use of any form of force or compulsion, except where necessary to protect others.

The novel of culture cycle, therefore mostly deal with people at the fringes of the culture: diplomats, spies, or mercenaries; those who interact with other civilization, and who do the culture's dirty work in moving those societies closer to the culture ideal, sometimes by force. In the fictional universe the culture exist concurrently with human society on earth. The time frame for the published culture stories is from roughly A.D 1300 to A.D 2970, with earth being contacted around A.D 2100, though the culture had covertly visited planet in the 1970s in the state of the art.

Now a day the concept of culture in anthropology  
and sociology is regarded as a fundamental element  
in the humanities. (ibidem 40-45)

Today culture is one of the most discussed concepts all around the world. It has a crucial role in human relations. Its understanding is the kernel of the new multiculturalism policy of different countries around the globe. And in this understanding the social sciences has a very crucial and important role. Anthropology is the most noted among them. But how did the conceptualized of 'culture' enter in the humanities? And especially how did it become a part of anthropology?

The title piece of the short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* related encounter of an Indian interpreter guide with an American Indian diaspora family on the latter's trip to India and unfolds in the process several stories hidden beneath the surface of apparent cosy family life. In the course of a close reading of the text the story reveals the *Maladies* of the exile and invoke images that may add newer dimensions to the very concept of the term.

In ***Interpreter of Maladies***, there are nine stories which bring to light many of the issues regarding identity faced by the diaspora community. The book contains the stories of first and second generation Indian immigrant, as well as a few stories involving ideas of otherness among communities in India. The stories revolve around the difficulties of relationship, communication and a loss of identity for those in diaspora. No matter where the story takes place, the characters struggle with the same feeling of exile and the struggle between the two worlds by which they are torn. The stories deal with the ever shifting lines between gender, sexuality, and social status within a diaspora whether the character be a homeless woman from India or an Indian male student in the United states, all the characters display the effect of displacement in a diaspora. Until, *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri focused mostly on first generation Indian- American immigrants and their struggle to raise a family in a country very different from theirs. Lahiri's second collection of short stories was released on April, 2008 *Unaccustomed Earth* achieved the rare distinction at number one on the New York Times best seller list.

In this work Jhumpa Lahiri has dealt with the themes of cultural identities and the problems of generation- of Indian parents and their children growing up in America while facing challenges of coping with the demands of their parents who are nostalgic about things and memories Indian and the pressures of American life and that society's ways and norms. These conflicting norms and values as regards life's important affairs like

love and marriage find very effective expression in her stories- both short and long. In the treatment of these themes she looks for cross cultural marriages and even there she explores the responsibility of accommodation and adjustment and thereby the happiness of home and family. It may be this leading concern behind Lahiri's art that makes her stories immensely readable and she loads them with a virtue of a different kind given the obvious compulsion on her part to priorities the dominant concern in the multicultural world today for a home that guarantees happiness and comfort of existence as civilized individuals. She finds the theme of happy home and intelligent adjustments in life and in love quite a natural choice on which she could concentrate. Moreover, in our days when newspapers are flooded in stories of intolerance and violent gruesome murders in culturally dissimilar setting, it appears extremely urgent that themes of accommodation, mutual appreciation and equality of cultures be emphasized, Jhumpa Lahiria's pre-eminent appeal seems to be stemming from this very growing realization in the intellectual world that the need today is to put a premium on love and such approaches in our social life and that create a space for it when art and visual media are charged with complicity in spread of an anti-culture of violence all over the world, it may only be a ray of hope that writers like Lahiri choose to deal with themes of socially responsible art that consistantly works to kindle virtue to give humanity a fresh breather to enter into cultural space with pride, dignity and confidence. If in practice and in logic multi-cultural refers to what is passed for as globe, Lahiri's art responds to its global challenge in that it tells what the humanity must listen and learn and adopt erasing difference and establishing live in the truly multicultural/ global form.

The power cut reminds Shoba about Calcutta where she was used to experiencing it frequently during her stay there in the holidays. She reminisces about the games played in the dark. She proposes to Shukumar that they could also play a game of confession in the dark. This game resulted in both relieving themselves of certain truths related to the past, which they would not have been able to articulate in normal circumstances. It is as if the insight of things/ position/ perspectives that's best articulated only in blindness/ darkness which, paradoxically, obviating a clear perspectives of things yet renders clarity more "real" than real.

Lahiri perhaps attempts to articulate that alienation and dislocation are not only rooted to those beings who are burdened with the nostalgia of their remembered pasts of their native land, but may be experienced by those de-anthologized beings such as Shukumar and Shoba, in whose case, the tenuous hold upon their originary roots, being second – generation expatriates, make them even more vulnerable to suffer the pangs of dislocation.

The fact that Shoba wants to move out of the house is indicative of her resolve to delocate her from the home which would have forever haunted her with the feeling of being inadequate. To be freed from the bonds of her painful memory, she has to dissociate herself from their home and that is the whole purpose of her game. Her decision expostulates the point that the distancing of oneself from one's home may be enabling in so far that it might help one in so far that it might help one in relocating themselves in an altogether themselves different space, thereby helping them to re-locate

their identities without the burden of nostalgia haunting them. This is perhaps the best way to counter the dislocation felt by those who do not have anything to fall back upon.

Again the problematic concerning the de-location of home is worked out more fully in *Interpreter of Maladies*. By situating the story in Orissa, Lahiri perhaps intends to posit that the feeling of dislocation is not entirely rooted when one is culturally displaced, but might be experienced anywhere, even in one's home of nostalgia. Hence, one can not adopt the essentialist approach that one's contact with his/her roots would be enough in the reclamation of his/ her identity. Rather, such an interacting might be disabling in so far as it may lead to a conflictual, polyphonic, dialogic, thereby problematizing the diasporic predicament still further. The text, presenting an interface between two persons of different cultural attempts to predicate on the postmodern notion that "home" has, more and more, come to represent a site where narratives of dislocation has tended to be written in a great measure.

Mr. Perzada's regular visit to their house becomes an occasion where they can re-live the painful reminder of the partition days through its horrifying recurrence, that's the present Indo-Pak war whose current status they get to know from the evening news. Mr. Pirzada's wife and children, being in Bangladesh he experiences grave concern over their wellbeing. This concern is shared by Lilia's parents who, in an act of solidarity, maintain stoic dispositions, and having nothing more than "boiled eggs with rice for dinner". (40) that were accustomed to having long, leisurely meals (34) before. What is pertinent to note here is that despite their knowledge about their ontological difference, there is a common integrating force binding them, and the nostalgia attached to home makes them feel united in a common cause. The search for home amidst foreign shores, in a way, gets fulfilled by the common language (Bengali) they speak, they devour, the cassettes of Kishore Kumar they listen to and having successive cups of tea dipped in austere biscuits after supper.

Second generation Indian diaspora in America, they do not have a "home" anywhere in the world. They neither belong to America, their birth place, where they still feel outsiders; nor do they belong to their ancestral 'homeland' India. They conform to the state of Trishanku of Indian mythology, a metaphor for the modern expatriate immigrants inhabiting the contested global local space. However, as they unfold glimpses of uneasy detachment and disinterestedness displayed by both the husband and the wife, especially the latter, suggest that probably there are more stories hidden beneath the apparent cozy family picture that meets the eye. They do not seem like usual parents with visible concern for their children.

The title of the present story acquires multiple meanings as the *Interpreter of Maladies* is approached by one, who is an 'exile' in her 'home' and 'homeland' for the interpreter of an acute malady so that she could expiate her guilt, pain and suffering. In the process the 'interpreter' too is awakened to the maladies afflicting his family and personal life and to the fact that he himself has turned into 'exile' in his 'Home'.

## **Conclusion:**

Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer prize winning *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) with its nine stories give the readers the subtle way in which the fictionist probes into various maladies that disrupt relationships between protagonists living in exile. As they come up with life in the new world, their emotional turmoil continues to be the focus of Lahiri's attention. Being an immigrant herself, Lahiri makes her soul searching study very absorbing, interpreting maladies as the dynamics of culture and diaspora continue to daunt her characters. The wife fails to understand the loss her husband has experienced, manifested in his hermit like withdrawn life. At the final breaking point when she reveals her intention to live in apartment away from her husband, he makes his final confession of the dead child 's sex revealing his deep rooted shock of having lost a boy child. Their malady is failure in communication in emotional stress. Shukumar out of his deep love for Shoba kept the secret of the child's sex from her, leading to breakdown relationship . When the malady is treated with true revelation, the battle is won by berth, as the story ends in mutual sharing of pain of loss.

It was indeed a small temporary matter that brought about the crisis and the resolution. In when Mr. Pirzada came to dine, based on the story of a family friend from Bangladesh in 1971 Lahiri concerns herself with interpreting the maladies that beget prejudices among people of different nationalities due to conflicts of national identity and geographical separation. The child Lilia who narrates the story develops a close affinity with Mr. Pirzada, a family friend from Dacca. The Bangladesh freedom movement, he leaves for Dacca to rejoin his wife and seven daughters. Lilia's curiosity to know about him and the difference of nationality is a revelation to the readers that displacement and loss of identity is the common lot of anyone in diaspora.

In the end the author of the story Jhumpa Lahiri to explore through her work is the fact that the distinction between human beings is man- made. The narrator of the last story feels drawn towards the old lady because she fills the vacuum in his life. She takes care of him emotionally and when he is at the crucial stage of her life, she helps him realize the importance of it. When he learns of her death he feels the blow of loss. The human bond that has tied them gets affected and he feels bad about her death. Not only that, Jhumpa makes her character very humble and down to earth as well. Her character speaks the glory of common life.

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