



EXPATRIATE SENSIBILITIES AND THE WOMAN IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri, the youngest of diasporic hierarchy stands prominent as an artist who was named as "One of the 20 best writers under the age of 40," By "The New Yorker." She made a precocious debut with her Interpreter of Maladies and bagged the prestigious Pulitzer award. Her recognition at international canvas may be ascribed to her masterly imaginative perception. Expatriate writing born out of the dialectics between displacement and relocation, belonging and alienation raises quite a few theoretical formulations which provide fresh perspective to creative works. Against the backdrop of this, Lahiri's stories carry rich details of women, their cultural values and customs. They occupy a space in between cultures, they constantly move between Indian and the U.S.A. Apart from being traumatized refugees, her female figures also come out as firm figures who negotiate a path in a country that seems to provide immense opportunities.

The collection of her stories *Interpreter of Maladies* bearing the sub-title "Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond", contains nine-stories "A Temporary Matter," "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", "Interpreter of Maladies", "A Real Durwan", "Sexy" "Mrs Sen's", "The Blessed House", "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar", "The Third and Final Continent". Seven of these stories deal with foreign American background while two of them depict typical Indian ethos of West Bengal. Besides her short stories her novel *Namesake* also portray the agony of rootless Indian – Americans called ABCD that is American Born Confused Desis.



In general there are nostalgic overtones in expatriate writings. Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction is no exception. Her narratives imply a cultural travel, a nostalgic reminiscence of home that is India the culture of adoption. Exchanging one tradition for another, she creates and inscribes, 'alternative worlds'.

Most of the characters in her fiction are immigrant Bengalis, living abroad, unable to cut-off completely the umbilical cord, rooted in India, despite their striving to be more than natives of their adopted land. In the process they are alienated, lost in the wilderness. The stories reveal their predicament, their alienation. Jhumpa Lahiri knows the art of story telling which is not merely a narration of events rather the narration moves from external reality to the inner world of the characters without any linear progression of events. One has to read the stories carefully to understand and enjoy the underlying irony and humour in them. Each story is different from the other in its colour and texture. The stories undoubtedly make a dint in the reader's consciousness.

These stories offer a wonderful variety of experiences gathered largely from the cultural clashes rippling outward in different directions. The trauma of cultural dislocation and displacement, an acute sense of loneliness and the pangs of estrangement suffered by the millions of 'exiled Indians' who try desperately to balance themselves, between, 'home' who try desperately to balance themselves, between, 'home' and 'abroad' are major maladies that the attempts to interpret. Most of the characters in these stories grapple with the changed pattern of life in an alien land but they also realize that the land of their parent's birth still surfaces somewhere in the background and haunts them.

"A Temporary Matter" the very first story in the collection beautifully depicts the conjugal crisis in a young couple Shobha and Shukumar. It focuses the emotional void that separates the couple and concentrates on the bond of marriage which is pious and holy in India but now it is gradually slithering down under the exhaustive pressure and the needs of the Western world. Shobha and Shukumar are second generation Indian – Americans. Shukumar in his thirty-fifth year is still a student of a graduate school while Shobha works in an office where she corrects the typographical errors in books'. Having lived together for three years now they drift apart. Their dreams are shattered when the child born to them is delivered dead.

The grief of the couple is not mutually shared. They lack the capacity to become an emotional anchor for the other.

In the figure of Shobha, Lahiri puts forth the immigrant rootlessness. She is a torn self between the Eastern and Western set-up. While caring for the essentialities of the modern world, she also expects the care and attention of her husband. She is presented as a thoroughly methodical person, a near perfectionist who always plans things in advance. Her house is very efficiently run. She is a type of lady who is always prepared for surprises. But the loss of the child causes a sea-change in her attitude. It shatters her to the core and she loses interest in everything – her house, her Kitchen, her own appearance and even her husband. Far from the systematic perfectionist that she was, now turns sloppy and careless. As a result, Shukumar who has taken up all these responsibilities now mostly stays indoor, almost becomes a recluse. He is typical portrayal of a modern man caught up between the pressure of the Western world and the demands of his own personal life and family.

The dead baby symbolizes fading away of their love and marital harmony. Now all they do is to avoid each other. To him Shobha lost her physical change and has begun to look “at thirty-three, like a type of woman she’d once claimed she would never look.”

The scheduled power cut in their motivates her to devise a game wherein they would make confessions. Ironically enough the trivia that they both confessed are hints of how little the shackles of institutions, moral or ethical standards restrict them. At the end she announces that she had found an apartment for herself and was moving out. It suddenly dawns on Shukumar that the game was actually a preface to this revelation. The growing intimacy was false and meant nothing. One the fifth and the final night of their ‘game’ – “They wept together for the things they now knew.” They also know the painful facts about the lost baby and that he was a body. They finally know, that wheat every they had between them was irretrievably lost.

The story brings the immaturity of Shobha to the forefront. The author has beautifully painted the human emotional errors and sentimental blocks which affect the things adversely. She also has stressed upon the needs of an individual self-amongst the colour of proper mutual



understanding and trust. As such the story is an example of the immigrant couples who are unable to acclimatize themselves completely into the foreign culture and society. It also highlights their clinging to the roots, irrespective of an entry into a comparatively ultramodern set-up. The surroundings to them though appear pleasing and promising but their heart knows the void which hurts them. The bi-cultural clash of Eastern and Western values ever haunts their lives. It is the agony which pulls them back making their life a dilemma, to which there seems no rescue.

“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” describes the experiences of a young girl Lilia who observes the various incidents related to Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani Professor who visits her family. The child’s dilemma to differentiate the visitor as an Indian, a Pakistani or a Bengladeshi is obvious. Ultimately innocently enough she concludes that the grounds of difference lie in ‘Pocket watch’ not knowing that it was a means to overpower his nostalgia. She as an observer develops familial intimacy with him and prays’ for his well-being. She expresses her concern by saying “Don’t worry” to Mr. Pirzada. at a very humane level. Lilia’s family while participating in American festivals wishes for the safety of Mr. Pirzada’s family. It is no doubt the bond of oneness and Indianness of both the parties remains unaffected. The young girl symbolizes the yearning of exile. She shares concern with Mr. Prizada at a very humane level highlighting the concern in the heart of a father for his daughters (miles away) during the war. Through the character of Lilia the writer has anticipated an innocent force working on essentials of humanity transcending the barriers of caste, creed or nationality.

“The Interpreter of Maladies” is women around the Indo-American couple Mr. and Mrs. Das who visit India along wit their three kids. During their visit of Puri they get introduced with Mr. Kapasi, the taxi-driver whose role is to interpret the maladies of Gujrati people to c doctor who does not understand Gujarati. Mrs. Das finds his job to be romantic enough. Afterwards she develops infatuation towards him and coming close she discloses the secret that one of her sons is from a Punjabi friend of Mr. Das. She represents a type of woman for whom marriage, far from being a sacred ritual becomes a haven for committing infidelity with impunity. The story evinces decline in marital relations affected by mechanical and computer-literate Americans’ mad rush after wealth, woman and wine and their libidos to

please themselves with a variety of people, echoing the social realism of American life. Here Mrs. Das, clearly indicates that she has no love either towards her husband or her children. It's a pity that her poor husband may think that she loves him. Love is a burden and marriage an obstacle to carry on with new relations. Being restive for eight years, she prays Mr. Kapasi to show the remedy for her release. She says: "Don't you see? for eight years I haven't been able to express this to anybody. He doesn't even suspect it. he thinks I'm still in love with him. Suggest some kind of remedy".

And this 'it' is the burden that she has to bear all alone because it is the fruit of her extramarital affair. Realizing that Mrs. Das suffers from strange disease, Mr. Kapasi wants to suggest to her that she must be honest and confess the truth to her husband. He is not the doctor but merely an interpreter. He offers no remedy to Mrs. Das, incorrigible disorder. Upon his enquiry whether she undergoes heartache or self-reproach for her past affair, she looks disapprovingly. He asks her "Is finds herself unable to answer. The delineation of Mrs. Das is also an expression of a woman character who has betrayed her husband by having an extramarital relationship, she has also tried to hide the truth to protect her Oriental image. She longs for Eastern values for marital relationship, but she is not able to adopt herself with the Western values. Swinging between two cultural patterns she suffers.

While writing this story Jhumpa Lahiri disclosed her views: "I think it best expresses thematically the predicament at the heart of the book – the dilemma, the difficulty and often the possibility of communicating emotional pain to others, as well as expressing it to out selves. In some sense, I view myself as a writer, insofar as I attempt to articulate these emotions as a sort of interpreter as well."¹ and Mrs. Das's case is one in this category. The author here acts as an efficient agent giving a voice to such maladies.

In her next story "A Real Durwan" the focus is on Boori Maa, sixty-four years old woman, refugee from East Bengal, a self-appointed sweeper of the stair-well of multistoried building who lived under the letter boxes near the collapsible gate. Besides, the maladies of a miserable life, a shock rattles her when a basin fitted on the stairs is found missing. The entire blame is shifted to Boori Maa for the neglect of her duty and consequently she is exiled from the place where she had been for so long, nurturing her wounds of refuge. Recognition of the

old age of Boori Maa and the hospitality offered by the residents to her is a clear reflection of the Eastern human values theft and carelessness in the most rude manner reflects the Western, materialistic approach which has overtaken them. She is treated as a subaltern woman. The vagaries of material possession plaguing the human relationship is the theme of this story.

There “Mrs. Sens’s” delineation centres round the lonely Benglai lady, a professor’s wife who acts as a baby-sitter to an eleven years old boy Eliot. Mrs Sen is a typical Indian with her traditional sari, bangles and vermillion, but in a foreign land she feels uprooted. Her working as a babysitter indicts the loneliness that she experiences in America. As an emigrant she is baited by the cultural dilemma. Even the young Eliot can make out that her husband does not care for Mrs. Sen’s as much as his father cares for his mother. Thus Mrs. Sen’s loneliness and difference between the Indian and American social ethical ways and manners stands conspicuous. Jhumpa Lahiri’s insight into human psychology, her keen observation of minute details in real life and her all-embracing’ compassionate nature for rich and poor, alike become explicit in this story.

The story “Sexy” analyses Miranda’s infatuation with Devajit (Dev) a Bengali married man. Their extramarital relationship is examined in the light of the word ‘Sexy’ used by Dev for Miranda, who symbolizes woman as an object of lust. She is a professional mistress who got a catch in Dev while his wife was away, but their relationship comes to an end when her wife comes from India. Both Dev and Mirands do not transcend the frontier of earthly love for it is fortified by cosmetic enticement. For them a sense of contentment appears bleak and remote. In fact, their act does not aim at redemption but is directed towards sensual pleasures. Miranda symbolizes a type of woman with unfeeling heart and venomous tongue, who smiles at people, uttering melodious and compassionate words mesmerizing them to have the deep impression that she is a glad with sheer physique-centered compliments like “very spicy” The words of Rohin the young boy make her realize the meaninglessness of the compliment when he says “Sexy” means “loving someone you’ don’t know”.

Thus a brief but deeply adulterous relationship constitutes the core of this story. The author comes up with a strong bicultural sensibility on the issue of marital, relationship. She has

taken up the issue of open sex and sex without love which is very common in Western culture.

A newly married couple Twinkle and Sanjeev trying to get settled in America constitute the story “The Blessed House”. The new house they have shifted had some Christian relics which sparked a debate between them. Due to different upbringing there is a difference in their attitude. Broadminded and generous Twinkle appreciates the Christian icons as decoration places while Sanjeev feels irritated with them. Twinkle becomes rigid and Sanjeev fails to persuade her. Twinkle thought that holy statues installed inside the house will make the house blessed. Sanjeev wears a scornful attitude so much so that distance in their newly wedded life is widened when he underestimates the tenacity of her wish and threatens to dispose of finding her in tearful rage shouting “I hate you”. Ironically enough the blessed house only remains a cursed one stained by the absence of love between wife and husband and the house could never be a home. The story is an important document upon the maladies of a new couple who are unable to share a common perspective.

The miserable plight of a 29 years old hysteric girl is described in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar. “Living in a store-big room in her cousin’s house, Bibi underwent inhuman treatment. For her fits’ of epilepsy, doctor suggested her marriage to be the best remedy. Her cousin and his wife did not find the money worth wasting for this and left her all alone. She bore the child of an unknown neighbour and was cured. She represents a woman of broken or lost identity. Motherhood causes her metamorphosis as she becomes self-dependant, confidant and self-sufficient. The story reminds one the character of ‘Pagli’ in Amrita Pritam’s “Pinjar” who becomes an object of callousness of the society.

The famous writer Khushwant Singh found “The Final Continent” as the best story. This final story of the collection portrays the life of an immigrant Indian who, studied in London for four year, went to Calcutta for his marriage with Mala and then he moved to America seeking fortune abroad. His wife Mala has to wait for another six months for Visa. The male narrator, first stays in YMCA hostel and then with the crotchety Mrs. Croft who is 103 years and whose whim is to rent her house to scholars only. She is finicky about punctuality in all matters. The narrator experiences on three different continent that are Europe, Asia and

America bicultural sensibility even more, His peregrination reveals the difficulties faced by an immigrant when he moves out of his country or the place he is used to by lapsing of time. He feels uprooted from one a desolate stranger. Although in Mala Mrs. Croft has found a “Perfect lady” but Mala feels completely alienated in a foreign land where she cannot relish, the disgusting “Oxtail soup”. And her husband too feels the new continent America as foreign as the moon.

The immigrant feels thinking about the effects of the uprooting on his next-generation, wishes his son at Harvard to be brought so that “he can eat rice with his hands and speak in Bengali”; This shows his keen desire to belong to the roots. By the end, he comes close to Mrs. Croft and at her death feels as if he lost his own mother. The story comes to an end on a positive note as the narrator and his wife reconcile themselves to the new life on the third and the final continent. The story is characterized by feeling of rootlessness in the life of the immigrant seeking fortune abroad. This also hints at identity crisis in the newly married couple. But the major theme of the story is that of an uprooted person who has been subject to trauma of alienation twice in his life.

All of these stories reveal that the beliefs and life styles in a way have been revolutionized in the wake of Americanization and globalization. The institution of ‘family which has been the most strong binding factor in the traditional sense has suffered a major blow under the influence of the Western culture. The role of woman as the spine of this institution has been assigned greater accountability. There is a tug-of-war between the culture of ht emigrant and that of the country they are rooted in. There is frankness and openness in man-woman relationships yet the bonds that hold them together seem weakening. The women of Jhumpa Lahiri’s fictional world are trapped in a stranglehold of Socio-Politico-Patriarchal emasculation. Moreover, Diaspora and feminism, instead of working together for a more fruitful intervention, and observed to inversely become agents of hostility. The gender marginalization and exploitation has also jeopardized their existence first as immigrants and then in woman. Despite the change in locale and culture, women are forced to remain under foot. Jhumpa Lahiri in her stories seems to be preoccupied with finding a way out of this socio-politico-emotional noose.



Many efforts have been made to analyze the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri ever since the publication of her collection of short stories. It has been highlighted by the angle of expatriate writings too, but what role does the woman play has often made an attempt to silhouette the woman in its wide variety against that backaround. At times they are given subaltern treatment and remind us the characters of Mahadevi Varma in Hindi Literature, winning our compassion for their utter destitution. These women also champion the feminist forts and as such they share the general lot of what the NRI'S share these days. At times the professional mistress-like figures, profess' Love at first sight and divorce at second.' And so far as Lahiri's evaluation of this sensibility reads, her women characters range from Boori Ma, Bildi Haldar, Mrs. Das, Shobha, Twinkle, Mrs. Croft etc., When power is required they act, as *Durga* for knowledge they are *Saraswati* and for fiscal foundations they might become *Laxmi* or as the need be.

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