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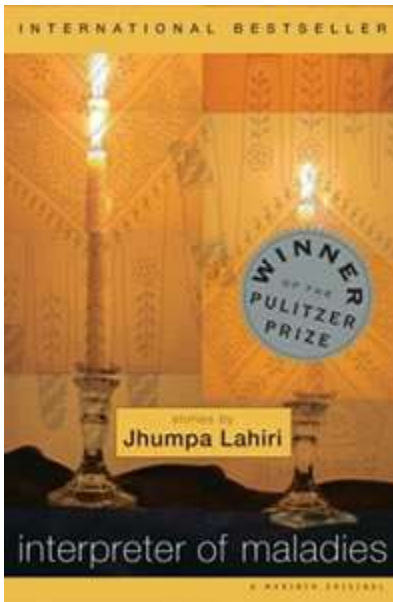
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## Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*: An Exploration of the Diasporic Realities

L. D. Easter Raj Densingh



### Diaspora – Some Thoughts

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Diaspora is a relatively new development in the post-colonial literature. It remains a favourite topic for investigative literary outputs. The term ‘diaspora’ is derived from the Greek meaning “to disperse”. Diaspora is also a popular term in current research as it captures various phenomena that are prevalent in numerous discourses devoted to current transnational globalization such as borders, migration, “illegal” immigration, repatriation, exile, refugees, multiculturalism, and hybridity. It signals an engagement with a matrix of diversity of cultures, languages, histories, peoples, places, and time. The issues of resistance and protest among the indigenous settlers and diasporic communities of the commonwealth had been investigated under political, historical, anthropological, social microscopes by hordes of eminent luminaries. This paper attempts to look into how Jhumpa Lahiri handles these issues in her works.

Diaspora is a loaded term that brings to mind the various contested ideas and images. It can be a positive sight for the affirmation of the identity or conversely, a negative sight of fears of losing the identity. Robert Cohen describes diaspora as “the communities of people living together in one country who acknowledge that the old country- a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore- always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions” (ix).

### ***Interpreter of Maladies* – An Interpreter of Emotions of Pain and Affliction**



**Jhumpa Lahiri**

<http://www.randomhouse.com/kvpa/jhumpalahiri/bio.php>

In an age when the whole world assimilates the experiences of the immigrants, the appearance of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* aptly provides a torchlight to give us a glimpse into the world of South-Asian Literature. Jhumpa Lahiri retaining her close attachment with India finds it difficult to claim United States as her home for she feels a bit of an outsider. At the same time she cannot define herself as a Bengali, and Calcutta as her home. Experiencing a perplexing bicultural Universe, Lahiri witnesses the traumatic sense of being an outsider.

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The nine stories in the short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* are sub-titled Stories of Boston and Beyond and these deal with the pangs of loneliness and a sense of being an outsider felt by the second-generation immigrants of Bengal in the alien land. Lahiri defines her position in the work by viewing herself as an interpreter of the emotions of pain and affliction.

### **Hybridity**

The post-colonial theoretician, Homi Bhabha coined another term “hybridity” in a view that many writers have a sense of belonging to both cultures. This interaction of the cultures no doubt leads to further conflicts, but it certainly opens new routes and modes of thinking for the individual and group identities of the diasporas and guides them to outgrow the stereotyped experiences of being uprooted, displacement and marginalization. During their stay in the new country and in interaction with the representative culture the subjectivities and modes of thinking of the diasporas also change and they too intervene in the cultural discourse of the dominant culture.

Thus, there comes a considerable change in the outlook and identities of diasporas with the changed global economic, political and cultural scenario. The immigrants face cultural dilemma when their cultural practices are mocked at and there is a threat to their ethnic and cultural identity. They stand bewildered, confused, feeling lost and homesick, showing resistance to the discourse of power in various forms. In the following generations these confusions, problems and yearnings become less intense as they get influenced by the culture of that country, and adapt themselves to it.

### **Other Indian English Writers on Diaspora**

In the closing decades of twentieth century, some Indian English writers like Amitav Ghosh, Sashi Deshpande, Sashi Tharoor and Upamanyu Chatterjee created waves at home and others like Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra and Vikram Seth made in-roads into the Anglo-American countries in particular, and the west in general by winning coveted prizes. Likewise, writers of Indian diaspora such as Salman Rushdie, Bharathi Mukherjee, Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri have created waves in the west and made their impact on Indian literary scene.

### **The World of South Asian Literature**

In an age when the whole world assimilates the experiences of the immigrants, the appearance of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* gives one a glimpse into the world of South-Asian Literature. In an interview with Issac Chotiner, she comments that when a person grows up as the child of an immigrant, one is always, or at least she was conscious of what it means or might

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mean to be uprooted or to uproot oneself. One is conscious of that without even having ever done it, and she knew what her parents had gone through- not feeling rooted.

### **The Focus of the Stories**

This collection introduces Indians and Indian Americans struggling with deracination and assimilation. Jhumpa Lahiri's characters tend to be immigrants from India, and their American-reared children, exiles who straddle two countries, two cultures, not belonging to either; they are too used to freedom to accept the rituals and conventions of home, and yet too steeped in tradition to embrace American mores fully. Lahiri delves into the souls of these indelible characters struggling with displacement, guilt, and fear as they try to find a balance between the solace and suffocation of tradition, and the terror and excitement of the future into which they are being thrust. This collection is about Indians settled abroad, and Lahiri addresses their struggles with multicultural upbringing and environment.

Out of the nine stories included in the collection, two stories present Indian characters exclusively against the Indian *locale* backdrop, traditions, superstitions and taboos. Of the two stories, Boori Ma in *A Real Durwan* and Bibi Halder in *The Treatment of Bibi Halder* evince the same character traits of diasporas. The other stories deal with the sense of alienation that an emigrant Indian feels in a foreign country, and they are based on the inner landscape, and struggles of Indians who have settled through choice or compulsion in Boston or beyond.

### ***A Temporary Matter***

In *A Temporary Matter* a young couple Shoba and Shukumar exchange confessions after a long silence to cope with the failure in their marriage. They become exiles, not of countries and culture but of their still-born dreams. Shoba is not able to forget the absence of her husband at the time of her still-born child. The sorrow of the lost child causes a communication breakdown in the relationship of Shukumar and Shoba. They avoid each other and their friends, Shoba filling her time with work and Shukumar procrastinating over finishing his dissertation. The lack of communication compounded by the loss of identity one feels in an alien culture, makes the couple avoid each other and find refuge in a place where the other does not frequent. Shukumar, unable to bear the pangs of being alienated reveals on his part the mystery concerned with the features of their still-born baby. Somehow their mutual confession brings them together in a flood of tears underlining the fact that cultural roots cannot be severed so easily. It is true as A.K.Mukerjee comments, "The marriage bond, which is still considered sacrosanct in India, is gradually slithering down under the pressure of new needs under a different background" (pp. 280-81).t

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## **Sense of Alienation**

Lahiri's expression of the sense of alienation continues in *When Mr. Pirzada Came To Dine* which presents the cultural unanimity between an Indian family and Pakistani young man in a foreign country. Mr. Pirzada is from Dacca, then a part of Pakistan. He left behind his wife and seven daughters for a fellowship to study the foliage of New England. Since his fellowship provided for only a meager dorm room, he comes to 10 year old Lilia's home to eat with her parents and to watch the news of the Indo-Pakistan War. In the story Pirzada suffers from the agony of separation from his family, wife and seven daughters who are in his homeland Dacca. While dining with Lilia's parents he keeps his pocket watch "set to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead", "on his folded paper napkin on the coffee table" (IM 30). Lilia remembers how her parents and Pirzada have watched the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, bloodshed and killing on T.V with sad hearts and shared their feelings of past and present displacement. And yearning to be connected to their part of the world, it was Lilia's parents' destiny to search for the compatriots through the University directory every new semester. This sort of identification, empathy and like-mindedness forms a strategy to reduce the alienated feelings that normally grip the immigrants. The children of the immigrants read the history and geography of America in schools and have assimilated their culture. But still, these children carry with them the past history of 'origin' of their parents and grandparents. Lilia who is able to recognize a similarity between Mr. Pirzada and her parents, feels alienated when Mr. Pirzada returns to his homeland. She broods, "I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughter for so many months" (IM 42).

## **Contrast in Upbringing: *Interpreter of Maladies***

In the title story *Interpreter of Maladies* the affluent American born Indians, Mr. and Mrs. Das are on a trip to India with their three children. The protagonist Mr. Kapasi is an interpreter and tour guide who takes them to the Sun temple at Konark. But Mrs. Das and family groomed in American culture feel bored and lack curiosity: "... Mrs. Das gave an impatient sigh, as if she had been travelling her whole life without a pause" (IM 47). But Mrs. Das suffers a malady that is deep-rooted, the secret guilt that her second son, Bobby was not her husband's. She finds Mr. Kapasi the right interpreter for her malady and speaks out, "Eight years Mr. Kapasi, I've been in pain. I was hoping you could help me better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy (IM 65). Kapasi considers it as his bounden duty to assist Mrs. Das "and so he asked, "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (IM 66). This story stands exceptional among all other stories for its powerful narration and fascination of the third world people to the European life. The story shows how the everyday language of a common Indian becomes a western language.

## **Humiliating Experiences**

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Lahiri believes that Indian immigrants face humiliating experiences not only in America but in every kind of dominant culture and in other nations. The predicament of Boori Ma in *A Real Durwan* is a fine illustration of this fact. Boori Ma, a Bengali and born of a lower caste is sent to Calcutta after the partition. As a self-appointed sweeper of the stairwell of a multi-storyed building her services “came to resemble those of a real durwan” (IM 73). She considers herself ‘an outsider’, ‘broken inside’, and feels “burned like peppers across her thinning scalp and skin, was of a less mundane origin” (IM 75). Ultimately she is suspected to be the informer to the robbers and is thrown out of the place when a few things of the locality are stolen in her absence. Jhumpa Lahiri underscores the impossibility of an exile communicating emotional pain and loneliness to others through the characterization of Boori Ma: “Knowing not to sit on the furniture, she crouched, instead, in doorways and hallways, and observed gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city” (IM 176).

### ***Sexy Miranda***

*Sexy* is the story that shows the falling marital relationship among young emigrant Indians. The story is about the extra-marital relationship between an Indian and a western woman as well as her feelings toward valuable relationships. In *Sexy Miranda*, an American develops an extra-marital relationship with a married Indian Dev. She is attracted to Dev for his age and his race. He is interesting, mature, wealthy, and complementary to Miranda in a way that she has not known before. But the relationship shatters for more than one reason. It happens not only because Miranda realizes that she cannot expect more than physical fulfillment from Dev but also because of the definition, that Rohin, her Indian friend Laxmi’s cousin’s child gives to the term ‘sexy’. To him it means ‘loving someone you don’t know’. Miranda realizes that is precisely what she did. He tells her further that “that’s what my father did... he sat next to someone he doesn’t know, someone sexy, and now he loves her instead of my Mother” (IM 108). Miranda now understands that she is drawn to Dev for his surface value, and also that Dev does not love Miranda for who she is. Even without the dress, she is simply a mistress – not a woman. Thinking about her own situation, she begins to cry. From then on Miranda stops meeting Dev.

### ***Mrs. Sen***

*Mrs. Sen* is a story which explores the life of an emigrant Indian through the European point of view. It is an archetypal story of the cultural outsider, but even her plight is offset by the loneliness of little Eliot, her faithful ward for a few hours every day. The story presents the real difficulties faced by Indian wives in an alien culture, without friends and family, struggling to cope with the new surroundings they cannot call their home. Bharati Mukerjee rightly claims in *Massachusetts Review*, “When an Asian man comes to America for economic transformation, and brings a wife who winds up being psychologically changed”(47). Mrs. Sen’s mannerisms,

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cooked dishes which she serves to Eliot's mother as a mark of Indian hospitality are despised by Eliot's mother. Mrs. Sen feels bad and insulted many a time by her remarks and always feels restless and uneasy, though she knows her relatives in India, "think I live the life of a queen..." (IM 125). Mrs. Sen's consciousness is always preoccupied with the thoughts of her home for "everything is there" (IM 113), in India, shows that diasporas construct imaginary homelands from the fragmentary odds and ends of memory. Eliot is astonished to note, "When Mrs. Sen said home she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables" (IM 116). Mrs. Sen's thoughts and attempts to resist the continuing agency of power of Eliot's mother end in tears and silence during her driving when "She was so startled by the horn that she lost control of the wheel and hit a telephone pole on the opposite corner" (IM 134).

### ***The Blessed House***

*The Blessed House* is the story that shows the adjustment of young emigrant Indians to a new culture and beliefs. The best thing about the story is that it focuses on the fact that how adjustment and mutual understanding between the couple Sanjeev and Twinkle make a happy marriage. The story arrests our attention as it records the emotional and cultural clash between a Hindu husband and his dislike for his wife's fascination for Christmas artifacts. But in reality it is nothing about the religious divide but it is the subtlety of human feelings that makes up everything. After Sanjeev discovers his malady of possessive love, he "pressed the massive silver face to his ribs, careful not to let the feather slip, and followed her" (IM 157).

### ***The Treatment of Bibi Haldar***

*The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* as told by Lahiri in an interview, is, "about a misfit, a young woman living in a rundown building in Calcutta, and she is in the care of her cousin and his wife....She is an epileptic". The absence of a man in her life to protect her frustrates her. Bibi herself unknowingly admits that her illness is not physical but something psychological. Her problem is solved when she becomes a mother before marriage. The following words of Bibi signify the desperate efforts of an exile to conceal her pangs of loneliness and keep a smiling face, "Now I am free to discover life as I please" (IM 170).

### ***The Third and Final Continent***

*The Third and Final Continent* shows the hegemonic control still exercised by the European people over the third world people. Lahiri in this story makes it clear how the first generation migrants do stop brooding over their past, and try to fix their roots in an alien land. In this story, the narrator recounts his tale of leaving India in 1964 with a commerce certificate and the equivalent of ten dollars in his pocket. He sails on a cargo ship for three weeks across the Arabian, Red and Mediterranean seas to England. He lives in London with twelve or more penniless Bengali bachelors like himself. They live three or four in a room, and share the meals

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they cook together. He attends LSE and works at the university library. They have few responsibilities beyond their jobs. They lounge around on weekends and meet more Bengalis who join for dinners. Occasionally one of them moves out to live with a woman his family in Calcutta arranged for him to marry. When he is thirty-six years old, the narrator's family arranges a marriage in Calcutta and after that he settles down in America. The bond between the landlady Mrs. Croft and the narrator is beyond explanation. Mrs. Croft liked him and called his wife Mala "a perfect lady". When he reads of Mrs. Croft's obituary, he says, "I was stricken ... Mrs. Croft's was the first death I mourned in America for hers was the first life I admired; she had left this world at last, ancient and alone, never to return"(IM 196). With a growing son, they attain contentment and happiness in this 'third continent' which is also the final for them. When he speaks of the difficulty in finding a home away from home in America to his son, he encourages him:

Whenever he is discouraged, I tell him that if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer. I am not the only man to seek fortune from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination (IM 198).

### In "Strange" Worlds

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* can be considered as a piece of diasporic writing. This short story collection includes the stories about the lives of immigrant Indians who struggle to adjust between the Indian traditions that they left behind, and the entirely different western world that they have to encounter every day. Regarding the treatment of the diasporic experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's work Aruti Nayar in her article "An Interpreter of Exile" rightly observes that:

... Lahiri negotiates the dilemmas of the cultural spaces lying across the continents with a master's touch. Though endowed with a distinct universal appeal, her stories do bring out rather successfully the predicament of the Indians who traipse between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind, and the other encountered but not necessarily assimilated (p.4).

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L. D. Easter Raj Densingh  
Assistant Professor of English  
H.H.The Rajah’s College (Autonomous)  
Pudukkottai  
Tamilnadu  
India  
[erajenglish@gmail.com](mailto:erajenglish@gmail.com)

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