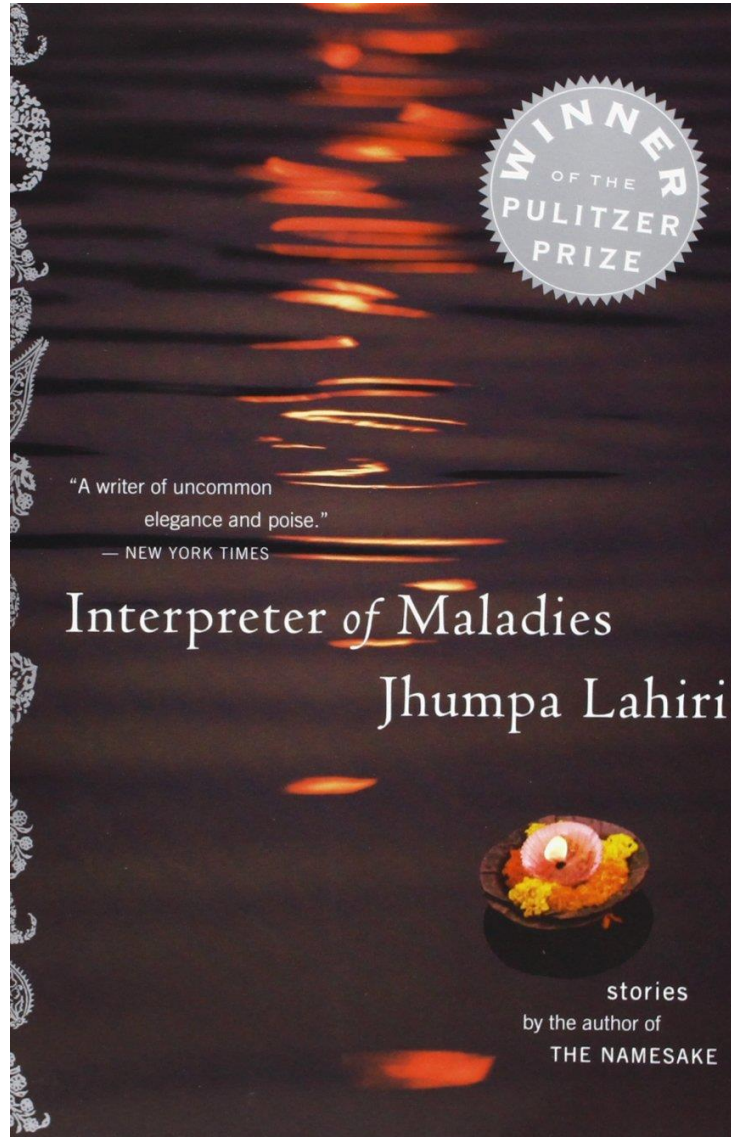


A Study of the Immigrant Experience in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Introduction

The Diaspora writings of the post-colonial writers like V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and many others share a common thread of experience which they register in their works.

Migration turns out to be one of the major issues in our contemporary world where two words, “globalization” and “post colonialism”, are continuously questioning the boundaries of national identity. The two worlds namely the ‘mother land’ and the ‘other land’ often lingers in their minds. Even the possibilities of a ‘floating home’, as advocated by Homi K. Babha, are also explored but they still are associated with the emotional territory of the Diaspora community. They often express their loss of belonging, identity crisis and longing for a mother land. They find themselves living in an alien land, with a threat of attack from the opposite culture, surrounding them perpetually. The roots of these writers point out a simple fact that the travel of people to different countries and intermingling of cultures have become immanent due to globalisation. Even the hybridization of languages and identity has broken the barriers of border and absoluteness of identity. People thus travel from one country to the other has to negotiate with the other culture. Cultural performance generally plays an instrumental role to construct an immigrant's identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri has become an emblematic figure of the new Indian Diaspora trying to confront the ‘two worlds’ through the space created in her works. An analysis of her debut works namely *Interpreter of Maladies* (Story Collection) and *The Namesake* (Novel) provides a lens to understand her creative insight into the Diaspora experiences. In these works she has explored the immigrant experiences such as the clash of cultures, the tangled ties between generations etc. with a poised and elegant voice. In *The Namesake* she portrays the experiences of difficulty of the Diaspora community to cope up with the bilingual and the bicultural environment taking the solace only from the nostalgia of the past experiences they had in the motherland. In *Interpreter of Maladies* her characters overcome the challenges of their parents and have found new ways to adopt themselves to the challenges of the ‘new world’ and ‘new culture’, but still a psychological vacuum exists in their minds, driving them helpless.

Cross Culture Experience of the Diaspora

Culture suggests the arts, customs and institutions of a group of people or nation, which helps to distinguish one group of people from the other. People with the same cultural practices had a distinct identity which later on became the distinct national identity among its practitioners. In the wake of ‘Globalisation’ and ‘Commercialisation’, migration of people from one country to the other and intermixture of cultures has become immanent. The term

“Diaspora” which means ‘to scatter over’ seems to be the right word to represent that community which embraces transnationalism and transculturalism, providing space for the coexistence of two cultures. By imbibing the values, customs and practices of two cultures they seek for a new identity, an inclusive identity. Most of the first generation Diaspora writers would have experienced the cultural shock when they encountered the foreign culture on their arrival. The experiences they had in the new land often drove them inwardly to find a happy abode in the memories of their past experiences they had in their own country. But the second generation writers, who were born natives of the foreign country, were able to accept their culture as natural and adopted them as well. The works of the Diaspora writers represent these cross-cultural experiences transcending differences in race, age, religion and gender, allowing the readers to travel into the invisible frontiers unmarked by the geo political boundaries to experience the ‘third culture’, invented by them.

First Generation and Second Generation Experiences

Lahiri explores the first generation and second generation immigrant experience, in the old and new lands, in the novel *The Namesake* (2003). The psychic condition of the first generation immigrants, Ashima and Ashoke is juxtaposed with that of the second generation immigrants Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi. Lahiri critically demonstrates how both the generations are preoccupied with the concept of ‘homeland’ and how they strive to achieve a home and an identity for themselves. In an age of transmigration, ‘home’ signifies its impermanence, displacement and dispossession. For many critics the idea of home is more conveyed as a sense of being between the two places instead of rooted one. When Ashima means home she means her mother nation, India, whereas for Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi it is USA, their birth place. While the older generation is negating for the land, the newer one is negating for an understanding of the values of their homeland.

Ashima’s remembrances of places in her home country serve as nostalgia and alleviate the pangs and pains she suffers in the new place. In an unknown city of Massachusetts she often recollects the picture of her family in Calcutta to mitigate the pain and anguish. When she was about to give birth to a child she remembers the conventional code and customs of the Indian culture: ‘women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares....’ (4). She even felt it miraculous and ridiculous that she gave birth and was rearing a child away from home, unmonitored and

unobserved by the dear ones. She poignantly recollects the lullaby from the Bengali songs which is intimately associated with the social conventions of Bengal. Rearing up child without her family, in a strange city, impels her to think herself as a person entering the world alone and deprived. Such experiences are hardly evadable for the first generation immigrants like Ashima.

In contrast to Ashima, Gogol's apathetic attitude towards Indian Culture is understandable as he has no ties with the Indian family and its members. He seldom recognizes the family members in the photo album that Ashima shows without her assistance. In order to transform him Ashima takes pains by teaching him Bengali rhymes, introducing names of Gods and Goddesses and other values prevalent in Bengali tradition. She nurtures the Bengali culture through Nazrul and Tagore songs and Ritwik Ghatak and Satyajit Roy movies besides indulging in debates over the political parties in Bengal. Ashima strongly believe that Cultural performances play a major role in constructing an immigrant's identity. But in the overseas country the proximity to the "other" culture tempts the immigrants to negotiate with them and Gogol the second generation immigrant exactly does that. Gogol is interested in listening to American music rather than Indian and is interested in celebrating Christmas and New Year rather than the Bengali Annaprasan (The Rice Ceremony), is a matter of concern for his parents. This dichotomy of the first generation immigrants' alienation in the foreign country and the second generations' disinclination towards the mother land is the outcome of the experience they had in their long years of living in different places.

The New Diaspora Experiences in *Interpreter of Maladies*

If her *The Namesake* deals with identity crisis of the migrated people, her debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* portrays characters who tries to adopt techniques to live in the new world. The nine short stories in this collection speaks beyond the stereotyped cultural clash, instead explores the human nature in the diasporic cultural context. The maladies suffered by the individuals in these stories are mainly due to the psychological, social, historical, and cultural unease caused by the changing positions in life. The writer herself could not devalue any of the two nations and hence has written some stories in the Indian back ground and some in the US. Angelo Monaco divides them further as follows:

The stories can be divided in two categories, with regard to the ethnic origin of the protagonists: two of them (“A Real Durwan” and “The Treatment of Bibi Halidar”) feature two Indian women, while “Interpreter of Maladies” (the title story) combines both an Indian-American family with an Indian citizen. The six stories of the second group can be divided into two categories: those where children interact with adults (“When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine”, “Sexy”, and “Mrs Sen’s”) and those where sentimental discord is central (“A Temporary Matter”, “This Blessed House”, and “The Third and Final Continent”) (79).

The stories in this collection clearly indicate the gradual disintegration of the Indian values and the Indianness has become an insufficient proof for carrying the identity tag “Indian”.

The two stories in the collection namely, “*A Temporary Matter*” and “*The Third and Final Continent*” narrates the experiences of the migrant couples in America. These couples were born in US and are able to adjust and adopt themselves to the new environment. The thought of the mother land comes to them as the remembrance of the past. They socialise very well, attend parties and celebrate their life in the American way but the new culture has not taught them perseverance and they always feel a psychological vacuum existing between them. Both Shukumar and Shoba of *A Temporary Matter* are American citizens of Bengali origin who cope well with the hostile American culture but are caught in the deteriorating relationship, especially after the death of their still born child: “...he thought of how he and Shoba had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible (10).

In the time of personal crisis they behave strange and try to remain away from each other rather than coming close to console each other. Only a temporary matter of cut off of the electricity for an hour for five days made them come closer. Even the power cuts drive them down the memory lane to Calcutta of the past, where they often encounter such power trips. Shoba cherishes such power cuts because she is fondly reminded of the games they used to play during such power cuts. She invites Shukumar to play a game similar to the “dare or truth” played in US. Shukumar realizes that he was not having many childhood stories of India, as he read about India only in the history books and compared to his wife

had not spent much time in India. Shoba is portrayed a representation of new generation migrants with a practical outlook. It can happen only in US that a female is a bread winner and her counterpart pursues his research without much uproar. When Shukumar showed signs of reluctance to attend an academic conference at Baltimore, leaving her alone at the time of expected labour she persuades him to go ahead and promised him that she will manage on her own.

He hadn't wanted to go to the conference, but she had insisted; it was important to make contacts, and he would be entering the job market next year. She told him that she had his number at the hotel, and a copy of his schedule and flight numbers, and she had arranged with her friend Gillian for a ride to the hospital in the event of an emergency. (9)

Shoba meets the challenges of the world practically, as any modern US citizen would, while her husband fumbles run over by sentiments and inferior complex. He lost his self belief completely after the loss of the child. Even when her mother in law accused him of leaving his wife alone during the labour time, he never answered her, instead resolved to remain silent. He wished the power cut to continue for longer period as he was afraid to make bold moves to retain the normal relationship with his wife in the light. The nights spent under the candle light ensured him of his glorious past, as he broke many barriers that were blocking their intimacy, since the loss. But the hide and seek game did come to an end by way of the game that Shoba ventured to play in the dark. On the final day of the power cut she told the 'truth' that she had planned to move away from the apartment in much the same American way. Lahiri leaves the relationship hanging suggesting much through the title, a temporary matter.

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's works, like most of the Diaspora writers', is autobiographical in nature. She often portrays characters, which live in a multi cultural environment, travelling between cultures and live in a bipolar sphere trying to come to terms with both. Her characters search for their origins finding a place or a nation that may be called their own. The older generations' search for physical identity and the newer generations' search for

psychological one are the themes closer to her heart and her unending search is evident in all her works.

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