

An Investigative Study of the Afflictions of Immigrant Women in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract

This research article focuses on the portrayal of the state of mind of immigrant women in Jhumpa Lahiri's first literary work *Interpreter of Maladies*. *Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of short stories which show the talent of Lahiri. She has beautifully handled her characters to express her ideas in an attractive manner. Lahiri's focus is mostly on the role of women in society and their mental and physical sufferings for their betterment. Her stories are mainly around women, and she has given much importance to women characters. Her selections of such a woman character are remarkable.

Keywords: immigrant, culture, women, delineation, estrangement

Introduction

One of India's most prominent story tellers is Jhumpa Lahiri. Her contributions to English literature are appreciated by all. Lahiri's first literary work is *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short stories which show the talent of Lahiri. Her stories are mainly around women and her characters add much beauty to her stories that makes them eccentric. The women

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characters in her stories are both ordinary and extraordinary, very simple and complex and strong and weak – they represent every aspect of life. Lahiri writes primarily about Indian immigrant women and their sufferings in assimilating themselves into the American culture. Few of her stories show that no matter in which country they live, the sufferings and struggles of all women are same. These sufferings and struggles are illustrated by Lahiri in her stories.

Lahiri's Characters

She wrote about three categories of women in her stories. They are, Indian immigrant women in the United States of America, women struggling for a better life in India and women struggling within themselves. As the United States of America is a medley of all the cultures, all the immigrants are forced to adopt themselves into these cultures as soon as possible. But people from various countries find it very difficult to assimilate themselves with an alien culture. They cannot get rid of their natural way of life. This is really a very big problem for immigrant women. They are struggling between their own culture and the culture one is expected to fit into. Jhumpa Lahiri has portrayed all these sufferings and struggles very clearly in her collection of stories.

Lahiri's story *A Temporary Matter* is about the Indian immigrant husband and wife Shukumar and Shoba. The entire story revolves around the loss of their child. Shoba is psychologically affected by her child's death. Shoba's mental instability is very clearly represented by Lahiri. Shoba's problem is her inability to control her anger and frustration of losing her child. So, she leaves her husband and decides to live a lonely life. Thus, she as she loses both control over herself and her surroundings, she also gains a different kind of control in deciding how she will live her life.

One of Lahiri's most important women characters is Mrs. Das. Mrs. Das embodies stereotypically American flaws, such as disrespect for other countries and cultures and badly behaved children. This is a great example of how Lahiri represents conflict so well. The author is able to vividly describe the agony and the pain of namelessness of the character Mrs. Das.

In her story *A Real Durwan* the main character is Boornima. She is sixty-four years old immigrant woman from a Bengali family. She lost her entire wealth and now works as a sweeper. Boornima is destitute and lives at the mercy of others. She belongs to the category of

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K. Parthiban and Dr. A.Ajmal Khaan

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women struggling for betterment in India. She used to sleep on wet newspapers in someone's portico. The woman does not need our sympathy but wants to be treated as an equal. Here, Lahiri paints a realistic picture of a struggling middleclass woman perfectly.

Bibi Haldar is another woman character. Bibi suffers from an unknown disease and so everyone leaves her alone in a room. Doctors try to cure her but no one can restore health. She is kept in a dark room for nearly three decades. Society treats her as a sexual object, but also as a decrepit non person. Not even her own relatives care for her, and Bibi feels lonely. Through this character Lahiri depicts that people can be isolated in their own land if the people indifferent to them.

Key Themes

The women characters in *The Interpreter of Maladies* have some similarities and contradiction with each other. The struggles of being an outcaste and being poor is communicated through the characters in a variety of ways. Each character in the stories is unique and they deal with each of their problems in different ways. Her stories offer a wonderful variety of experience. Lahiri deals with dislocation, a sense of loneliness and the pangs of estrangement suffered by exiled Indians.

Most of Lahiri's writings hang between two identities. She wants to convey the canvas of Indian as well as immigrant life. Jhumpa Lahiri's literary works offer an impressive exploration of the human conditions. Lahiri's writings celebrate womanhood and femininity not as a universal experience, but as a differing and layered way of experiencing life.

In Lahiri's works, there are two types of characters in nature. They are both fantastic and appealing. Many of her characters described in the diaspora hold onto role definitions that American readers find as stereotypes of Indian culture. These generalized roles and sometimes their reversal act as literary tools that add to her most sympathetic characters and her most poignant story lines.

Lahiri's married characters are often in confusion regarding their marriage roles and conduct within and outside the home. After giving birth to a child, Indian women are completely domesticated. Many of Lahiri's characters in diaspora, cope with new and sometimes shockingly different stereotypes in their new homelands. Sexuality plays an important part in her fiction. She

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provides insight into diasporic experiences through stories of Indians in America and the profound nature of the immigrant experience.

Conclusion

Lahiri's women characters deviate from traditional misconceptions of Indian culture and take a firm hold of their individuality and freedom. They are not bound by any limitation. Through these characters, Lahiri illustrates that women cannot be categorized into one group. Their roles are ever changing with the time and environment they live in, giving them the voice needed in today's society. *Interpreter of Maladies* thus pays a great deal of attention to Indian women and the different roles they undertake in their respective societies. Thus, Lahiri's approach to delineation of women characters is done through a unique perspective.

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