Voyage Between Two Worlds: A Study with Special Reference to Interpreter of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahiri

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Indian English Literature refers to the body of work by writers in India who write in English Language and whose native language could be one of the numerous languages of India. Diasporic Literature comes under the broader realm of Postcolonial Literature- the production from previously colonised countries such as India. In Postcolonial literatures, the concept of 'exile' involves the idea of a separation or distancing from literal homeland or a cultural and ethnic origin. Migrant literature is a topic which has commanded growing interest within literary studies since the 1980s. 'Migrants' are defined as people who have left their homes to settle in countries or cultural communities which are initially strange to them. The transnational mobility of people may be the result of forced or voluntary migration, of self-exile or expulsion. Under the generalized rubric of 'diaspora', we will engage with the experiences of displacement and homelessness, the ideologies of 'home' and nation, the cultures of diaspora, and identity questions.

The South Asian Diaspora, shaped by dispersions of people, goods, ideas and beliefs that flowed from and through the Indian Subcontinent is currently one of the world's largest Diasporas. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and the Maldives anchor a sense of home for people who have moved outside of the region throughout the centuries. The Indian Diaspora has become a part of the American and English literary traditions. Indian English Writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukharjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry and Jhumpa Lahiri have all made their names while residing abroad. Diaspora is regarded not as a singular phenomenon, but as historically varied and heterogeneous in its aspects.

Jhumpa Lahiri introduced us to people who left behind family and friends and the familiar heat and bustle of India to build a new life in America- a cold, bleak land other than which it currently resides, and whose social, economic and political migration, of self-exile or expulsion. Under the generalized rubric of 'diaspora', we will engage with the experiences of displacement and homelessness, the ideologies of 'home' and nation, the cultures of diaspora, and identity questions.

This paper is intended to study the conflict facing the generations of Indian Diaspora with special reference to Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies. Diaspora is a term often used today to describe practically any population which is considered 'de-territorialised' or 'transnational' that is which has originated in a land other than which it currently resides, and whose social, economic and political migration, of self-exile or expulsion. Under the generalized rubric of 'diaspora', we will engage with the experiences of displacement and homelessness, the ideologies of 'home' and nation, the cultures of diaspora, and identity questions.

The rising star on the Diaspora sky, Jhumpa Lahiri portrays the theme of cultural displacement at its best. The short story collection of Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies, highlights facets of cultural displacement. It dwells upon the identity crisis and quests to explore their destiny in an alien land. Her characters suffer from an intimate level of the dissatisfaction and disruption brought on by the change of residence. What they aspired for, and ultimately what they are, they are not able to strike a balance between the two worlds; the one left behind and the other they have to come to live. They are obstinately rooted in the home culture and reluctantly refuse to adopt themselves to the alien culture.

The first story of the book "A Temporary Matter" is the story of Shoba and Shukumar, a young couple who had lived in Boston for three years. The story takes its name from the temporary matter of electricity cut off for an hour daily for five days. So the story is confined to those five days when there will be no electricity for an hour. Lahiri's tale examines how a tragic loss can lead to indifference and a breakdown in communication between two people who once intensely loved each other. It exemplifies universal lessons in love and the individual's struggles to overcome change and insecurities within relationships. Shoba and Shukumar trapped within themselves, refusing to communicate-

Shoba “looking at thirty-three, like the type of woman she had once claimed she would never resemble” and Shukumar who was a mediocre student:

Until September he had been diligent if not dedicated, summarizing chapters, outlining pads of yellow lined paper. But now he would lie in their bed until he got bored, gazing at his side of the closet..... at the row of the tweed jackets and corduroy trousers he would not have to choose from to teach his classes that semester. (4)

They were here for the sake of greater opportunities, perhaps a better standard of living. And yet it was tough, because they had taken such a huge step and left so much behind. Feeling as if they are on a river with a foot in two different boats, they spent their immigrant life. Each boat wants to pull them in a separate direction, and they are always torn between the two. They are always Hovering; literally straddling two worlds, and have always thought of that idea that metaphor for how they feel they live. Cultural incongruity mars marital understanding and this was the tragic part of their life. Because of the misunderstanding between them in an alien place they were alienated from each other. The things disliked by Shoba were liked by Shukumar and vice versa. Thus, Lahiri subtly evokes the couple’s common state of lack of interest in their shared environment as both have failed to withstand the change.

The second story “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” also brings forth the aspect of homesickness and withdrawal into a private world of memories. The story narrated by a young child Lilia. Pirzada, a professor of Botany from Bangladesh, had to visit America to pursue his research. Each week Mr. Pirzada wrote letters to his wife and sent comic books to each of his seven daughters. While Mr.Pirzada was living in Boston he was invited by an Indian couple living there. They had a ten year old daughter named Lilia. Lilia, despite the fact of being so young to understand the differences prevailing among human beings belonging to different cultures, was able to trace out and understand the identical likes and dislikes between her family and Mr.Pirzada, the Indian visitor. “Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same” (25). Even the similarity in their regular habits was keenly noticed by her. She narrates, “They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night as for supper with their hands. Like my parents Mr.Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol...” (25). The above mentioned observations establish the simple yet powerful variations that separate the immigrants from the natives.

The next story, “Interpreter of Maladies” is a title story in this collection. This story unfolds the intricacies of the Indians living abroad, distanced from their ethos. It is the story of an emigrant Indian family on a visit to Orissa in India as tourists. The Das couple is mismatched is clear at the outset itself. Even the taxi driver, Mr. Kapasi, notes their usual attitude towards their children: “Mr. And Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves” (49). In addition, Mr. Das seems to be more attached to India; Mrs. Das is indifferent in her attitude towards this country. Her hostility arises mostly because of the hot climate here: “I told you to get a car with air-conditioning,” Mrs. Das continued, “Why do you..."
The stories revolve around the difficulties of relationships, communication and a loss of identity for those in Diaspora. No matter where the story takes place, the characters struggle with the same feelings of exile and the struggle between the two worlds by which they are torn. The stories deal with the always-shifting lines between gender, sexuality, and social status within the Diaspora. Whether the character is a homeless woman from India or an Indian male student in the United States, all the characters displays the effects of displacement in a Diaspora. Some are homesick; many are lost in the ‘new world’. With the characters poised between the old world of India and the perpetual unnerving newness of America, Jhumpa Lahiri début story collection displayed a commendable grasp of biculturalism as well as a realistic elegance.