

Cultural Identity Sensibility and Belongingness Inadequacy in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Humans have had a special need and desire for the sense of 'Identity' ever since the first days of civilization. 'Identity' is the end result of everyone's efforts. A person has no value if he can't prove who he is. Human beings employ a variety of means (name, address, celebrity, fortune, popularity, etc.) to establish their position in the world. Many of the themes in Jhumpa Lahiri's books revolve on the tensions that arise between Indian and American cultures due to the author's background as a Bengali Indian American. Her protagonists are often members of the Indian diaspora who are homesick and lonely because to an identity conflict or a longing for the past and suffer from cultural identity sensibility and belongingness inadequacy. Her writings show how migrants feel about their adopted country, how they miss their homeland, and how they fight for a new place for themselves and suffer from cultural identity sensibility and belongingness inadequacy there, although they try to build a better economic and social life. Despite coming from a variety of backgrounds, all of Lahiri's protagonists are stuck between two cultures: the one they left behind and the one to which they are trying to adapt and finally suffer from cultural identity sensibility and belongingness inadequacy. This clash of cultures is a recurring theme in her writing. Even while immigrants to the United States quickly adjust to daily life in the new country, they never lose their longing for the customs and culture of their birthplace. Although they benefit from a better environment and more opportunities, they are nonetheless influenced by their Indian heritage and hence have mixed feelings about life in the United States. This study examines how Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* deals with issues of cultural identity sensibility and belongingness inadequacy.

Keywords- Cultural Identity, Sensibility, Belongingness, Inadequacy, Dilemma, Loss of Identity, Jhumpa Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies, Indian Diaspora.

I. INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri is a gifted writer whose prose has a distinctively pleasant aroma. Her Indian ancestry and background are dominating all through her tales. The protagonists of her works are Indians living in the United States and other countries. She addresses the fundamental concerns of their immigrant sensibility in her literature. First-generation immigrants often display a sense of pride in their heritage, whereas those of the second generation are more likely to show their departures from the norm. Self-actualizing immigrants from the former prefer not to dishonour their cultural heritage, while those born and raised in the latter do not

expect or need it in order to enjoy the many cultural opportunities that exist in today's America. Her heroine goes out into the world, struggles to understand this strange area (whether it be real or imagined), and develops as a result of her experiences. "Even if the person doesn't see the importance in the big picture, they may find profound meaning in the most commonplace of situations." Their whole childhood in the transnational cross-cultural area is shown, from their acculturation to their borderland inhabitation to the construction of their hybridised reality to, most importantly, the establishment of a new amalgamated culture.

Based on Lahiri's writings, it's evident that immigrants would be better off if they didn't have to

choose between their two cultures. This means they have to deal with the advantages and disadvantages of both India and the rest of the world. They would do well to think globally when appropriate but maintain an Indian identity at all times. This calls for a symbiotic approach to bringing balance to both settings. Almost often, her tales conclude on an upbeat note, with the promise of a 'future' that implies, with no effort, we may abandon our cultural difficulties and advance towards a society where tradition and modernity meet in their intrinsic goodness, reaffirming the value of living. Through one of her main characters, she has delivered a message that neither culture should be completely abandoned nor attempted to be diminished, but rather they should be blended.

A time of doubt and confusion during which a person's sense of identity becomes unstable, generally as a result of a shift in their projected goals or place in society. The word was first used by the German-born psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Ericson, who is most known for his thesis on the 'psychological evolution of humans'. Each person's growth into the next stage of development is preceded by a period of crisis and internal conflict. Conflicts and wars have often been sparked by the issue of identity. Finding oneself is a key human experience that has been defined and explored in literature repeatedly throughout the course of human history. This quest for individuality is shown by Jhumpa Lahiri, who in 2000 won the Pulitzer Prize for her first short story collection titled 'Interpreter of Maladies'. Through its protagonist and antagonist, the story examines the difficulties of giving and receiving a new name and how it affects an immigrant's sense of identity and belonging in their new country. The hardships and tragedies endured by immigrants are detailed in this work.

II. INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

The title narrative 'Interpreter of Maladies' shows how the sensitivity of disarticulation, which isn't entirely fixed when one is culturally detached, but may be applied anywhere, even in one's own family, might bring about an agreement with troubled family relationships. Mr. Das and Mrs. Mina, an Indian American marriage, and their three children, Tina, Ronny, and Bobby, are the protagonists of the aforementioned narrative, which takes place in Puri. Lack of dialogue between the story's female heroine and her husband and children is also a prominent theme. Mrs. Das's secret emotionally separates her from her children and husband. Her internal conflict is ultimately resolved, and she seems to be reunited with her loved ones and able to socialise with others at the story's finale. Mr. Kapasi plays the role of a catalyst, illuminating her ailment so that she can treat it. Mrs. Das's identity difficulties stemmed from the boredom and isolation she experienced as a result of her transient lifestyle. However, it would be unsteady to argue that the

diasporic position caused the partners to cheat. The following eight years of Mrs. Das's uncomfortable existence, during which she cannot even tell her secret to anybody, were the actual misery and worry of the identity crisis. Mrs. Das wants a confidante who is both near and remote, like the nation she was born in.

Mrs. Sen's:- A Bengali woman living in the United States has a whole identity crisis in this tale. In this scenario, an Indian lady and her American husband relocate to the United States, where she is tasked with raising an American kid of eleven years of age. Mrs. Sen tries very hard to learn about American culture and customs, but she just can't shake the feeling that 'Everything is [in India]' (113). The Genitive form of the title in 'Mrs. Sen's' suggests that she is the hostess, yet Mrs. Sen is an alien in her own home and in her new country. Her husband Mr. Sen, a professor of mathematics at the university, spends much of his time away from home on academic errands, leaving her little time for her own interests and pursuits, leading to an identity crisis.

III. CULTURAL IDENTITY SENSIBILITY IN INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

In her fiction Jhumpa Lahiri addresses the issue of the intersection of cultural sensibility and threat of the loss of cultural identity. Through some favorite metaphors she unfolds the strangeness of the situation in her stories as well as her novel. In her collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, the story 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine'¹ has Pirzada yearning for his roots, his country and his family in America. Dinner time becomes his savior as it brings him closest to his country with the same kinds of food and similar eating habits shared by the host family of Lilia. Asha Choubey² notices the food metaphor working through many a story in this collection: for the simple reason that even in India most of these characters speak English, yet English food, albeit appreciated sometimes, is still not an integral part of the Indian cuisine or diasporic identity, "food acts more as a symbol and develops a metaphoric stature than mother language".

Nostalgia for the native soil is a symptom of isolation and feeling out of place in Lahiri's characters. Her writing skillfully depicts the generational divide between the first-generation diaspora, who long for the comforts of home, and the second-generation, American-born children who reject their parents' uniform worldview and instead express pride in the cuisine and cinema of their birthplace. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, the family unit is transformed into a dramatic setting where the dynamics of the relationships are tested. Her protagonists are aware that they live in a multicultural society where their ideas about family are shaped as much by their upbringing as by mainstream American beliefs. When people move to a new country, they often

try to recreate aspects of their old life there, whether they plan to or not. As the text so aptly puts it, 'He thought of how long it had been since she looked into his eyes and smiled, or whispered his name on those rare occasions they still reached for each other's bodies before sleeping, the male protagonist of Lahiri's 'A Temporary Matter' mulls over the happier days of courtship and marriage while dealing with the harsh reality of an increasingly isolated wife and the grief over a still-born child. In this scenario, nostalgia takes the form of a sad longing for a lost emotional bond. Through his narration of the event, the husband reveals his nostalgia, which the reader might interpret as a yearning for the couple's previous level of understanding and the opportunities it held.

- I. Jhumpa Lahiri, Mrs. Sen's. Interpreter of Maladies, Harper Collins, New Delhi, 1999.
- II. Jhumpa Lahiri, Blessed House, Interpreter of Maladies, Harper Collins, New Delhi, 1999.

This story's melancholy is understood if you realise it's about more than just a broken marriage and its aftermath, but also about the upheaval of moving between cultures. In these tales about young, urban couples at a crossroads in their relationships, Lahiri is primarily concerned with depicting nostalgia as a yearning for a lost emotional connection or purpose in the relationship. Characters like Mr. Pirzada and Mrs. Sen encourage homesickness and a desire to reconnect with loved ones in Lahiri's novels. At the short tale 'Mrs. Sen's', the protagonist pines away for her happy upbringing or the companionship of her brothers back in their father's house, which stands in opposition to her efforts at assimilation in her new country. Mrs. Sen's homesickness manifests as a lingering sadness or medical condition every time she receives a letter from back in India.

As the protagonist of 'This Blessed House' comes to terms with the fact that his wife is someone he has never met and who does not share his cultural norms, he ruminates about the sort of marriage his parents could have had and how different it would have been from his own. As an immigrant, Lahiri's 'The Third and Final Continent' deals with the pain of a new beginning. She captures the isolation and alienation felt by the newcomers, who appear to exist on the periphery, stuck between the past and the present as they reflect on happier times back home and their transition to a new place. Based on what has been said above, it is clear that the majority of the tales in Interpreter of Maladies share a longing for either a romanticised version of 'home' or the restoration of relationships that have broken down in a foreign setting. "The characters of these tales are Bengali-Indian, yet they are set in contemporary America and are not necessarily intent on returning to India". Rather, they are mesmerised by America's appeal as a cross-cultural 'third place' where they can reconcile their disparate identities and make a new home.

Analyzing her short works, we see that her characters are mostly mounded by the developed,

economic demand to reside in America, and that their melancholy is perceptibly linked to the loss of either conventional forms of kinfolk backing or emotional understanding. But it doesn't mean their situation has improved much. Even if they are legal residents, well-off, and in committed partnerships like marriage or parent-child bonds, her characters seem to be at a crossroads, facing either loneliness or a difficult decision. The nuclear families in Lahiri's short works often consist of second- and third-generation Americans. Characters of tales situated in the diasporic realm belong to various levels of cultural adjustment. Shobha and Shukumar from 'A Temporary Matter' and Mr. and Mrs. Das from 'Interpreter of Maladies' are Americanized and have embraced a crossbreed culture, in contrast to Mrs. Sen in 'Mrs. Sen's', who is a newcomer and strongly anchored in Bengali Indian culture. Shobha, for instance, counts Gillian, a white American, among her closest pals. The couple's shared cooking habits and household chores are signs of their integration into mainstream society. Because she has spent her whole life in the United States, Lilia in 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' is sceptical of her parents' cultural practises. Mr. Kapasi in 'Interpreter of Maladies' hears a quarrel between Mr. and Mrs. Das, a Western couple visiting India, and observes that the lady refers to her husband by his first name throughout the exchange. Mr. Das, acting very American, pushes Mr. Kapasi's hands. All of these things separate them from the typical Indian. The cultural constraints help provide the right tone for the characters.

However, Lahiri is not concerned just in cultural characteristics but she is much more interested in investigating the human mindscape of her characters and dealing with the human predicaments. Lahiri's final story, 'The Third and Final Continent', is the best example of the cultural assimilation and crossing of two cultures and worlds; it not only emphasises the economic difficulties and loneliness faced by Indian immigrants to the United States, but also focuses on their determined resolve to accomplish something and make a new life for themselves. It should be mentioned that Lahiri's objective is to highlight that while this conversion is not without great price and sacrifice: its achievement is owing to the immigrant's capacity to improvise, invent and balance diverse sides of their existence.

IV. BELONGINGNESS INADEQACY IN INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

When a person feels alienated and alone, or when they set themselves apart from the group and their culture, they may begin to doubt their own identity. The following is a partial quote from Partha Chatterjee that may be helpful. There is a division between ghar and bahir, the house and the outside world. The house is a reflection of our inner spiritual self and genuine identity, whereas the world is the exterior, material sphere. A

person's genuine identity is tied to the country they were born and raised in, therefore when they go far from home they often feel disassociated from their true selves. That person tends to feel perpetually alone. This feeling of isolation affects immigrants of both the first and second generations. Immigrants' emotional upheaval may also have a lasting impression on their offspring.

Family, community, and culture all have a role in shaping an individual's sense of self. This is especially challenging for those who have experienced culture shock. Many Indians feel a need to connect with the earth, but they do it with a veneer of deception. They return to the country of their parents and grandparents, yet they are unable to fully integrate into local society or adopt their ancestors' values and customs. Their identity is torn between their chosen culture and the one they grew up with, and this puts them in a precarious position.

Jhumpa Lahiri's characters are intricately woven from her own experiences as an immigrant and the chasm that exists between Indian and American culture. She inserts individuals into the storyline who are put through hell because of their secret identities. Mr. Kapasi represents the 'split' between the culture of Indians born in the United States and that of Indians who were born in India in the short tale *The Interpreter of Maladies*' (pp. 43-69). When guiding the Das family, he is continuously perplexed by the fact that his clients 'looked Indian yet dressed as outsiders did' (pp. 43-4). To him, they were all quite self-aware, more like siblings' (p. 49) than parents and children. The pair also doesn't seem to be influenced by India's harsh reality, despite the hardships that so many others in the country face every day. At one point during his trip, Mr. Das pauses to snap a picture of a barefoot guy, his head wrapped in a soiled turban' (p. 44), perhaps seeing him more as a prop for his photo op than as a fellow human being. Mr. Das doesn't give a hoot about being a tourist. When Mr. Kapasi starts talking to her about his other career, he starts to become interested.

After discussing his knowledge with Mrs. Croft, who is 103 years old, the young male narrator of this narrative overcomes his identity dilemma and decides that his new home continent is the 'ultimate' continent. In a nutshell, the issue of identity crises appears in all of the aforementioned works. Shobha, Mira, Mr. Kapasi, Mrs. Das, Mrs. Sen Miranda, Boori Ma, and Bibi Halder all go through an identity crisis at some point in the story. Since she has firsthand knowledge with the solitary predicament from which her protagonists suffer, almost all of her works centre on the inner lives of their protagonists.

"For though they had created me, and reared me, and lived with me day after day, I knew that I was a stranger to them, an American child. In spite of our closeness, I feared that I was alien. This was the predominant anxiety I had felt while growing up". (Lahiri, 2011: 79-82)

While it's true that not every story in 'Interpreter of Maladies' is set in the United States, they all have a common theme: they centre on protagonists who are struggling with some kind of identity problem. As a result, most of the people in 'Interpreter of Maladies' face the challenge of an identity crisis while adjusting to life in the diaspora. Lahiri's work is easily cognisable by her characters' reliance on straightforward dialogue and the fact that they are often Indian immigrants in the United States of America who must negotiate the cultural differences between their home country and the country in which they now live. Her works of fiction often centre on her personal experiences and reflect both her own and the experiences of her friends, acquaintances, kiths, and kens. She researches the mental agony and distress her characters experience as a consequence of their identity problem and the specifics of migrant behaviour. It's possible that this novel was her first. In 1997, she began production on it. In light of the tense historical context, she took almost seventeen years to complete *The Lowland*.

V. CONCLUSION

There is something almost religious about the simplicity of Jhumpa Lahiri's prose that makes it so enticing. Hence, she deserves to be included among other famous English authors like Ernest Hemingway, Ruskin Bond, and William Dalrymple. Because their writing styles are so close to her own. She has utilised articulate conversations to express her thoughts in her writings. Several of Lahiri's short tales explore the various forms of diasporic nostalgia. The characters in the tales who are situated in the diasporic space and who are at various phases of cultural adjustment have been the focus of the research paper's analysis. It was particularly illuminating since it showed how Lahiri had progressed and changed from her early short tales, which dealt mostly with first-generation expats. Thus, Lahiri is effective in emphasizing nostalgia as a characteristic of her exiles' dual experience of their home and diasporic cultures.

As a result, the tales and the book provide several illustrations of how to translate successfully across cultural and identity divides. The journeys of Jhumpa Lahiri's protagonists from their homeland India to their new homes in the United States and beyond reflect many facets of human experience. What the characters go through in these novels is a true portrayal of the lives of Indian immigrants. One way or another, the Indian diaspora in the United States is described in *Interpreter of Maladies*. They make sure that the next generation of diasporans is just as impacted by passing on their culture to them. They are neither American nor Indian citizens. These narratives also show how a person's sense of self is shaped by the norms of the society in which they live and they suffer from cultural identity sensibility and belongingness inadequacy.

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