



Diasporic Trajectory and Broken Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Interpreter of Maladies'

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ABSTRACT

Lahiri as a writer of uncommon elegance and poise and a wonderfully distinctive new voice, she chronicles dislocation and social unease in a fresh manner as did her predecessors like Bharati Mukherjee or Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She is the recipient of the coveted Pulitzer award for her collection of short stories Interpreter of Maladies, is a voice of Indo-American origin. Though she lives in the U.S, her works are imbued with the ethos of Indian culture and sensibility. She may be considered a writer of the Indian diaspora, though her own idea of India is 'of the mind' only.

Keywords: Dislocation, Social Unease, Indo-American, Culture, Indian Diaspora.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Jhumpa Lahiri has portrayed Tejinder Kaur observes, some of the problems engendered by the experience of migrancy and diaspora such as various hazards experienced by them in the process of settlement in the new country; their cultural dilemma and displacement; the generational differences; transformation in their identities with the new demands; and the new possibilities and new ways of thinking about their relations to the 'subject culture' and their homelands which can bring transformation in the received notions of diaspora identities and their modes of existence”(36).

The diasporic experience can be defined, as Stuart Hall says, not by essence or purity but by the recognition of necessary heterogeneity and diversity - by a conception of identity, which lives with and through, not despite difference, by hybridity. Diasporic identities are those, which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (38)

Through the stories, Lahiri interprets the maladies of her protagonists, which are the maladies of the diasporic universe. Lahiri is profusely praised for her well- knit stories in which she portrays the characters drawn from all over the world - from India, U.S.A., U.K., and other Commonwealth countries in their own situation. These immigrant characters are mostly psychedelic and they struggle for identity and commitment to life in the multicultural milieu of Bengal, Boston and beyond. Broken Identities in Interpreter of Maladies deals with the crisis in the identity of the characters as a result of their settlement in an alien country.

All the stories in the collection deal with the maladies of maladjustment. Hence biculturalism and conflicting mindsets prevail in the lives of her major characters. Their Indianess plays a subsidiary role in Lahiri's fiction, however, since she emphasizes through their interactions with Indians and other Americans - such perennial theme as love, marital difficulties, adultery, guilt, alienation, communication, personal relationships, and self-discovery prevail in the stories.

In The Temporary Matter the couple, Shoba and Shukumar are trapped within themselves and refuse to communicate after the birth of their still-born child. Shukumar, who is still a student at the University, feels incompetent while Shoba is the bread winner of the family. The insecurity and uncertainty in the relationship of the Indian couple living in America reflect exactly the unstable life in exile. An unexpected announcement of power-cut provides them with a chance to come closer. The couple starts to reveal their untold facts to each other.

There was a series of confessions. During those moments the couple becomes nostalgic about their homeland. It is quite obvious that the couple embraces certain aspects of South Asian culture and customs. For instance, Shoba planned the rice ceremony for her child, a tradition where the baby gets its first taste of solid food. Shoba had "decided on which of her three brothers she was going to ask to feed the child its first taste of solid food, at six months if it was a boy, seven if it was a girl" (11).

They use a mortar and pestle from Calcutta and placements from Lucknow; they eat 'Ragan josh' and 'shrimp malai' at a table lit by candles held in lotus-shaped brass holders. Hence these are the aspects of diasporic consciousness. The characters are conscious enough to choose the aspects of their cultural heritage, which they retain in their adult life also. Shukumar's difficulty in framing an identity, Shoba's nostalgia about her homeland and its culture, and the couple's Indian psyche are the aspects of the diaspora.

The couple embodies the idea of a cultural borderland between India and the United States where customs and traditions are consciously examined. A peep into Shoba and Shukumar's kitchen emphasizes this evolving culture: "the pantry was always stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil, depending on whether they were cooking Italian or Indian" (6).

Like Shukumar and Shoba, Sanjeev and Twinkle in *This Blessed House* have links with India and feel exiled in the alien land. Shukumar's parents arranged their marriage. His mother had felt that he had "enough money in the bank to raise three families" (148). At the urging of their matchmakers, they married in India. Later, the incompatibility of their daily life leads Sanjeev to question his relationship with his wife.

However imprinted cultural codes lead him to hold on to his life with Twinkle. Sanjeev is enraged with Twinkle's craze for the Christian paraphernalia. Like an exile, desperate to save his cultural identity in the foreign land, Sanjeev asserts now and then "we're not Christian" (157). Sanjeev finds it difficult to frame his identity in the foreign land. He is very conscious of their identity that they were Hindu Indians. Each discovery of Twinkle's irritates and unnerves him.

He waits for a chance to throw everything in the garbage. Therefore, there is an ever-conflicting mindset in the couple. Though Sanjeev is a second-generation immigrant and fully westernized, his ancestral cultural code ultimately keeps him with his wife. It is apparent that Sanjeev faces a crisis in forming his identity. Hence both the couples acquire 'hybrid identities' and are in a state of 'in-betweenness' (2). Thus this aspect of the stories pertains towards diasporic consciousness.

In *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* Lilia sees Mr. Pirzada having difficulty in framing his identity. The only link between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family is that they speak the common language. For ten-year-old Lilia, Mr. Pirzada is only an Indian, till her father informs her that after Partition of 1947, Mr. Pirzada is no more an Indian. It was beyond the grasp of innocent Lilia. In fact, it is rather difficult for her to make any sense out of it; "it made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same" (25).

Mr. Pirzada feels displaced in the alien-land so he always keeps his pocket watch "set to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead" during dinner (30). He always yearns for his home. Lahiri in one of her interviews recounts "I've inherited my parents who consider another place their home even after thirty years" (40). Lilia also faces identity crisis when her American neighbours mock her as "an Indian witch" during the Halloween (39). Thus these issues are the features related to diasporic experience.

2. CONCLUSION

Through her characters, she tells us about the human conditions that have universal resonance in her immigrant identity that forms the core of her stories. She tells her tales as a master storyteller, with a distinctive voice. Her works exemplify the role that diaspora plays in shaping an artist's imagination. Thus she has enriched the corpus of international writing in English

3. REFERENCES

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