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Trauma of Cultural Dislocation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract:

Jumpha Lahiri, is a dazzling story teller with a distinctive voice, an eye for nuance and an ear for irony. She has very sublimely understand in her collection of short stories entitled, *Interpreter of Maladies*, the lives of Indians in Exile, of people navigating between the strict tradition they have inherited and the baffling new world they must encounter every day. *Interpreter of Maladies* is her fist published collection which bagged her Pulitzer Prize for fiction 2000.

Although Lahiri is an Asian in origin in America, her understanding of Indian and America is apparently visible in her stories. The stories in the collection present her Trans-Continental and Trans-Cultural experiences of India, England and America that justify the full title of the book, *Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*. The stories chronicle the traumas and sufferings of the Indians settled abroad, who fail to find their identity in a world where they cannot have a sense of belongingness. She portrays faithfully the trauma of cultural dislocation, disorientation and displacement suffered by the millions of "excited Indians," and they try desperately to balance themselves between home and abroad. Lahiri has done her best to interpret the maladies of their major issues. The stories also bear multiple identities and the strain of double coding for the Indians and the Western audiences.

The Present Paper is an endeavour to show the way in which Jumpha Lahiri has highlighted the sense of distance from their Indian heritage which is common thread among so many of the characters in this collection.

Keywords: cultural dislocation, Identity crisis, Exile, belongingness

Jumpha Lahiri, one of the second generation immigrants in the USA, acknowledged as one of the women writers in Indian English Literature for her Indian themes, is a recent new wave literary artist. She has authored the Pultizer Prize winning collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond* (1999) and the novel *The Namesake* (2003). Being herself an immigrant, she feels the significance of family and how it ties man to his homeland. In the words of Lahiri herself, "I went to Calcutta neither as a tourist nor as an outsider and yet I also know that as different as Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way, in the ways I didn't seem to belong in the United States" (2001: 7). As a diasporic writer, she deals with multi-cultural society- partly from 'inside' and partly from 'outside'. She strives for her native identity and simultaneously endeavours to evolve a new identity in an adopted Anglo-American cultural landscape. However, in this clash of cultures, she faces an immigrant's dislocation and displacement. She regards dislocation as a permanent condition of human existence. Hence she sense of belonging to a participate place and culture and at the same time being an 'outsider' to it creates an inner tension in her characters.

Lahiri was born in London of Bengali parents, her father a librarian and mother a teacher. She grew up in Rhode Island U.S. and has visited her parents home city Calcutta several times during which she had felt “every visit was an emotional see-saw across continents and cultures.” Lahiri is an Indian by ancestry, British by birth, American by immigration and targets the western audiences by deliberately portraying the Indian-American life. She began her writing with a classmate during school recess harking back to the past –a nostalgic longing instilled in her heart by her mother. In course of her terminal visits to Calcutta roots, she had become bilingual and bicultural in her linguistic acquisition and cultural assimilation. After her Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies from Boston University, she had planned to write her roots and origin as a struggling writer came into being after her completion of a creative writing graduate programme of Boston University. Being “homesick” in her literary sensation and diasporic in her imagination, she thinks of the question of her identity as a difficult one and yet feels that she belongs to the vast fascinating metropolis called Calcutta. A sense of isolation and state of immigration make her identity a baffling question. Her stories in this collection are set in India and America and establish a certain Indo-American cultural link, in the postcolonial context. She has chronicled her character’s lives with tactile precision. She has made a search for identity with an emotional empathy through her protagonists in most of her stories that are busy like her doing research and completing their dissertation. Therefore, the jury on the Pulitzer Committee have chosen the book for the prize for her transcontinental cultural consciousness and her diasporic identity.

Interpreter of Maladies deals with the question of identity that immigrant Indians face abroad. The diasporic characters face a sense of alienation of exile. The absence of the sense of belonging, the lingering awareness of “clutching at a world that does not belong to them” leaves them isolated and willing to create “home”, a “community” in their own way. The protagonists are not averse to the idea of acculturation accompanied by a sense of loss and heart-breaks but they also want to “adapt and adopt.” The nine-short stories in the anthology deals with characters that are, or feel displaced from home. If we try to classify them, we find that the characters are first-generation and second-generation Indian settlers in the US (‘Mrs. Sen,’ ‘The Third and Final Continent,’ ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’), Indians in the native country (‘Interpreter of Maladies,’ ‘A Real Darwan’) and finally an American (‘Sexy’). In almost all the stories there is a longing for the native land, the life led in India before their migration to the US. Even the second-generation settlers are not free from the connection they have with the country of the birth of their parents. Politically and nationally they are Americans but the ‘added baggage’ of their parent’s memories of their country is something that they have to contend with. The first-generation settlers fear that the children may forget the traditions and culture of their parents and become completely Americanized. Thus they have to keep alive the traditions of their forefathers in the ‘little Indians’ that they create in their apartments. The occasional visits to India also keep them in touch with their ‘roots’ and magic that is India keeps them bound to her. It is a commonplace that most of Lahiri’s characters are immigrant Indians negotiating two cultures but the problems the stories deal with, are not, in essence, culture-specific; rather they have a universal appeal since they may happen to anybody in any corner of the world. Unlike most other Indian American writers, Lahiri is more concerned with human relationship and tries to focus on how inter-personal relationship develops in the new diasporic space. The stories ‘A Temporary Matter,’ ‘Interpreter of Maladies’ and the ‘That Blessed House’ have second generation Indian Americans of the age group of thirty as Protagonists but the crises they suffer are of universal nature having no connection with caste, class, race, creed and ethnicity. The other two stories that employ girl narrators are primarily concerned with

interpersonal relationships but the questions of identity formation and reconciliation of cultures remain as a subtext.

In “A Temporary Matter” the Indian couple living outside India faces a temporary crisis: electricity will be cut for one hour each day for five days at a stretch. Their marriage is a failure; the string that had tied their hearts was broken with the death of their child. Sobha and Sukumar begin the game of confessing secrets to one another in the dark. We proceed from harmless personal details to the harmful ones when Sobha says that she has decided on a separation and has already made arrangements for it. The climax is reached when in a spirit of revenge Sukumar describes their dead child to Sobha whom she had never seen, a secret which he had previously decided never to tell her. The story ends with the couple weeping together. The story reflects the alienation and loneliness that the emigrants face in a foreign land. The marriage bond, which is still considered sacrosanct in India, is gradually slithering down under the pressure of new needs under a different background. Nevertheless, one needs another’s touch in an emotional crisis. That is why Sobha and Sukumar, failing to find any foothold of security, weep.

The second story, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” is narrated from a child’s point of view. This story is set in Boston but has 1971 Indo- Pak war and the birth of Bangladesh as the backdrop. The exiled Indian is usually anxious to hobnob with compatriots but in this case although Mr. Pirzada spoke the same language as the child’s parents, he belonged to East Pakistan. In Dacca he had a three storey home, a lectureship in Botany at the university, a wife of twenty years and seven daughters between the age of six and sixteen whose name all began with the letter ‘A’(23). Lilia, the child narrator, is an expert in American history but is completely ignorant about the division of Bengal between Hindus and Muslims. Lilia and Mr. Pirzada become fast friends and the child quite understandably prays for the safety of her friend, seven daughters in the newly developed War situation. All of a sudden Mr. Pirzada disappears from the child’s life to find out the whereabouts of his family. Jumpha Lahiri attempts to delineate the child’s perception of the things happening around her. The little one knows a little a little about human relationships and does not have a clear idea of what would have meant for Pirzada to have been away from his family for so long.

“A Real Darwan” begins with Boori Ma, “sweeper of the stairwell” of a multi-storeyed building. Her services “come to resemble those of a real darwan.”(73). The streets and places names of Calcutta are mentioned at random in this story of Boori Ma. ‘College Street’, ‘Circular Road,’ ‘Jodhpur Park’, ‘Howrah Bridge’ add realistic appeal to the story. Parmanand Jha says “the vagaries of material possession plaguing human relationship form the matrix of this story. The story is based on the search for a real darwan.”

“Sexy”, is the story based on an extra-marital relationship that Laxmi finds nauseating and absurd. Miranda, a young energetic American who falls in love with Dev, a married Bengali banker. Dev’s wife is away for some days. This story again highlights weak conjugal ties. And we are stuck in the ‘basic out of sight out of mind.’ Miranda and Dev refer to breaking of commitment in the husband-wife relationship again and again in the story.

“Mrs. Sen” is the story of another emigrant in America whose husband is a professor of mathematics in a university. The family is keenly observed by an American boy of eleven years named Eliot who is looked after by Mrs. Sen while his mother goes to work. Mrs. Sen’s job is the job of a baby- sitter who has nothing to do at home except buying fish and cooking. Mrs. Sen has no friends in America. Her husband has no time for her. She tells Eliot how she feels lonely, how her golden dreams of living in a foreign land with her husband vanish like

rain in summer. Eliot's mother, an American lady has no time at her disposal to realise the delicate emotion that develops between an American child and an Indian woman who takes time to adapt herself to a foreign country.

Bibi Haldar, in the story, 'The Treatment of Bibi Haldar', is presented against an Indian socio-cultural backdrop. She is about 29 years old. She suffers from "an ailment that baffled family, friends, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets and fools." (158) Bibi finally has a miraculous cure. She becomes pregnant. She says, 'I'm contagious, like the pox. She says I'll spoil the baby.' Later on she delivers a 'forceps' baby. The child proves to be a panacea for Bibi's comparatively better health condition: "she was, to the best of our knowledge, cured."

"The Blessed Home" voices the idea that man's never ending task is to discover his humiliations and to atone for the deficiencies of human life and surroundings. The story also elaborates the idea that success lies in our willingness to construct an adaptive and assimilation living, further to reconstruct "what has fallen apart". Here Twinkle and Sanjeev violate their convictions but are soon convinced that the joy of togetherness can only be consistent when proper room is shaped to accommodation mutual desires and demands. The advantage and necessity of interpersonal dependence is also focussed to express necessary participation in marital life, otherwise estrangement is the unavoidable catastrophe.

The title story "Interpreter of Maladies," the third and longest story in the collection, is set in Puri, India. It is a complex story about an Indian-American couple- Mr. Das, his wife Mina and their three children - Tina, Ronny and Bobby. They hire the services of Mr. Kapasi as a tour-guide and chauffeur, to see the famous Sun temple at Konark. During their conversation on route, the couple learnt that Mr. Kapasi, besides his part time job of a tour-guide, works as an interpreter in a doctor's clinic where he translates the Gujarati spoken by some of his patients. The real crisis, however, comes when Mrs Das discloses to him, in the car, that one of her two sons, Bobby was conceived from her husband's Panjabi-Indian friend in a mutually agreed sexual encounter in her own house. Mr. Kapasi, the Interpreter of people's maladies, fails to offer any remedy to Mrs. Das's malady, which may be her falling marriage and falling out of love for life, which she had vainly hoped, he would offer. All he can utter is, "is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (66) "when I was putting the collection together," writes the author, "I knew from the beginning that this had to be the title story because I think it best expresses thematically the predicament at the heart of the book- the dilemma, the difficulty and often the impossibility of communicating emotional pain and affliction to others, as well as expressing it to ourselves. In some senses I view myself as a writer, in so far as I attempt to articulate these emotions as a sort of interpreter as well." (Lavine Melwani)

The last story of the collection "The Third and Final Continental" presents the alienation and the gradual initiation of the young male narrator, a Bengali gentleman. A man from India (Asia), pursues his studies in England (Europe) and his job takes him to America (USA). Adapting to the ways and culture of three continents, the man and his wife succeed in retaining and enriching their original cultural identity. They have come a long way from renting a room for eight dollars to owning a house in the suburbs. One hundred and three years old Mrs. Croft became his inspiration. If she could lead a life spanning a little more than a century witnessing the various upheavals in the world, he could also live a life spanning the three continents. It is his conscious decision to make America his home. He is reconciled to the fact and happily lives a life keeping his own cultural identity alive and accepting and imbibing he various changes that life confronts him with.

The nine stories in the collection offer a wonderful variety of experiences gathered from the cultural clashes rippling outward in many directions. The trauma of dislocation, an acute sense of loneliness and the pangs of estrangement suffered by the millions of “exiled Indians” who try unsuccessfully to balance themselves between “home” and “abroad” are the major maladies Lahiri attempts to interpret. Lahiri’s quest for identity is a quite one, which takes into account the obsession of her parents with India and the fact that it might have been passed on to her as a legacy. She has loved being in Calcutta but has realized that she did not belong there just as she did not belong in America. Identity is the recognition of one’s self. She has also expressed her view in a response to her parents’ nostalgia about which she says: “my writing, these days, is less a response to my parent’s cultural nostalgia and more an attempt to forge my own amalgamated domain.” Lahiri’s preoccupation with her parental home in Calcutta has made her to think of the home issues. During her terminal visits to Calcutta with her parents, she finds less of cultural separation between America and India due to greater communication and access although she has enjoyed a “sense of emotional exile’ like her parents. (Jumpha Lahiri)

Lahiri is Profusely praised for her nine well-knit stories in which she portrays the characters drawn from all over the world- i.e. 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 the beyond. Although the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* use the device of multiculturalism to express separation and loneliness, these are universal human experiences. The theme of emotional and cultural, estrangement, exile, loss, separation, grief, displacement and marginality form the common matrix of the stories.

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