

# Experiences of Cultural Displacement in the Stories of Diasporic Writers: A Study in the Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri

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## ABSTRACT

*Multiculturalism is one of the important results of extensive-diasporic growth which has been taking place in various countries of the world because of a number of factors. In 19<sup>th</sup> century many Indians left their native land and moved to UK or USA or the middle East either for academic purpose or for economic gains. In the beginning the native residents treated them in an indulgent manner. Gradually, they faced problems but learnt very soon to adjust and, finally, they were accepted in the new country as a minority group with a distinct identity. As regards the second generation expatriates, they learned to accept the adopted country as their own country without losing touch with their parents' country. The writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai and her daughter Kiran Desai belonged to the later group.*

*Among them Jhumpa Lahiri's case is somewhat more unique because she was born in London and, finally settled in USA along with her father. She graduated and got Master's degree in English with an additional Master's degree in creative writing and Ph.D. degree also from Boston University of America. She started writing quite early and won several prizes as a story writer and got Pulitzer Award in 2000 for "Interpreter of Maladies", a book of short story. By now two volumes of short stories namely "Interpreter of Maladies" and "Unaccustomed Earth" and two novels namely "The Namesake" and "The Lowland" have been published. She has been honoured with various awards for her short stories and fiction viz- Pulitzer Award, PEN Hemingway Award, the Frank O'Connor Award and Fellowship and Membership of American Academic of Arts and Letters.*

*However, presently I would like to concentrate on her status as a diasporic writer dealing with the theme of cultural displacement and the need for reconciliation with reference to some of the stories of "Interpreter of Maladies".*

**Keywords:** *Multiculturalism, Diaspora, Memory, Exile and Hybridization*

## STORIES OF JHUMPA LAHIRI: AN INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to a group of Indian writers who are usually described as "Writers of the Indian diaspora".<sup>1</sup> Previously, the terms like immigrant writing or expatriate sensibility were more fashionable but, all of them, refer to the sense of exile and double awareness of loss and longing.

The term 'diaspora' literally means the dispersion of any people from their original homelands and it refers to a kind of unplanned growth and hybridization of people and culture across continents. It disturbs the writer's painful self-awareness about one's actual roots leading to an uncharted journey along various routes and its interactional face leads to various ruptures and re-discoveries of identities. It goes to the credit of Jhumpa Lahiri that she does not make much noise about her diasporic identity and, in fact in a press-conference in Calcutta (now Kolkata), she revealed-"No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile whichever country I travel to. That is why I was tempted to write something about

those living their life in exile.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, her stories revolve round the individuals who are restless and never at ease in their original homeland nor in the new country where they “remain at periphery as a permanent alien and an outsider and seldom enjoy the exuberance of immigration.”<sup>3</sup> Thus Jhumpa Lahiri tries to steer clear of the political issue of discrimination and prejudice and instead chooses characters who are refined individuals with liberal views but they suffer from difficulties of existence which in any case, is a philosophical and moral issue.

### RETROSPECTIVE SIGNIFICANCES

The beauty of diasporic literature lies in the fact that it mirrors a “double vision”, at once yearning backward and looking forward. Consequently memory plays a very important role and while yearning backward, the characters of an experience a recurring sense of loss and longing, a sense of displeasure and nostalgia for their native land.

Coming to the stories, the first story in the collection is entitled “*A Temporary Matter*” but the story unfolds the complication of marital discord. It was D. H. Lawrence who first suggested that “the relation between men and women is the most enduring subject of fiction.”<sup>4</sup> The present story dealing with Shoba and Shukumar, a young couple living in a quiet street for a few years suddenly realize during power failure that it is not a temporary matter but a culmination of long suffering and deep discontent that have been growing for years. The couple had met each other “four years ago at a lecture hall in Cambridge”<sup>5</sup> when a group of Bengalee poets were giving a recital. They knew each other well and found that they had lot in common.

The story begins with an announcement from an electricity department that “power failure is a temporary matter and they would have to bear with it for at least five days for one hour.”<sup>6</sup> Against such a background, the couple are forced to unburden themselves and they realize that their three year marriage has soured, specially after the death of their only child at birth. During this break, they realize that both had become experts in avoiding each other because they had nothing interesting to talk about. The end of the story is equally revealing. The writer lays bare the heart of two characters with lot of sophistication and the temperamental gulf between the two is beautifully brought out. “When the power is restored, Shoba announces that she has decided to move it to another apartment”<sup>7</sup> and, yet at the end, in a queer twist of the tale, we are told “they wept together for the things they now knew”.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the sense of belonging and the need for sharing each other’s grief makes man human. In short, in this story memories play havoc and both Shoba and Shukumar realize that memories are not dead things even when they dwindle and dim but they come back strongly and remind them of cultural alienation.

“*Interpreter of Maladies*” is the title story of a volume named after this key story. The story hovers round an Americanised Indian family’s visit (the Das family) to the Sun temple of Konark and unfurl the complexus of conjugal life through a very business like encounter between Mr. and Mrs. Das, “a tourist guide cum taxi driver who works as an interpreter to a doctor.”<sup>9</sup>

In this story, the writer throws light over the inherent nature and domestic life of the characters. The very beginning of the story clearly suggests that Mr. and Mrs. Das are least concerned about things which cement conjugal relations. There are other issues as well as which are more serious. Mrs. Das has three children-Ronny, Bobby and Tina but Bobby is not as on from Mr. Das. The revelation of this fact by Mrs. Das refers to an aspect of their domestic life which they want to hide from the world but Mr. Kapasi notices this and realizes that the couple lack the required warmth of conjugal affair which is identical to his own case.

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His own job of interpreter has never been appreciated by his wife where as the same job appears quite romantic to Mrs. Das who does not find any Charm in her husband. As an interpreter of Maladies, Kapasi rightly realizes that Mr. and Mrs. Das had a bad marriage just as he and his wife are having a difficult marriage. Mr. Kapasi also confesses to Mrs. Das about his own marital discord.<sup>10</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The story indirectly hints at the truth that the concept of marriage was evolved to combat unrestrained sexuality but this is possible only when the couples have compatibility at both physical and mental level. Obviously, in this beautiful story, the writer comes to the suggestion that some people resort to fantasy and flirtation for keeping a marriage workable and safe. The beauty of the story lies in the fact that the writer uses her authorial voice in analyzing a common cause of the failure of marriage which is more or less the same in case of immigrants and the native couples. Indirectly, the story also suggests that the dialogue between the East and the West is often a painful process.

Conclusively, the two stories discussed above deal with the issues of Indian immigrants, including their generation gaps in understanding and values in a very convincing manner.

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