



Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Interpreter of Maladies': Unraveling Cross-Cultural tension

Nusrat Jahan Mallick

Language Instructor Department of English
Samta College, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia

Jhumpa Lahiri, the Indo-American writer, explores a range of themes in her works, including cultural conflicts, a Diaspora perspective, feelings of alienation, generational divides, human relationships, and more. Lahiri's parents, Bengali immigrants, settled in the United States when she was just three years old. The Diasporic sensibility is instrumental in attempting to bridge cultures by broadening experiences. These immigrants grappled with a persistent sense of alienation, the quest for belonging, and intercultural conflicts. The clash between traditional and contemporary values contributed to a generational gap that impacted their relationships. While the immigrants embraced the new culture, they remained firmly rooted in their old one.

The clash between distinct cultural backgrounds and frequent interactions among diverse worldviews profoundly influence the emotional and individual lives of the Diaspora in multicultural societies. The term "culture" encompasses a broad spectrum of meanings, encompassing the arts, customs, and institutions of a particular people or nation, which serve to distinguish one individual from another or one nation from another. However, within the context of Jhumpa Lahiri's characters, there is a search for their origins, a quest to find a place or a nation they can truly call their own, whether it be India or the USA. This pursuit aims to bridge the gap between the concepts of cultural identity and multiculturalism, which are not always in direct opposition.

Lahiri's short story collection tends to put to test one culture against the other culture. The character that belongs to different social and cultural environment comes to interact with one another and this interaction isn't just of two individuals but two cultures also. The first reading of 'Interpreter of Maladies' seems to offer an image of the different cultural relationships between immigrant Indians and the West. It shows the troubled position of the displaced individual who is nothing between two cultures which is totally unfamiliar. But at the depth level, all the stories, record journeys across visible and invisible frontiers that the protagonists must come across in order to find their real selves.

The collection is a matchless study of the cross-cultural interaction between two entirely different cultures, characters belonging to different social and cultural environments come to interact with one another and thus their meeting becomes a meeting point not only of two persons or families but of two cultures as well.

The border requires a different interpretation. Lahiri's origin in India tempted critics to include "Interpreter of Maladies", as her debut book, yet Lahiri's artistic intention is more specifically associated with her wish to move beyond the stereotypical image of Indianness. She sets three stories in India and the rest of them deal with the lives of first and second-generation Americans of Indian origin. Michiko Kakutani says that "Many of Mrs. Lahiri's people are Indian immigrants trying to adjust to a new life in the United States and their cultural displacement is a kind of index of a more existential sense of dislocation" (48).

Lahiri's works do not show the inevitable clash between two different cultures because she belongs to a third-generation Indian who was born in India, nor does she live in this country. But being born to Bengali Parents, she has strong ties with India, the country of her parents' origin. No doubt she is connected with India only indirectly, her understanding of its rich cultural and social heritage is in no way less striking than that of any first-generation Indian English writer, who expresses everything from the depth of his heart.

In "Interpreter of Maladies", Lahiri explores human relations in a cultural context, but her approach to culture seems to be in terms of the two possible paradigms as national and international entities. Lahiri's stories such as "Mrs. Sen", "A Temporary matter", "This Blessed House", "Sexy", "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" etc. show cultural conflicts and inner agony of various characters. Mrs. Sen, Shoba, Shukumar, Mrs. Das, and Twinkle all the characters face problems due to their cultural differences, and this difference not only makes them alienated but even makes them feel rootless.

Mrs. Sen for example, concerned as an Indian woman who is unable to assimilate into her adopted country in contrast to her more socially adept husband. Mrs. Sen's company with an American boy, Eliot provides an opportunity for each to experience the other's alternative culture. Eliot is an eleven-year-old white American boy, who introduces balance between two cultures and we perceive Mrs. Sen from Eliot's eyes. Mrs. Sen is a traditional Indian housewife, who terribly suffers from loneliness in foreign culture. She craves for someone's company. On the other hand, Eliot perceives a new culture of affection, love, and warmth in the company of Mrs. Sen. He contrasts Mrs. Sen and his mother. Mrs. Sen prepares Indian food for him with warmth, whereas his mother does nothing more than phone out for pizza every night. "...sit at the table as he ate, drinking more wine and asking how his day was, but eventually she went to the deck to smoke a cigarette, leaving Eliot to wrap up the leftovers" (118). Eliot's experiences run somewhat parallel to Rohin's as the boys with both their mothers and a woman whose ways are foreign, attempt to connect the two cultures into a more regular reality.

“This Blessed House” explores both complications of an arranged marriage and the adjustments that must be made to accommodate a couple’s disparate personalities within any relationship. The couple had little knowledge of each other’s interests, likes and dislikes because their parents brought them together in the bond of marriage. Sanjeev is the son of his parents who lives in Calcutta while Twinkle is a second-generation American. This basic cultural difference is a further obstacle to their establishment of a successful relationship. Though Twinkle has a taste for Christian ‘idol’, Lahiri implies that Sanjeev must have to develop a more tolerant attitude towards the new culture to lead a successful married life. But Sanjeev’s character shows that the immigrants’ experiences are parlous and a lot of problems come in adjustment.

Cultural conflict is a central theme to Lahiri’s stories and is not limited to the encounter between India and America, but clashes can occur on both sides of the frontier. “Interpreter of Maladies” deals with the encounter between a n Indian tour guide, Mr. Kapasi, a gifted linguist, who interprets the maladies of the patients to the doctor and as a guide to a n Indian American family touring India. The Dases are perceived by Mr. Kapasi from the start as foreigners as they, “looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did.” (44). The Das family’s visit to India is an example of failed intercultural communication. Mr. Kapasi sees the same unhappiness as he felt about his marriage. Mr. Kapasi was looking for a friend to fill the void in his boring life while Mrs. Das was looking for someone to “interpret her common trivial little secret.” (66). She wanted some remedy to cure her consciousness, expecting to feel better and relieved from the burden of adultery. Mr. Kapasi instead wanted to “fulfill his dream of serving as an interpreter between nations” (59).

Lahiri brings to the fore issues related to intercultural communication, the cultural clash and sees all these problems as having to do with human nature rather than being strictly associated with the condition of the immigrant of Indianness. Shuchen says that “Nine stories have in common certain themes and motifs, such as exile, displacement loneliness, difficult relationships and problems about communication.” (126). Lahiri resorts to India either as the setting of her stories or as a place or cultural set of customs and beliefs most characters refer to themselves to define their identity. Ashutosh Dubey remarks that “Mrs. Sen’s loneliness emanates from being so far from home on the other hand Eliot’s loneliness comes from living in suburbia.....he does not know his father and hardly knows his mother.” (23). It is Western culture’s effect that Eliot is removed from all cultures by his mother. So, the author shows cultural conflict. Mrs. Sen cannot find peace and joy in a foreign country and always recalls her past memories to find some solace.

Female protagonists in the collection, who are mostly Indian immigrants, exhibit an acute sense of awareness as individuals. This awareness comes to them in view status of the Western social and cultural setup, which gives equal status to their male counterparts. They cannot compromise on the question of their “otherness” and sometimes even ready to separate from the husband in case there is no compatibility of attitudes and preferences. In the Western social and cultural milieu, this consciousness turns into a complex of many emotions, attitudes, and lifestyles.

In “Temporary Matter”, Shoba and Shukumar are of Indian origin immigrants in America. This story focuses on the deteriorating relationships between young couple after the death of their child. Despite their common origin, they find it impossible to communicate and get estranged to the point of separating. Shoba, like in Western culture, gives up her household duties. Even she is ready to move to a new apartment because it becomes impossible to lead a happy life under one roof.

The impact of Western culture on the immigrant psyche is significant in Shoba’s case, which is after her thinking and behaviour. The change in her appearance is also noticed by the writer “She wore a navy blue poplin, raincoat over gray sweatpants and white sneakers, looking at thirty-three, like the type of woman she’d once claimed she would never resemble” (1).

A heart-moving story “A Real Durwan” is fully set in India. The protagonist of the story is a sixty-year-old woman, who due to partition got deported to Calcutta from her motherland. Her voice and language reflect that she is a foreigner in India “No one doubted she was a refugee; the accent in the Bengali made that clear.” (72). Boori Ma always exaggerates her past life to protect herself against the aggressiveness of the new cultural environment. But she was accused of theft, and cruelly thrown away from the apartments, showing failed human relationships and cruelty and poverty.

In “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, Lahiri has chosen a different way of expression, and a little girl Lilia narrates the whole story from her point of view. Lahiri subtly uses the persona of Lilia to filter the cultural differences between the two countries and the reality of the American culture that is born into. She dutifully learns the history of her birth country but is drawn inexorably towards that of her parents. She is aware of the difference between the self and the others across the visible and the invisible boundaries.

Like other characters, the impact of American culture on Indian immigrants could be apparently seen in Lilia’s mother. Lilia’s father seems to be closer to his roots and native culture of India. He gets disturbed when Lilia shows her ignorance about the partition of India. He is shocked to know that Lilia has a poor knowledge of Indian heritage and its history and asks angrily what she learns at school, but her mother comes to intervene on her behalf. “Lilia has plenty to learn at school. We live here now, she was born here, and she seemed genuinely proud of the fact as if it were a reflection of my character..... She ran her hand through her hair, bobbed to a suitable length for her part-time job as a bank teller.” (26-27).

“The Third and Final Continent” depicts the cultural conflicts of the speaker who searches for his identity across continents. His origin is from India, then travels to Europe to study, and finally an immigrant to North America. He studied in London and has adapted to the British way of life. He tries to keep his cultural identity intact by keeping the most trivial of Indian traditions alive as eating ‘egg curry’ (173) but his cultural conflicts are reflected in his refusal to eat ‘Hamburgers’ or ‘hot dogs’ (175) as it is sacrilegious according to his Hindu beliefs. He is burdened with a fragmented sense of identity constantly pulled in the opposite direction between Indian culture and the need to assimilate into American culture. But, in contrast to his wife Mala, who adopts the role of a traditional Indian wife, is appreciated by Mrs. Croft who declares her a ‘Perfect Lady’ (195). In her stories, Lahiri uses marriage, sensuality, the immigrant experience, and bridging the gap between Eastern and Western culture. She goes beyond what has

already been explored and provides essential insight into her works not only as literature but as a piece of culture that affects more than just scholars and students. Robin is a seven-year-old boy from 'Sexy' who perceives the concept of sexy in a fresh and touching way. The depth of his pain is reflected when he explains that being sexy 'means loving someone you don't know' (107). Judith Caesar argues that Lahiri imagines an American world not just through American eyes but through eyes that have seen other cultures and a mind that has understood other ways of thought. So, Lahiri peeps into the deep psyche of the child and brings those conflicts among the immigrants. It helps them to create a sort of cultural harmony.

Indian immigrants go to the West in search of a better future and settle down there, thus breaking the connection with the homeland. But the country of their origin always fascinates them. They feel torn apart between the cultural ethos they have left behind and the cultural milieu they find themselves in. Though Shoba and Shukumar have now no direct connection with India and they have assimilated themselves into the Western ethos, up to a great extent, they have a kind of liking for the country of their actions considerably. Shukumar feels jealous for he has not spent as much time in India as Shoba has and now is more interested in his motherland.

These stories present real men and women, sometimes at war with themselves, with their parents, and sometimes with their milieu. The clash comes to the fore because of the precipitation of unwarranted situations in alien lands. The projection of the interaction among cultures, sometimes, results in assimilation, desperation, and sometimes sentimentality and nostalgia. Thus, Jhumpa Lahiri has been able to apprehend the truth of the representatives of different cultures coming together in different modes and moulds.

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