

**CONSCIOUSLY OF A MULTIPLE OUTSIDER: EXPLORING  
THE INDIAN DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S  
*INTERPRETER OF MALADIES* WITH REFERENCE TO TWO  
SHORT STORIES**

**MANISHA BHATTACHARYA**

According to Amitava Ghosh, “the Indian Diaspora is one of the most important demographic dislocations of modern times and each day is growing and assuming the form of representative, significant force in global culture” (Ghosh 243). Diaspora is a form of hybridity which is subversive, it resists the cultural authoritarianism. Ahmad Aziz (*In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*) said: “one of the most important aspects of Diaspora writing is that it forces, interrogates and challenges authoritative voice of history. The writers of Diaspora have a global paradigm shift, since the challenges of Postmodernism address the narratives of power relations that silence the voices of dispossessed” (Aziz 54). Diaspora shows us how these marginalized voices have gained ascendancy. To quote Bhabha: “That it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history, subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement- that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking” (Bhabha 100). V.S Naipaul depicts the search of roots in his *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961): “Mohan Biswas’s peregrination over the next 35 years, he was to be wanderer with no place to call his own” (Naipaul 160). They are national, not nationalistic; inclusive, not parochial; representing the both the local and global (thus making it ‘glocal’); celebrating the plurality of India as vital ‘worldliness’.

Jhumpa Lahiri, another diasporic writer clearly speaks from a position of “in-betweenness”. She describes the failure of belongingness: “No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile whichever country I travel to, that’s why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile” (Lahiri 29). In “Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition”, Homi Bhabha states, “It is not the Colonialist Self or the Colonizing Other, but the disturbing distance in between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness- the White man’s artifice inscribed on the Black man’s body. It is in relation to this impossible object that emerges the liminal problem of colonial identity and its vicissitudes” (Bhabha 106). If from the above quote we focus on certain key phrases like “the disturbing distance in between” and the “problem of colonial identity and its vicissitudes” that we will enter into certain key areas

of experience in Jhumpa Lahiri's short fiction. Instead of "colonial identity and its vicissitudes" we would have to read diasporic identity and its vicissitudes, since Jhumpa Lahiri writing in English belongs to a diasporic Indian/Bengali community that had to recast itself according to the cultural parameters of the new imperialism of America in the post Second World War world. Her characters are caught between their roots and the "New World".

If colonization started this great interface of nations, the process of the intermingling of races has continued with migrations and Diasporas of various sorts. One kind of diaspora from India took place in the late nineteenth century, that of indentured labourers who went to work its sugarcane and cotton plantations of the West Indies and in parts of South Africa. For instance, Naipaul's grandparents traveled to the West Indies in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to escape what Pankaj Mishra in his introduction to *V.S. Naipaul: The Writer and the World*, calls "the dereliction of late - nineteenth-century North India." Another kind of Diaspora was the mass migration of professionals and middle class Indians to America during the 70's in the wake of the Vietnam War which had created a need for professional labourers in America. In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), we get from a sensitive and feeling point of view, the many minor tragedies, failures, disappointments, clashes, crises, confrontations that this interface of cultures, Bengali and American, could have caused. What Lahiri's often understated yet subtle narrative technique does, is to point out and firmly establish the reality of this Diaspora, of this specific kind of Bengali postcolonial experience. Often the experience is filtered through women, and the stories thus become a poignant testament to the many kinds of alienation that migration of cultures denoted. In *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), it is often the next generation that Lahiri looks at, pointing out in certain heart rendering cases, the difficulty and tragic fallout of being the children of first generation immigrants and sometimes going too far to adapt to the mores of a new culture.

In *The Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri's work traces alienation of various kinds. In the story "Mrs. Sen's", one of the most relevant in the collection, we are brought face to face with a Bengali woman, recently married and immigrated to America, not sharing a very intimate relationship with her husband, who fails to learn the ropes of crucial adjustment to the new environment. Although, the importance of the Lahiri's stories hinges on portraying a very specific kind of Bengali experience abroad, they sometimes contain Chekhov like, a more universal sorrow and sadness over the irreconcilable nature of human reality, especially relationships. The

distance in Mr. and Mrs. Sen's relationship becomes apparent from the narrator's comment: "Mr. Sen teaches mathematics at the university, Mrs. Sen had said by way of introduction, as if they were only distantly acquainted." (Lahiri 112)

In order to institute some values to her otherwise housewifely existence in an American neighborhood, where her only real occupation is cooking for two people, Mrs. Sen advertises to be a babysitter: "Professor's wife, responsible and kind, I will care for your child in my home." (Lahiri 111) The story partly focalized through the child character Eliot, who becomes Mrs. Sen's babysitting responsibility, while reinforcing the oddness and the newness of this babysitter from a different culture, also adds to the story's poignancy as we sense the child's inarticulate sympathy for this woman who was traumatized by certain aspects of her job, like a needed proficiency in driving, an activity for which she felt a singular disinclination and fear. This fear is culturally conditioned, because in India, at the time that Mrs. Sen immigrated which was in the 70's, few women unless belonging to radically progressive families, drove. The story demonstrates Mrs. Sen's acute fear of driving, a fear that causes a minor tragedy in her life and limits whatever expansion or integration into the host community that she had sought, through babysitting.

At the interview between Eliot's mother and Mrs. Sen, driving becomes an issue of some importance. As the impersonal narrator narrates the interview between Mrs. Sen and Eliot's mother, the importance of driving in American society comes through: "Most of all she (Eliot's mother) was concerned that Mrs. Sen did not know how to drive. Eliot's mother worked in an office fifty miles north, and his father, the last she had heard, lived two thousand miles west." (Lahiri 113)

It is at this point that the husband of Mrs. Sen, silent so long during this interview, intervenes, "I have been giving her lessons, actually, Mr. Sen said setting his mug on the coffee table. It was the first time had spoken" (Lahiri 113). From indications that the text has set up from the very beginning, and the infrequency of the interactions between Mr. and Mrs. Sen, the reader surmises that theirs is not exactly a warm relationship. The alienation of Mrs. Sen in a new country and overwhelmingly different cultural context, and even within her own family situation is not hard to assess. In response to Mr. Sen's pronouncement, Mrs. Sen talks about home and its different ways: "Yes. I am learning... But I am a slow student. At home, you know, we have a driver" (Lahiri 113).

When Eliot's mother responds to this statement with, "and that's

all...in India?" the narrator implies Mrs. Sen's emotional reaction to this word of home or India:

The mention of the word seemed to release something in her...She, too, looked around there room, as if she noticed in the lampshades, in the teapot, in the shadow frozen on the carpet, something the rest of them could not. "Everything is there." (Lahiri 113)

Eliot liked coming to Mrs. Sen, because in winter her apartment was much warmer than the one he lived in with his mother. He also loved watching Mrs. Sen chop vegetables everyday with a giant blade that he had never seen anybody use in America:

He especially enjoyed watching Mrs. S. as she cupped things, seated on newspapers ...Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas. Each afternoon Mrs. Sen lifted the blade and locked it into place, so that it met the base at an angle. Facing the sharp edge without ever touching it, she took whole vegetables between hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, and butternut squash. She split things in half, and then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices and shreds, she could peel a potato in seconds. At times she sat cross-legged; at times with legs splayed...she refused to let Eliot walk around when she was chopping (Lahiri 114-115).

Thus she tells Eliot the stories of her life lived in Calcutta, helping to shape her identity. Mrs. Sen reflects Lahiri's familial experiences as she recalls that for her mother, "cooking was her jurisdiction. It was also her secret". It focuses on Home that is equally communal, yet highly personal. The importance of the other's gaze becomes an important aesthetic in this story as it is so in her other stories in this same collection. Through the gaze of the innocent child, we see how Eliot constructed an image of Mrs. Sen which in spite of his sympathy for her, was predicated on his sense of her strangeness.

As she plied her ritual everyday, a little bit of conversation would reinforce the fact of her loneliness. She told Eliot one day, "Here in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence." (Lahiri 115) Another day she asks Eliot, "Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?" (Lahiri 116) And again, "Mr. Sen says that once I receive my license, everything will improve. What do you think, Eliot? Will things improve?" (Lahiri 119)

A poignant relationship between the baby sitter and the child develops as the adult, lost and estranged in a new culture and in an uncongenial relationship, looks to the child for succour and comfort. It is a measure of Lahiri's clear sighted art that the story shows Eliot to listen, but hardly offer any comfort, as the adult reveals herself in all her vulnerability and yearning for security. However, Eliot does respond to Mrs. Sen's frenzied efforts to learn driving, by answering all the questions she asked him at the tune:

“Impossible, Eliot, How can I go there?”

“You need to wait until no one's coming”

“Why will not anybody slow down?”

“No one's coming now” (Lahiri 120).

However, when he sat with Mrs. Sen, under an autumn sun that glittered without warmth through the trees, he saw how the same pile of cars made her knuckles faint and dim, her wrists shiver and her English falter:

“Everyone, this people, too much in their world” (Lahiri 121).

Eliot noticed that there were two things that made Mrs. Sen happy. One was as the arrival of a letter from home and the other was the obtaining of Irish whole fish from the seaside. On the first occasion that the man from the seaside shop telephoned her about fresh fish, Mr. Sen has to grudgingly take them. In the meantime, Mrs. Sen's driving lessons or attempts at driving don't go well: “In November came a series of days when Mrs. Sen refused to practice driving.” (Lahiri 127) That it was an area of acute marital discord becomes obvious to the reader when we learn that sometimes for days Mrs. Sen did not cook or did not order fish from the seaside. However, things become smooth between husband and wife and Mr. Sen once again, takes them to the seaside. Mrs. Sen appears happy too and dresses up in a red sari for the occasion. On the way back, Mr. Sen insists that she drives and she is extremely reluctant to do so. Eventually, giving in to her husband's cold insistence, she does and says, “I hate it. I hate driving. I won't go on” (Lahiri 131).

The story soon moves towards its tragic and poignant end. One day when the fish-seller from the beach calls her to say that he has fresh fish for her, she takes Eliot and goes out in the car and has an accident. The damage is minor-Mrs. Sen made a small cut on her lip; Eliot raised an objection briefly about a pain in his ribs. Mr. Sen apologized to Eliot's mother, wrote out a check reimbursing her for the previous month's

payment and Eliot who had heard Mrs. Sen crying in the bathroom, does not get to see Mrs. Sen anymore. On their way back home, Eliot's mother confessed that she was relieved. The story ends on the following note:

It was the last afternoon Eliot spent with Mrs. Sen, or with any baby-sitter. From then on his mother gave him a key, which he wore on a string around his neck. He was to call the neighbors in case of an emergency and to let himself into the beach house afterschool (Lahiri 135).

No longer was Eliot picked up from his bus stop, no longer was he peanut butter on crackers, no longer was his opinion solicited on driving; his mother called him from work and said:

You're a big boy now, Eliot." she told him. "You okay?" Eliot looked out the kitchen window at gray waves receding from the shore and said that he was fine (Lahiri 135).

Laura Anh Williams noted, "Lahiri's stories brought into focus the quite obliterated female diasporic subjects" (Williams). Let us take for example the eponymous story that gives its name to the volume, "Interpreter of Maladies". Mr. Kapasi is a tour guide and he has taken the Das family out on sightseeing in India, on a tour of the Konarak Temple in Orissa. The Das's are a young Indian-American couple like Lahiri herself and have children named Bobby, Ronny and Tina. Mr. Das teaches in a middle school in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The story depicts a conflict between cultures.

All through the trip, Mrs. Das seems bored and irritated. She feels a kind of diasporic anxiety coming back to the place where she was born; coming back to her roots. She asks how long the trip is, whether the car is air conditioned or not, and recriminates her husband for it not being so: "I told you to get a car with air – conditioning". Mrs. Das continued. "Why do you do this, Raj, just to save a few stupid rupees? What are you saving us, fifty cents?" (Lahiri 49) On the way to the temple, Mr. Kapasi explains his work that he does for living. Apart from being a tour guide he works as an interpreter in a doctor's office, interpreting for the doctor who does not know Gujarati, what the patients are saying in that particular language. Hence we see the possibilities of an ironic implication of the title "Interpreter of Maladies."

Mrs. Das seems very intrigued by Mr. Kapasi's other occupation and calls it "romantic" (Lahiri 50) and also asks him to describe a typical encounter with a patient. Mr. Kapasi narrates how a patient had recently

complained of feeling as though he had straws stuck in his throat, and how after Mr. Kapasi explained it to the doctor, the man's ailment had been fixed with medicine. Mrs. Das seems enthralled by the account and says that Mr. Kapasi has a "big responsibility" because he could easily say something wrong and neither party would know about it:

Well, for example, you could tell the doctor that the pain felt like a burning, not straw. The patient would never know what you had told the doctor, and the doctor wouldn't know that you had told the wrong thing. It's a big responsibility (Lahiri 51).

The story moving in a typical Maupassant manner with hints and shades and nuances of character and feeling, comes to a crisis as Mrs. Das suddenly reveals her past to him, hoping that he would be able to "interpret" her malady for her. At a moment when her husband and children have got off to see the monastic dwellings at Udaygiri and Khandagiri, Mrs. Das told Mr. Kapasi that Bobby was not her husband's son.

All this while, Mr. Kapasi had been feeling flattered over Mrs. Das's attention towards him and put it down to own attractiveness. Her revelation startles him profoundly and she asks him to say something as an "interpreter of maladies":

Don't you see? For eight years I haven't been able to express this to anybody, not to friends, certainly not to Raj. He doesn't even suspect it. He thinks I'm still in love with him. Well, don't you have anything to say? (Lahiri 64)

This is the moment of crisis or "moment of truth" as Mrs. Das or Memo goes on:

...my secret, and about how terrible it makes me feel I feel terrible looking at my children and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away. One day I had the urge to throw everything I own out the window, the television, the children, everything. Don't you think it's unhealthy? (Lahiri 65)

She begs him to suggest some "remedy." (Lahiri 65) Mr. Kapasi is inadequate to the moment. He asks Mrs. Das an obvious question to which he gets no answer: "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (Lahiri 66)

The moment of crisis passes without a resolution. Mrs. Das goes back to the family and Mr. Kapasi gives up any hope of continued contact with the family that had seemed possible through Mrs. Das's sudden attention towards him; though Mr. Kapasi imagines a future correspondence with

Mrs. Das, visualizing them building a relationship to translate the transcontinental gap between them. At this juncture, we can understand how the ancestral country of their heritage is proved disappointing to Mrs. Sen who is more anglicized than Indian.

The story aids on the note of ‘vertiginous possibilities’ that the open-ended short story is supposed to offer, and which makes it a modernist genre. In spite of the symmetry of design and unity of impression that the story contains, there is no Aristotelian closure or resolution. Although, Lahiri’s story does not fit the Chekovian prescription of his stories being just “middle” (22), her stories have a degree of progression that allows us to think, that even if there is no “end”, there is a “beginning” and “middle”. In his book *The Modernist Short Story* Dominic Head posits that form and context are fitted together in the modernist short story and the use of ellipsis, ambiguity and resonance which are often characteristics of a short story, but with an ultimately unifying effect, works differently for a modernist story. Jhumpa Lahiri’s short stories, which while lacking the kind of formal experimentation or symbolic manner that one associates either with Joyce or Mansfield, and often told in a straightforward, realistic manner more reminiscent of Maupassant than anyone else, do put us through a “reality warp.” There is objectivity, observation, sympathy, but no sentimentality. Whether these stories are “Unaccustomed Earth,” “Only Goodness” or “Nobody’s Business” of *Unaccustomed Earth* or “A Real Durwan” “Sexy”, “The treatment of Bibi Haldar,” “A Temporary Matter,” or “This Blessed House” of *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri lays testament to compassion and a wide canvass of human types, which is moving and impressive.

As Ronny Noor asserts, “The value of these stories- although some of them are loosely constructed- lies into fact that they transcend confined borders of immigrant experience to embrace larger age-old issues that are in the world of Ralph Waldo Emerson “cast into the mould of these new times redefining America.”” (Noor 45) And Ketu H. Katrak commented: “The *Interpreter of Maladies* reflects the trauma of self transformation through immigration, which can result in a series of broken identities, that from multiple anchorages.” (Katrak 111) Diasporic novelist of subcontinent origin like Jhumpa Lahiri often articulates through her works a transnational paradigm of identity formation marked by flows of cultural mobility. In the process, the essentialised structures of race, religion or language through which we often seek to construct static, singular moulds of identity are recurrently subverted to yield place to a fluid hybridity that fashions itself through the networking of rhizomic nodes of history, heritage and habitat. The short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian –American writer, follow a



similar trajectory as she locates herself in a ‘double city’ that combines her present with her inherited past as she recognizes how inside her “is the essence/of another continent.” Lahiri talks about trauma that we witness in diasporic writings, trauma which is deeply tied to our own historical realities which are hardly space oriented. Her perspective is echoed beautifully by Bhikhu Parekh: “The Diasporic Indian is like the banyan tree, like the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life. He spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, he has several homes and that is the only way he increasingly comes to feel at home in the world” (Parekh 605).

### Works Cited

- Ahmad, Aijaz. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi K. “Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition.” *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. Print.
- Davis, Robert Con. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. New York and London: Longman, 1989. Print.
- Ghosh, Amitava. “The Diaspora in Indian Culture”. *The Imam and the Indian*.ed. Amitava Ghosh Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2002. Print.
- Head, Dominic. *The Modernist Story*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Print.
- Ketu, Katrak. “The Aesthetics of Dislocation”. *The Women’s Review of Books*, XIX, no. 5 (February 2002). Web. 8 May. 2018.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999. Print.
- . *Unaccustomed Earth*. Noida: Random House India, 2009. Print.
- Naipaul, V.S. *V.S. Naipaul The Writer and the World*. Ed. Pankaj Mishra. London: Picador, 2002. Print.
- . *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Delhi: Picador, 2011. Print.
- Noor, Ronny. “Review: Interpreter of Maladies”. *World Literature Today*. Autumn-Winter 2004. Web.8 May. 2018.
- Parekh, Bhikhu. “Some Reflections on the Hindu Diaspora”. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* vol 20. issue 4 (2010):603-620. Web.
- Williams, Laura Anh. “Foodways and Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*”. *Melus*, Saturday, December 22, 2007. Web. 7 May. 2018.