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CULTURAL IDENTITY STRUGGLE IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is widely praised for her nine skillfully crafted stories, featuring characters primarily from India, the United States, and the United Kingdom, among other places. These immigrants often grapple with their identity, and her stories tend to explore the Indo-American cultural identity struggle. A significant portion of her work presents three generations of Indian Bengali immigrants to America, who struggle with their cultural identity. Lahiri delves into the identity struggle through the empathetic portrayal of her main characters, who are actively engaged in their lives. Many first-generation migrants in her stories face a cultural crisis, despite their best efforts to uphold their beliefs, values, and customs; they experience a clash of identity in their adopted homeland. This paper investigates the cultural identity struggle portrayed in Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*. By exploring the experiences of Indian immigrants and their descendants, the paper examines the complexities of personal and cultural identity, as characters navigate the challenges of adapting to new environments and reconciling their heritage with present lives, ultimately striving to establish a sense of belonging in a globalized world. Through a close examination of Lahiri's diverse characters, the paper highlights the various ways individuals grapple with their dual cultural identities and the emotional and psychological turmoil that often accompany the process of acculturation.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Indian, Struggle, Cultural, Immigrant, *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri has emerged as a prominent figure in the diaspora literature. Born to Bengali parents in London, she later moved to Rhode Island with her family and was raised amidst traditional Bengali culture. Throughout her childhood, she visited India, specifically Kolkata, with her parents. As a second-generation immigrant, Lahiri experienced her parents' emotional exile and grew

up with conflicting expectations. Her ability to portray deep-rooted cultural conflicts through various character perspectives has captivated a diverse audience. Lahiri, born to Indian immigrants in England and later becoming an American citizen, embodies both a migrant and diasporic writer. Her work reflects the Indian diaspora, weaving narratives that highlight the complexities of identities within the diasporic space. The central

theme of *Interpreter of Maladies* revolves around the identity struggles faced by Indians and Indian immigrants, encompassing the generational discrepancies in perception and values. It was Jhumpa Lahiri who became the first Asian-American to win the Pulitzer Prize in the year 2000, the highest American literary award, for her debut collection *Interpreter of Maladies*.

A Temporary Matter: “A Temporary Matter”, a short story by Jhumpa Lahiri, explores the theme of identity struggle through the lens of a married couple, Shoba and Shukumar, who are both Indian immigrants living in the United States. The story delves into their personal battles with identity, their relationship with one another, and the emotional aftermath of a shared tragedy. Shoba and Shukumar both struggle with their individual identities as Indian immigrants adapting to life in America. Shoba's career as a proofreader allows her to maintain a connection to her Indian roots, as she works with texts from various countries, including India. Shukumar, on the other hand, is a doctoral candidate who feels disconnected from his Indian heritage due to his academic pursuits. Their individual struggles with identity manifest in their relationship, creating a distance between them. This identity struggle is further complicated by their inability to communicate effectively with one another. Both Shoba and Shukumar have withdrawn from each other after experiencing a traumatic event - the stillbirth of their child. Their inability to cope with the loss has caused them to retreat into their own worlds, further exacerbating the struggles they face with their own identities.

The story's title, “A Temporary Matter” refers to a temporary power outage in their neighborhood, which forces the couple to confront their issues in the darkness. During this time, they begin to share secrets with each other that they have never spoken about before. This sharing of secrets serves as a metaphor for the couple's internal struggles with their own identities and the emotional barriers they have erected. As they reveal their secrets, they begin to confront the reality of their relationship and the identities they have formed in their new lives in America. Shoba and Shukumar's experiences as Indian immigrants, their personal losses, and their

attempts to reconnect with each other in the face of tragedy all contribute to their ongoing identity struggle.

Jhumpa Lahiri in the short story effectively portrays the complexities of identity struggle faced by Indian immigrants in America. The story showcases how identity is shaped by various factors, including cultural background, personal experiences, and relationships. Shoba and Shukumar's journey highlight the need for open communication and understanding in order to navigate the challenges of identity in a new and unfamiliar environment. The story serves as a poignant exploration of the human experience, delving into themes of love, loss, and the ongoing struggle to understand oneself and one's place in the world. Through the story of Shoba and Shukumar, Lahiri masterfully illustrates the difficulties faced by immigrants as they strive to reconcile their past and present identities while navigating the complexities of life in a foreign land.

When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine: In “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, a short story by Jhumpa Lahiri, the theme of identity struggle is explored through the experiences of the central characters: Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani scholar, and Lilia, a young Indian-American girl. The story is set during the Bangladesh Liberation War, highlighting the historical and political backdrop against which these characters navigate their personal identity struggles. Mr. Pirzada, a visiting scholar from what was then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), grapples with his identity as he witnesses his homeland's turmoil from afar. As a Bengali Muslim, Mr. Pirzada is caught between his ethnic and religious identities, which are further complicated by the political situation in his home country. He befriends Lilia's family and regularly comes to dine with them, creating a unique bond that transcends cultural differences. Lilia, the daughter of Indian immigrants, struggles with her own sense of identity as she tries to understand her family's cultural heritage and Mr. Pirzada's experiences. Through her interactions with Mr. Pirzada and her observations of his anxieties about his family's safety back home, Lilia becomes more aware of the complex political and cultural realities that shape her own identity.

The story highlights the cultural differences between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family, as well as the similarities in their shared experiences as immigrants in the United States. Despite their distinct backgrounds, Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family bond over their shared displacement and their desire to maintain a connection to their respective homelands. Through Lilia's perspective, Lahiri explores the complexities of identity for second-generation immigrants, as they navigate the intersection of their cultural heritage and their present circumstances. Lilia's parents encourage her to learn about her Indian roots, while at the same time, she is exposed to American culture and values. Her friendship with Mr. Pirzada allows her to develop a more nuanced understanding of her own identity, as she learns to empathize with his struggles and appreciate the diversity of experiences within the larger South Asian diaspora. In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", the writer skillfully weaves together themes of identity struggle, cultural displacement, and empathy. The story highlights the challenges faced by immigrants as they attempt to reconcile their past and present identities while living in a foreign land. Through the relationships and experiences of Mr. Pirzada and Lilia, Lahiri underscores the importance of understanding one's cultural heritage and embracing the complexities of identity in an increasingly interconnected world.

Interpreter of Maladies: "Interpreter of Maladies", the title story of Jhumpa Lahiri's acclaimed collection, the theme of identity struggle is examined through the lives of the central characters: Mr. Kapasi, an Indian tour guide and interpreter, and the Das family, Indian-Americans visiting their ancestral homeland. The story delves into their personal struggles with identity as they navigate the complexities of cultural dislocation and miscommunication. Mr. Kapasi, a tour guide and interpreter for a doctor, grapples with the disappointment of his unrealized dreams and the mundanity of his life. He is intrigued by the Das family, who represent a fusion of Indian and American cultures. As he guides them through the Indian countryside, he is both fascinated and repelled by their behavior, which reflects their detachment from their Indian heritage.

The Das family, consisting of parents Raj and Mina and their three children, struggle with their own sense of identity as Indian-Americans. Their superficial connection to their cultural roots is evident in their lack of knowledge about Indian customs, language, and history. The parents, born and raised in America, face a disconnect with their heritage, while their children are even further removed from their Indian roots. Throughout the story, Lahiri explores the complexities of identity for both first- and second-generation immigrants. Mr. Kapasi's struggles stem from the discrepancy between his aspirations and his reality, while the Das family grapples with the dislocation and cultural confusion that often accompany the immigrant experience. The story's climax occurs when Mina confides in Mr. Kapasi about her extramarital affair and seeks his guidance, mistaking his profession as an interpreter for a counselor or confidante. This pivotal moment emphasizes the theme of miscommunication and the difficulty in understanding one another's experiences, further highlighting the complexities of identity struggle.

In "Interpreter of Maladies", Jhumpa Lahiri masterfully explores the intricacies of identity struggle for both immigrants and their descendants. Through the interactions between Mr. Kapasi and the Das family, Lahiri delves into the challenges of reconciling one's past and present identities, the disorientation that can result from cultural dislocation, and the necessity for empathy and understanding in an increasingly globalized world. The story serves as a poignant examination of the human experience, as it touches on themes of longing, regret, and the search for connection and understanding. Through the lives of Mr. Kapasi and the Das family, Lahiri illuminates the struggles faced by individuals attempting to navigate the complexities of identity in a world where cultural boundaries are increasingly blurred.

A Real Durwan: In the short story "A Real Durwan" the theme of identity struggle is explored through the experiences of Boori Ma, an elderly woman who works as a durwan or gatekeeper for an apartment complex in Calcutta. The story delves into her personal struggle with identity as she navigates the challenges of poverty, displacement, and social

isolation. Boori Ma, a refugee who lost her family and possessions during the partition of India, finds herself struggling to maintain her sense of identity in the face of adversity. She clings to memories of her past life, regaling the residents of the apartment complex with stories of her former wealth and social status. However, these stories are met with skepticism, as the residents view her as a pitiable, eccentric figure rather than someone who once belonged to a higher social class. The residents of the apartment complex also grapple with their own identity struggles as they attempt to improve their social standing and living conditions. In their pursuit of upward mobility, they become increasingly disconnected from Boori Ma and her stories, further isolating her and exacerbating her sense of displacement.

As the story unfolds, the residents' desire for progress ultimately results in Boori Ma's downfall. When a new sink is installed in the complex, Boori Ma is falsely accused of stealing the old one and is consequently banished from her home. This event underscores the theme of identity struggle, as Boori Ma's past and present identities are brought into sharp contrast, with her past life now irretrievably lost. In the short story Jhumpa Lahiri masterfully explores the complexities of identity struggle faced by individuals who experience displacement and social upheaval. The story examines the challenges of maintaining a sense of identity in the face of adversity and highlights the need for empathy and understanding in a world where people's circumstances can change dramatically.

Through the character of Boori Ma, Lahiri illustrates the vulnerability of individuals in a rapidly changing society and the struggles faced by those who are unable to adapt or find their place in the new order. The story serves as a poignant examination of the human experience, touching on themes of loss, resilience, and the search for belonging. The short story is a powerful exploration of the challenges faced by those who struggle with their identity in the face of societal change and personal upheaval. Through Boori Ma's experiences, Lahiri deftly demonstrates the importance of understanding and empathy for those grappling with

the complexities of identity in a constantly evolving world.

Sexy: The theme of identity struggle is explored through the experiences of Miranda, a young American woman, and her affair with Dev, a married Indian man in the short story "Sexy". The story delves into their personal struggles with identity as they navigate the complexities of cultural differences and infidelity. Miranda, a receptionist living in Boston, becomes involved with Dev, who is trapped in an unhappy marriage. Their affair forces Miranda to confront her own sense of identity as she tries to understand her role in the relationship and her attraction to Dev, who represents an exotic and exciting departure from her mundane life. As she immerses herself in Dev's world, wearing a sari and learning about Indian culture, she struggles to reconcile her newfound desires with her own values and sense of self. Dev, on the other hand, grapples with his dual identity as both a husband and a lover, as well as the cultural expectations placed upon him as an Indian man living in America. His affair with Miranda highlights the tensions between his traditional upbringing and his desire for a more liberated lifestyle.

In addition to the central characters, the story also features a subplot involving Miranda's coworker Laxmi and her cousin's experience of infidelity, further emphasizing the theme of identity struggle. The story explores the concept of "sexy" and how it is perceived and understood in different cultural contexts, revealing the fluidity and complexity of identity. In "Sexy", Lahiri skillfully examines the intricacies of identity struggle in the context of an affair, cultural differences, and shifting perceptions of what is considered attractive or desirable. Through the experiences of Miranda, Dev, and the supporting characters, Lahiri highlights the challenges faced by individuals attempting to navigate their own identities in a world where personal desires and cultural expectations often collide. The story serves as a thought-provoking exploration of the human experience and the constant search for self-understanding and belonging.

Mrs. Sen's: In "Mrs. Sen's", a short story from Jhumpa Lahiri's collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, the theme of identity struggle is explored through the experiences of the titular character, Mrs. Sen, an Indian woman adjusting to life in America, and her young charge, Eliot, an American boy who spends his afternoons in her care. The story delves into their personal struggles with identity as they navigate the complexities of cultural differences and their evolving relationships with their surroundings. Mrs. Sen, who moved to America after marrying her husband, grapples with feelings of dislocation and homesickness as she tries to adapt to her new life. Her identity as a traditional Indian woman is challenged by the cultural norms and expectations of American society, and she finds solace in her daily rituals, such as preparing elaborate meals and maintaining a connection with her family back in India. Through her interactions with Eliot, she attempts to preserve her cultural heritage while also confronting the reality of her new environment. Eliot, in turn, is experiencing his own identity struggle as he navigates his parents' divorce and the uncertainty of his changing family dynamics. In Mrs. Sen, he finds a source of comfort and stability, as well as a window into a different culture and way of life.

In "Mrs. Sen's", Jhumpa Lahiri masterfully explores the intricacies of identity struggle for both immigrants and those experiencing personal upheaval. Through the experiences of Mrs. Sen and Eliot, Lahiri delves into the challenges of reconciling one's past and present identities, the disorientation that can result from cultural dislocation, and the necessity for empathy and understanding in an increasingly globalized world. The story serves as a poignant examination of the human experience, as it touches on themes of longing, change, and the search for connection and understanding.

This Blessed House: In "This Blessed House", the identity struggle revolves around a newlywed Indian-American couple, Sanjeev and Twinkle, as they adjust to married life and settle into their new home. Sanjeev, a practical and serious man, is disconcerted by Twinkle's whimsical nature and her fascination with the Christian artifacts they find hidden throughout their home. Their differing

perspectives on the artifacts reflect the couple's struggle to understand and accept each other's identities, revealing the challenges of finding common ground in a relationship marked by cultural and personal differences.

The Treatment of Bibi Haldar: "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" explores the identity struggle of Bibi Haldar, a young Indian woman suffering from an undiagnosed illness that causes her to experience severe seizures. Bibi's identity is defined by her condition, which isolates her from her community and limits her opportunities for a fulfilling life. The story highlights the constraints placed upon Bibi's identity by societal expectations, as well as her determination to overcome these limitations and forge a new sense of self in the face of adversity.

The Third and Final Continent: In "The Third and Final Continent", the protagonist, a young Indian man, embarks on a journey from India to England and finally to America, where he settles and builds a life for himself. Throughout the story, the protagonist grapples with his evolving identity as an immigrant, experiencing the dislocation and cultural confusion that often accompany the immigrant experience. His interactions with Mrs. Croft, an elderly American woman from whom he rents a room, serve as a testament to the power of human connection in overcoming the barriers of cultural difference and fostering a sense of belonging. As he adapts to life in America and establishes a family of his own, the protagonist reconciles his Indian heritage with his new American identity, finding a sense of stability and purpose in the process.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of cultural identity struggle in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* reveals the intricate web of personal, social, and cultural factors that contribute to the formation and negotiation of one's sense of self. Through the experiences of her diverse array of characters, Lahiri deftly illustrates the myriad ways in which individuals grapple with their own unique challenges and complexities, highlighting the resilience of the human spirit and the potential for connection and understanding to transcend the boundaries of culture, tradition, and personal

circumstance. Throughout the collection, Lahiri delves into the intricacies of personal and cultural identity in the face of changing relationships, cultural dislocation, and societal expectations. By drawing from her own experiences as a child of Indian immigrants, as well as her keen observations of the world around her, she is able to capture the essence of the identity struggle in a manner that is both authentic and universally relatable.

The stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* serve as poignant reminders of the importance of empathy and understanding in navigating the challenges of cultural identity struggle. By presenting characters who are actively engaged in the process of self-discovery and who grapple with the tensions between their past and present selves, Lahiri underscores the necessity for individuals to reconcile their personal histories with their present circumstances in order to forge a sense of belonging and purpose in an increasingly globalized world. Moreover, Lahiri's exploration of cultural identity struggle in *Interpreter of Maladies* highlights the transformative power of human connection in overcoming the barriers of cultural difference and fostering a sense of belonging. Through the relationships formed between her characters, she demonstrates the potential for individuals to find solace and understanding in one another, despite their disparate backgrounds and experiences.

Lahiri's nuanced portrayal of the complexities of cultural identity struggle serves as a powerful testament to the importance of recognizing and celebrating the diversity of human experience. By presenting characters who defy stereotypes and who challenge conventional notions of what it means to belong to a particular culture or community, she encourages readers to question their own assumptions about identity and to embrace the richness and complexity of the world around them. The exploration of cultural identity struggle in *Interpreter of Maladies* offers valuable insights into the ongoing challenges faced by immigrants and their descendants in adapting to new environments and negotiating the complexities of their dual cultural identities. Through her characters' experiences, Lahiri provides a window into the emotional and psychological turmoil that

often accompanies the process of acculturation, as well as the resilience and resourcefulness required to navigate such challenges successfully.

In a world marked by increasing cultural diversity and interconnectedness, the exploration of cultural identity struggle in *Interpreter of Maladies* holds particular relevance and resonance for contemporary readers. As individuals across the globe grapple with the challenges of balancing their personal histories and cultural affiliations with the demands of an increasingly globalized society, the stories in Lahiri's collection serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of empathy, understanding, and the cultivation of a shared sense of humanity. In closing, the short stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* provides a compelling exploration of cultural identity struggle through the experiences of a diverse array of characters, each facing their own unique challenges and complexities.

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