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THE TWO SIDES OF THE COIN IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S 'INTERPRETER OF MALADIES'  
AND 'THE NAMESAKE'

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of globalization and ever-increasing acceleration in technical front the world has shrunk into a global village with a plenty of opportunities to offer, giving rise to rapid immigration to various countries around the globe especially the most coveted American soil or 'The third world'. The geographical boundaries are transcended and the imaginary division of the East and the West are diluted that these divisions are slowly erased and the gaps are bridged to bring a sort of homogeneity. Although these divisions have reduced in the physical sense, mentally it has aroused traumatic experiences in the lives of the immigrants who are caught between the two worlds of the orient, the East to which they belong and the occident, the West where they have migrated for greener pastures. Their emotional and psychological anguish in various aspects and their angst in negotiating with identity crisis due the cultural dilemma form the major themes in many of the diasporic writings of contemporary times mainly the female writers. Popular writers like Bharathi Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee have penned their feelings through their writings. Their successor, Jhumpa Lahiri has portrayed the plight of these expatriates with great authenticity and prowess in her works that some of them have been awarded prizes and won her world-wide fame. Such writings which portray the trials and tribulations of these exiled expatriates suffering existentially can be designated under the umbrella of diasporic literature. This paper aims at bringing out the contrasting aspects of orient and occident in the short story collection 'Interpreter of Maladies' and her first novel, 'The Namesake'.

**Keywords-** advent, global village, immigration, homogeneity, orient, occident, expatriates, prowess, diasporic literature.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'diaspora' literally means 'to scatter or 'to spread'; a sort of human dispersal from one place to the other. While it gains its origin from Jews who were thrown out of their settlement moved in a multitude causing an exodus to where

they moved; in this context, it means a complete uprooting from their homeland to different parts of the world willingly or unwillingly. This gained momentum after the post-colonial times and especially after the ban on American immigration law was lifted in the mid-sixties giving rise to huge

number of people migrating to America for bettering their prospects. Distances due to geography, climatic conditions, language, culture and lifestyle determined the lives of these migrants also who have either gone in pursuit of education or for the sake of monetary benefits. Their quest for identity, loss of roots and ancestral ties, alienation, loneliness, hybridity in culture, failures in marital relationships and emotional bonding in familial ties and nostalgia are some of the issues they face especially the women. They carry the baggage of their past thus struggle to negotiate in the process of adjusting and adapting with their present.

The Pulitzer Prize winning short story collection, 'Interpreter of Maladies' and 'The Namesake' her first novel also adapted as a film deal with these aspects not only pertaining to the first generation but also the second generation who are 'caught in the web' of tradition and modernity. Jhumpa explores and interprets the nuances in her stories since she herself is a second-generation immigrant of Bengali origin; in a way 'The Namesake' is her autobiographical sketch of the character, Gogol who frantically searches for his identity throughout the story. This paper aims at highlighting the characteristics replete in these stories related to the orient which also means the land of the rising and the occident denoting the land of the setting sun figuratively.

Uma Parameswaran has defined it thus: ---  
---"first is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a phase in which one is busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of diaspora existence by involving themselves ethnocultural issues. The fourth is when they have 'arrived' 42 and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues". (Parmeswaran, 165)

#### **The Aspects of Orient and Occident**

The first story, 'A Temporary Matter' deals with the theme of marriage which is on the rocks due to the unusual silence between Shobha and Sukumar due to the loss of their baby. Their still-born baby has made their lives still or so to say tongue-tied that they avoid each other due to their lack of communication. A temporary power cut for

five days in their area brings one sort of a respite for they are forced to come together during dinner, a refreshing interlude when they try to make confessions of their past. The author portrays both Sukumar and Shobha as products of America that both are independent in thinking and want to exercise their free will, a typical feature of the occident. Shobha in the end decides to leave Sukumar for good and move to another separate accommodation which again denotes her determination to survive on her own. Sukumar, an American does not want to budge from his point of view of not wanting to have another baby puts an end to their relationship. The title story, 'Interpreter of Maladies', weaves a thread around a strong sense of guilt; the character Mina Das suffers in silence unable to communicate to her husband about her infidelity. She finds solace in Mr. Kapasi's company who is supposed to be an interpreter of maladies to a local doctor in Orissa. Finding his profession 'romantic', she gets a relief in confessing her pent-up feelings to a total stranger after a span of eight years. Though her parents are from the orient she is a product of the occident that her values lean towards the west.

On similar lines, there are two more stories based on marital relationship and extra marital relationships in 'This Blessed House' and 'Sexy'. The former one is more of the occident since the portraiture of the character, Twinkle born and brought up in America takes to that culture unlike her husband Sanjeev who is a first-generation immigrant from Calcutta. His breeding is that of the east, hence he expects his wife to follow that culture but to his chagrin she behaves otherwise. Sanjeev finds her fascinated by a collection of 'Christian paraphernalia' which she displayed on the mantel shelf, a true representation of the occident. In spite Sanjeev reiterating that "We're not Christians", she is hellbent on having her way. Even her name represented the west as against her original name, Tanima. Sanjeev finds it difficult to accept her childish behaviour but he is left with no choice than accepting her. He patiently anticipates a change in her for the better when he carries 'a solid silver bust of Christ' to place on the mantle as part of the menagerie, in the end.

The latter story 'sexy' deals with an American woman, Miranda cheated by an Indian married man, Dev who is unaware of the implications of the eastern culture falls a prey to his charms. Dev takes advantage of her ignorance, carries on his illegal relationship going around with her during his wife's absence. The orient in him makes him keep his wife in the dark and when she calls him from India he stays at home. Miranda's revelation dawns when she deciphers the meaning of the word sexy through a seven-year old boy Rohin. It comes as a rude shock to her but soon reconciles to reality.

All these stories have different story line but they have a common thread which groups them together as one. Jhumpa Lahiri's predecessor, Chitra Banerjee has expressed her views on marriage in the following way. According to Anita Desai "The Indian woman is always being working towards an adjustment and compromises..." Banerjee break down this tradition and portrays a tapestry 'New women' in her prize winning short story collection – 'The Arranged Marriage'.

Stories like 'A real Durwan' and 'Treatment of Bibi Haldar' are based on the native milieu, the orient where the occident characteristics are found a plenty. Alienation, loneliness and isolation form the crux of these stories in which the characters Boori Ma and Bibi Haldar are the victims of these conditions they suffer in the hands of the society. They both are delineated not only as victims but they are ostracized due to their helplessness and hence can be termed as 'marginalised women'.

'Mrs. Sen's' and 'When Mr. Pirzada came To Dine' bring out difficulties faced by these two characters in coming to terms with the American soil due their nostalgic reminiscences of home and family. They constantly dwell upon the lingering memoirs of their native that they physically live in America but mentally travel to their roots. The aspect of orient is abundant in Mrs. Sen who recreates India in America with respect to her diasporic kitchen, her preparation of food and fish, her attire and accessories, represent the orient. The author has brought the occident in Eliot's mother in every respect. Mr. Pirzada is another character who yearns to get back to his family in Pakistan to that

extent he sets the time in his watch behind to that of Pakistan while having dinner with Lilia and her parents. Both Lilia and Eliot stand for the occident since they are products of the American soil.

In the last story, we find more of the occident throughout, since the narrator willingly travels to England initially for his survival. Later, he moves to Boston for better prospects and he stays with Mrs. Croft an American for six weeks before his wife's arrival from Calcutta. The narrator is an orient but he slowly adapts to the American lifestyle with his wife Mala and son for thirty years as an American citizen. His son who is in Harvard university is getting ready to' spread his wings 'into the wide world, 'unprotected and alone' to face new challenges like his father nonchalantly, he is a true representation of the west.

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel, 'The Namesake' also adapted as a film directed by Mira Nair gives a real reinforcement to the diasporic identity to her novel and a career growth in her literary works. Her creation of the characters, Ashima and Ashoke both migrated from Calcutta and their adaptation to the host culture is something unique. While Ashima represents the orient completely, Ashoke shows semblance of a neutral attitude towards American lifestyle. Both are first generation immigrants leaving their roots for education initially and later materialistic pursuits.

At the outset when Ashima delivers her first child, she feels alienated in the hospital without any of her near and dear which is customary of the orient to stay with the support parents during that auspicious moment; a moment of celebration. She is so traditional in her outlook that "she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare". (Lahiri: 2003:6). She is nostalgic about her homeland that she carries the tattered copy of the Bengali magazine, 'Desh'to read in the hospital which she has read a dozen times; on the other hand, Ashoke reads 'Globe'.

Another aspect of orient is regarding naming their new-born son; staunchly waiting for Ashima's grandmother's letter from India which is lost in transit and never reaches them. Both Ashima and Ashoke are resistant in following the American

system of procuring a birth certificate before releasing the baby from the hospital; of course, with a name on it. The orient in Ashima surfaces again when Gogol's 'annaprasan', his rice ceremony comes around. It is usually the maternal uncle who initiates the ceremony.; she misses her brother Rana who is in India very far from her.

Ashoke and Ashima shift their home close to the university in which Ashoke is offered a job as an assistant professor in Electrical Engineering department. This change thrills Ashoke imagining himself standing in front of American students but to Ashima it adds to her woes since it is situated in the outskirts of the city. She has difficulty in fetching the day to day essentials due to the distances and on top of it she has 'no interest' in driving their new Toyota Corolla which is a necessity now. The author draws a parallel between her character Mrs. Sen in 'Interpreter of Maladies' who is highly resistant to adapt to the American ways. The author also gives an analogy to this experience of Ashima 'as a lifelong pregnancy' to be a foreigner.

With regard to food, Ashima slowly learns to roast turkey 'albeit rubbed with garlic and cumin and cayenne'. For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate Christmas and Thanksgiving. Both the children looked forward to the birth of Christ rather the Durga and Sarasvati Puja. It is a clear indication that they were slowly getting accustomed to be Americans rather than the Indian culture; again, the occident takes over the orient gradually. The concerted attempt to teach Gogol Bengali language is a wasted one since he wishes to attend art class instead of Bengali class; Gogol finds it difficult to learn Bengali pronunciation. Gogol's fourteenth birthday was celebrated both in the American style as well the Bengali way in a grand manner; on that occasion Ashoke gifts him a copy of the short story collection of Nikolai Gogol to his son. The tastes of Gogol in reading and listening to music have changed the American way that he was unable to appreciate the present's relevance; he keeps aside and is in a hurry to say goodnight to his father.

Unlike Ashima, who adhered to her Indian way of wearing sari and Bata shoes not willing to change; Ashoke was open to adapt to American lifestyle in some ways like switching from tailor-

made to readymade dresses, using ball pens instead of fountain pens indicate his neutral attitude towards change though at heart he is an orient. He doesn't like the way the Americans waste their food throwing in the bin in his university that he tells Gogol to eat his food completely; also teaches him to eat with his fingers inculcating the traditional eating style. Gogol in his teens slowly starts using a fork sometimes, also wears his sneakers at home which is against their Indian custom.

Fate thought otherwise, Ashoke's sudden demise in Ohio alone in the hospital, due to massive heart attack startled Gogol and woke him up to reality, responsibility and a sense of commitment towards his family. His take it easy attitude changes and he undertakes a journey to settle scores with the hospital formalities and vacating his father's apartment in Baron court; he takes in small details in the apartment and in spite of Maxine's suggestion to stay in a hotel he decides to spend the night on his father's bed aware of his father's presence in his absence. Clearly, the orient in Gogol is awakened after his father's death.

Normal life resumes and after a year of Ashoke's death, Ashima brings up the topic of Gogol's marriage saying that 'life goes on' suggesting Moushmi's name of a Bengali family known to them for a long time. He understands his mother's expectations 'after his father's death have accelerated' that she wants him to settle down. . The author has given a 'global identity' to Moushmi's character, she has migrated from England to America to get married to an American but it breaks up; she is also given a French connection who is to pursue her higher studies in French Literature in New York. Moushmi and Gogol are married after a year in New Jersey as per the Bengali customs taking wedding vows in Sanskrit' surrounded by Bengali friends and relatives. Things appear normal for a year but after their first wedding anniversary it goes haywire with the entry of Moushmi's old flame, Dimitri who emerges in her life to completely change everything for both of them. Moushmi as the name means literally damp wind which drifts away in the south westerly direction to France true to its meaning; her French

connection revived in the true sense an embodiment of the occident.

Sonia, Gogol's sister is an occident in her attitude decides to marry Ben, a half Jewish person; again, the author has given a global identity to this character trying to bring in multi-culturalism. She is projected as a passive person unlike Gogol who is aggressive but she is strong-willed and clear in her decisions.

Ashima sells her Pemberton home to an American and is all set to leave America for good to Calcutta to live in her brother's house for six months and then come to America for the other six months to stay with her children. As the author puts it, "True to her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere". (Lahiri: 2003:276). Though she is very much an orient at heart for some strange reason she has grown fond of this place where she has known her husband and raised both her children and has developed an affinity to it; 'a home away from home' will always evoke lingering memories of her husband and children. Her occident is in a way woken up to dwell in her mind forever.

Bharathi Mukherjee refers to this phenomenon of straddling the fence in more explicit terms: "It was not right to describe the American experience as one of the melting pot but a more appropriate word would be 'fusion' because immigrants in America did. White counterpart but immigration was a two-way process and both the whites and immigrants were growing into a third thing by this interchange and experience"

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