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DIASPORIC DILEMMA, NOSTALGIA AND ATTAINING AN IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT



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The present study is based on the analysis of diaspora and nostalgia experienced as the major theme by the characters of two selective stories such as, When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine and The Third and Final Continent in the short story collection "Interpreter of Maladies" by award winning Indian American author Jhumpa Lahiri. The paper begins with a brief introduction about diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri and the book "Interpreter of Maladies" (published in 1999). The introduction is preceded by defining the two stories such as When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine and The Third and Final Continent as the short stories of major study of the paper. A short summary of the stories are given one after the other along with a sketch on the aspects such as diaspora, war, secularism, self identity, time, advancement of science and technology as the factors that influence the imposing of the cultural displacement with reference to characters such as Lilia and her immigrant parents along with Mr. Pirzada in When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine and the characters of the narrator and his wife Mala in the story The Third and Final Continent. Then the paper is concluded with Lahiri's message of life and its challenges to the reader, portraying a contemporary picture keeping in relation to the present day scenario all over the world.

Key words: Cultural displacement, nostalgia, becoming something.

The formation of a Diaspora could be articulated as the quintessential journey into becoming; a process marked by incessant regroupings, recreations, and reiteration. -Okwui Enwezor

The term 'diaspora' is descended from the Greek word 'diaspeirein', meaning "to scatter, spread about." Diaspora first entered English Language in the late 19th Century, eventually used widely and specifically for scholarly writings. In modern day this definition implies the sense of cultural displacement. The history of the term diaspora shows how a word's meaning can spread from a very specific sense to encompass much broader ones. From the Greek word meaning, 'to scatter,' a diaspora is defined as a community of

people who do not live in their country of origin, but maintain their heritage in a new land. They have their ancestral roots from one country but reside in a different place. A major requirement for diaspora to exist is "Dispersion". Dispersion refers to a movement away from a particular space, something like the petals of a dandelion blowing in the wind. Consequently, diaspora has been associated with loss and exile; two words that denote suffering and tragedy. Hence, a multitude of diaspora has occurred globally due to religious, social, political, economic, and even natural forces. These forces have ranged anywhere from violent revolutions to massive earthquakes, essentially anything that disrupts the normal flow of life. However, there is no clear and definite definition of the term diaspora,

but it can be well understood by stating that, diaspora is the act of displacing an individual from the culture of his native land to that of a foreign land. In other words it can be said that a migrated individual is placed under a cultural shock which defines the difficulties of the individual's adaptation towards the new customs of living in a new land.

The following study throws light on the impact of such a displacement felt by the characters of the three selected stories from *Interpreter of Maladies* written by Jhumpa Lahiri, in both internal and external aspects. Lahiri analyses the cultural displacement as a challenge imposed on the characters of her stories such as Lilia and her immigrant parents along with Mr. Pirzada in *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*; characters of Mrs. Sen and young Elliot in *Mrs. Sen* and the characters of the narrator and his wife Mala in the story *The Third and Final Continent*.

Nilanjana Sudheshna Lahiri was born on July 11, 1967, in London, England, to Bengali parentage. Her family nickname was, 'Jhumpa,' which was come to be used by school teachers. Lahiri went on to attend Barnard College in New York, with a focus on English literature. She then joined the student body of Boston University, earning three literary master's degrees before receiving her doctorate in Renaissance studies. As an author Jhumpa Lahiri published her debut in 1999, *Interpreter of Maladies*, winning the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. She followed up in 2003 with her first novel, *The Namesake*, and returned to short stories with the No. 1 New York Times best-seller *Unaccustomed Earth*. She is a member of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, appointed by U.S. President Barack Obama. Her book *The Lowland*, published in 2013 was partially inspired by real-world political events, it later went to be nominated for the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award for Fiction. Jhumpa Lahiri is currently making contributions to the field of literature as a professor of creative writing at Princeton University.

The story "When Mr. Pirzada came to dine" has an impact of homesickness, the raging civil war between Dacca and Pakistan and the selfless love and humanity among Indians all over the world. The

story starts with young Lilia; born to Indian-American parents, remembering her past experiences at home, learning about the independence of India and meeting Mr. Pirzada. However, she has no memory of his first visit. Her parents were Indians from Calcutta and regularly looked for people with surnames familiar to their part of the world in the university directory. Through turning pages and letters they discovered Mr. Pirzada and invited him to their home. Eventually, Lilia was accustomed to his presence every night at home for dinner. They never had a direct conversation; she was more of a listener to her parents and Mr. Pirzada's exchange of dialogues, never participating, just silently listening. Through their stories she came across the land of her ancestors, growing problems in India and Dacca fighting for freedom from the ruling regime in the west. Dacca was Mr. Pirzada's homeland. He had a family of six daughters and a wife of twenty years. He had come to New England to study foliage which was sponsored by the government of Pakistan. Lilia was charmed by Mr. Pirzada's broad elegance and flattered by his faint theatrics and gestures. Every night he used to get chocolates and mints for her. One night Lilia's mother complained of him showering gifts on her and that it may spoil her to which he dramatically replies "I only spoil children who are incapable of spoiling" (WMPCTD 23). Lilia cherished each and every piece of chocolate given to her as a jewel and coveted in her sandalwood box. Another incident on the day of Halloween made Lilia cheer in delight as well as made her feel a bit awkward, when Mr. Pirzada suggested to accompany her and her classmate for trick-or-treating so that they feel secure and return home safely. She adored the personality of Mr. Pirzada and his pampering. These incidents show the intense bond Mr. Pirzada shared with her family, how he cared for Lilia as if she were his own child ... as if he saw a vivid reflection of his six beautiful daughters in her. Mr. Pirzada was living in the states and his family in Dacca. He carried a pocket watch which was set to the local time in Dacca, his eyes used to glance at it every now and then, probably making him think what his family must be doing and missed the warmth of their souls. Even the suits

which he wore were specially crafted by Indian tailors. The materials he carried along with him do display the connection he wishes to continue in use even though he is living miles apart and in an absolutely new environment and culture. These elements used in this story portray a sense of disbandment and a longing desire to go home.

To Lilia it felt like a ceremonial practice every night at dinner, to sit at the coffee table and eat rice and lentils while watching the national news with her father and Mr. Pirzada. Civil war was raging in Dacca; destructive visions were playing on the screen and those images flashed in miniature across Mr. Pirzada's eyes, she observed. Lilia thought the only way which made them connect to that part of the world was TV; it kept her parents updated about the situations broiling in the east. The mind of young Lilia was exhausted, she felt a strange attachment with Mr. Pirzada's family, and she often wondered about the adversities his family must be suffering in. Somewhere she could not relate herself to the position of his young daughters living in those miserable conditions. Lilia was brought up in a secured world, her heart thronged with pain to see the news of destruction and the stoic eyes of Mr. Pirzada wanting to weep, she felt helpless, her worried soul made frequent prayers, her mind ceaselessly thought about the day Mr. Pirzada reuniting with his loved family. She knew he would be dearly missed by her family but it was more important for him to be with his own people. The author gracefully portrays the level of maturity in a young girl's mind, how she learns to overcome from the trivialities of life and cares to feel considerate about the people surrounding her.

Lilia's parents no doubt enjoyed the company of Mr. Pirzada, but they did have an indignant attitude towards his place of origin. It may not be profound but somewhere in their conscience they did not consider him to be one of them i.e. an Indian. The father spoke in a displeased manner while he addressed Mr. Pirzada, he advises Lilia to, "... No longer consider an Indian"(WMPCTD 25), further adding "Our country was divided in 1947" (WMPCTD 25) thus trying to ingrain in the mind of his child that Mr. Pirzada is from a different nation which was partitioned from theirs by war. They

spoke the same language; laughed at same jokes, looked more or less similar and enjoyed similar eating habits still her father felt a difference which cared to be explained through geographical maps. Lahiri beautifully ends the search of difference in nationality in Lilia's mind. During the times of crisis and destructive war raging in Dacca, Lilia concludes her search as she observes Mr. Pirzada and her parents "... operating... as a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear" (WMPCTD 41). Through this story Lahiri is able to characterize the wistful longing of a man to return to his homeland, the desperate efforts of a family helping him to reach his homeland, and the dreadful impact of war. Thus, making the reader realize that there is in fact no dominant distinction among people, no partition affects mankind and dispersion does lead on to make new relationships and create stronger bonds among people. In the end it lies in the innate nature of man to help his fellowmen in times of crisis or not and that's what makes a difference.

The work "The third and final continent" has a depth driven plot which allows glimpse into the lives of characters both in India, the states and about human relationships. The protagonist of the story is a young bachelor hailing from a middle class bengali family from Kolkata, who has big dreams in his eyes and is struggling to educate and establish himself abroad. He left India in 1964(the first continent), to study in LSE, London, lived with a group of penniless bengali bachelors like him and worked in the library only to earn hand-to-mouth. In 1969 he turned thirty-six years and got married with a talented and homely bengali girl which was an arranged affair. Leaving his bride at his paternal home, he shifted to the United States to work in the library of prestigious MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

In first few pages of the story the speaker makes the reader come across his journey and standard of living in these two continents. Both were different in experience and made a major impact on his mind. He felt the subtle tinge of diasporic essence in his plate of life. He gradually adjusted himself to the ways of American living with the help of a guidebook. His life in America

according to him was hectic and it was in this land that he learnt the ways of love and life. Somehow he managed to stay six weeks at the YMCA and immediately searched for rooms on rent as he now had to support his wife. Mrs. Croft was a tiny extremely old woman dressed in a long black skirt spread like stiff tent to the floor and a white shirt with ruffled cuffs. Majority of days she was dressed in this manner, a fine old lady taking out her expenses from room rent which she allotted to only people employed in Harvard or MIT. Mrs. Croft is portrayed as a lady of particular preferences, agreed to rent out her room to our speaker whom she regarded as a gentleman. It was the year astronauts had landed on the shores of the Sea of Tranquility and hoisted American flag on the moon. This news thrilled the soul of 100 year old Mrs. Croft. She frequently used the adjective 'splendid' when she spoke about this event. The same word 'splendid' modified the void in the relationship between the narrator and his wife, when they had come to visit her. The glaze in Mala's eyes, her soft smile made the narrator come across a different aspect to her aura. He was touched with the fact that she travelled far from home, crossed seas over to just be his wife and that one day her death would affect him and his would create a cleft in hers. The distance between them he felt had lessened after their visit at Mrs. Croft. The inevitability and magnanimity of death is well portrayed in the story. The speaker first talks about his own father's death and the devastating effect on his mother. Then he moves on to creating an emotional bond with his wife and how until death comes they won't part away, then beautifully concludes his pent up emotions on reading Mrs. Croft's obituary "... for hers was the first life I had admired; ancient and alone, never to return." (TFATFC 92).

Jhumpa Lahiri is renowned for the finesse and poignancy of her pose, with the ability to subtly, and mesmerizingly build an emotional connection to characters. The characters in her novels are strong, well built and round figures. They evolve and adapt themselves with the situations and content. With a distinctive voice, her storytelling leaves my soul contemplating deep about the challenges people go through in order to settle and make a living abroad,

leaving behind their comfort zone and rustling with relationships and matters of love and longing. These sublimely understated stories are spiced with humor and intense detailing. The emotional confusion and yearnings of exile of the outsider is appreciated by the reader. On asking her about the eloquence of her speech and writing process, Lahiri once said in an interview with the New York Times (2012) - "I hear sentences as I'm staring out the window, or chopping vegetables, or waiting on a subway platform alone." It is indeed a magical thing to arrange a handful of words which affect and alter the mind of real people and make them understand situations artfully and constructively. I would like to conclude my thoughts extracting lines said by our lovely speaker from "The third and final continent" - "As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination." Jhumpa Lahiri's work makes the reader think about the life they are blessed with, the grace of the almighty, and our inner strength. The stories she weaves around her characters leaves a major impact on the mind of the reader thus making him contemplate deep about the challenges in life. The essence of diaspora and nostalgia is well portrayed with the fatalities and trivialities of life.

"The Interpreter of Maladies" has won an array of honors, including the Pulitzer Prize and PEN/Hemingway award.

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