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THE IDEA OF DISPLACEMENT IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "INTERPRETER OF MALADIES"  
WITH REFERENCE TO "WHEN MR. PIRZADA CAME TO DINE",  
"INTERPRETER OF MALADIES" & "MRS. SEN'S"

PUJA GHOSH

Assistant Professor (Contractual), B.H College, Howly, Assam

Email: [Puja.honeydew@gmail.com](mailto:Puja.honeydew@gmail.com)



PUJA GHOSH

ABSTRACT

The present study is based on the idea of displacement as the major theme of the selected short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of maladies". The book contains nine short stories and each one of them deals with the question of identity, alienation, and plight of those who are physically and psychologically displaced. But I would like to limit my studies to the three short stories from the collection viz. "When Mr. Pirzada came to dine", "Interpreter of Maladies", and "Mrs. Sen's". The migration has become one of the most important issues of the contemporary world. Jhumpa Lahiri is also a diasporic writer like Salman Rushdie, V.S Naipaul and Bharati Mukherjee. The characters in the prescribed stories are citizens of more than one country and thus their identities are not fixed. The theme of the stories are the loneliness faced by the dislocation, cultural dislocation and the question of identities faced by the immigrants of the different South-Asian communities.

**KEY WORDS:** Displacement, Identity, Diaspora, Cultural.

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri is a famous Indian American author of Bengali origin. She was born in London, raised in Rhode Island and born to a Bengali parents. Thus she has strong ties to the United States, England as well as her parent's homeland. And growing up with ties to all the three countries, created a sense of homelessness and identity crisis in her. She, in her famous short story collection "Interpreter of Maladies", voiced the pain felt by the immigrants- the breakup of identities, the sense of loneliness experienced by the immigrants, the cultural difference, lack of communication, etc. Interpreter of maladies indicates interpreter of emotional pain and affliction. It is a collection of nine distinct short stories revolved around the first and second generation South-Asian immigrants and the idea of otherness among the country. But I would limit my studies to the three short stories viz.

"When Mr. Pirzada came to dine", "Interpreter of Maladies" and "Mrs.Sen's". The stories interprets the character's struggles, sufferings and sacrifices. Most of the characters in the stories are the citizens of more than one country and so their identities are not fixed. And displacement here does not mean physical displacement, it means both the psychological and physical displacement. We can find displacement in various forms in the stories- Cultural displacement, displacement due to political reasons, displacement due to marriage, etc. whether or not she suggested a cure, Jhumpa Lahiri endeavours to interpret the maladies of the mind of the characters in the book.

The first story "When Mr. Pirzada came to dine" deals with the theme of cultural displacement. The act of displacing an individual from the culture of his native land to that of a foreign land is called cultural displacement. The individual hence finds it

difficult to adapt towards the new customs of living in the new land. The story is narrated by a young Indian-American girl named Lilia. Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani botanist, is studying in New England during the breakout of the Indo-Pakistani war in 1971. Lilia meets Mr. Pirzada regularly at her home because her family routinely invites him to dinner. The story is written from a third person point of view of the ten years old Lilia. When Mr.Pirzada was in Boston, the political unrest started in Dacca. Lilia is caught between the traditions of her parents and the American cultures. Lilia cannot understand the remark made by her father that Mr.Pirzada is no longer the same as his parents since the partition of India and Pakistan, "Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian" (IOM, 25). Even then, the young Lilia is incapable of getting the distinction- "It made no sense to me. Mr.Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same." (IOM, 25). Through the visit of Mr.Pirzada, she comes to learn about the war of Pakistan, the history of India's violent independence experienced by her parents. Lilia's mother is very proud of the fact that her daughter was born in America and is away from the problems faced by them in India. She encourages her about the American traditions and does not want her to know about the situations in India- "In her estimation, I knew, I was assured a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity. I would never have to eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from my roof- top, or hide neighbours in water tanks to prevent them from being shot, as she and my father had." (IOM, 26,27). But unlike her mother, her father wants her to know about India, who came to know that the school taught only American history and geography. Lilia's father wanted her to know about India, about the country of her parent's upbringing. Even the school did not support Lilia reading about Dacca in the library. It shows the western colonialism in the story. The following conversation takes place between Lilia and her teacher- "Is this a book part of your report, Lilia. "No, Mrs. Kenyon." "Then I see no reason to consult it.' She said, replacing it in the slim gap on the self." (IOM,33).

Also, through the character of Mr.Pirzada, Lilia learns "What it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away." (IOM,42). Mr. Pirzada missed his family and mostly his seven daughters. His pocket watch was always fixed on with the standard time of his country. He always worried about his family back in Pakistan. By witnessing the love and fear of Mr. Pirzada for his family, Lilia gains a new awareness of a world larger than her own. Moreover, Mr. Pirzada is curious about the American cultures and customs and Lilia tries to teach him about his culture. She teaches him about Jack-o'-lantern and Halloween, which Mr. Pirzada is curious to know. It is the power of assimilation process for all the immigrants to learn new tradition and customs while maintaining their old tradition and customs.

The war finally ends and Mr. Pirzada returns back to his native country. He has been reunited with his family. Mr. Pirzada's migration comes to an end and he no longer returns to America. The war between India and Pakistan in 1971 is witnessed from a distance in the story. For both Mr.Pirzada and Lilia, the relationship between identity and nationality is not stable. The division of Pakistani and Indians is arbitrary. Both Lilia and her parents have different notions of identity. The culture and religion is the root of identity for Lilia's parents. Whereas, for Lilia, race is the identity.

The title story "Interpreter of maladies" is about the first-generation Indian-American couple Raj and Mina Das who came to visit Konark in Orissa with their three children, from New Jersey. They hire a tour guide by the name of Mr. Kapasi. Mr. Kapasi works as a tour guide in the weekends and works as an interpreter in a doctor's office during the week days. Mina Das, the wife comments that Mr.Kapasi's job as an interpreter is romantic- "But so romantic, Mrs. Das said dreamily, breaking her extended silence." (IOM,50). Mina Das thought that the patients were completely dependent on Mr.Kapasi. The medication is of no use if one is not able to interpret the malady at first. But Mr. Kapasi had never any high esteem about his job. Thus the comment 'romantic' arouses a feeling of romanticism in Mr.Kapasi, as his own marriage was going through crisis. He begins fantasizing about her.

The story "Interpreter of Maladies" is about interpreting one's maladies. In order to overcome one's malady, one has to interpret it at first. Mina Das also suffers from a malady. Her malady is deep-rooted and she had been suffering from it since seven years. For the first time in her life, she reveals to Mr.Kapasi that her younger son Bobby was not her husband's. Raj and Mina got married very young. She was overwhelmed when she conceived very early. She spent her days in her house, nursing the baby and taking care of the house. Raj became very busy with his teaching assignments and life became dull and drab for Mina. Her problems became more complicated when she conceived Bobby because of a sexual encounter with one of Raj's friend. She kept the secret for eight years and finally revealed it to Mr. Kapasi. She thought that Mr.Kapasi is the right one who could interpret her malady and give proper solutions to her problems- "Eight years, Mr.Kapasi, I've been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy." (IOM,65). Mr.Kapasi, because of his typical Indian background and patriarchal ideology could not understand the depth of her problem. Instead he was disgusted. He felt that it was his duty to assist Mrs.Das and said- "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs.Das, or is it guilt?"(IOM,66) Mina Das was not ready to accept that it was her guilt that made her suffer. Mr.kapasi could not understand the fact that it was because of her unhappiness and dullness in her marriage that caused her to have an extra-marital sexual relationship. He considers it as an act of unfaithfulness towards her husband. In the story, Jhumpa Lahiri shows how the Indians and Americans are caught in the middle of two different cultures. Mr.Kapasi wanted to have a close relationship with Mrs.Das, he fantasized about her. But as soon as, he came to know about her secrets of the affair, Mr.Kapasi was disgusted. Mr.kapasi's relationship with his wife is similar to Mr. Das's relationship with his wife, Mina Das. This story deals with the theme of communication gap and broken marriage.

The culture of the two nations clashes in the story. The cultures of the East clashes with the cultures of the West. For example, Mr Das like a typical American squeezes Mr.kapasi's hand,

whereas Mr.Kapasi presses his palms in greetings. Further, Mr. and Mrs.Das does not behave like couples, they behave like an older brother and sister. Infact they behave like they are in charge of the children for one day- "It was hard to believe that they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves." (IOM,49) All the characters are isolated from one another in one form or the other- the husbands are isolated from their wives, the children are isolated from their parents, the immigrants are isolated from their home and family. Distancing from one's culture results in the loss of identity and thereby results in broken and fragmented self-image. The story also shows the tension of wanting to belong to the new society and also wanting to retain their old cultures.

The next story, "Mrs.Sen's" is about a Bengali wife brought to America by her husband. Mr. Sen is a university Mathematics teacher and remains busy at his work place. Thus, Mrs. Sen feels lonely and isolated in her home. We find that Mrs. Sen completely tosses between the past and the present. Her life is full of boredom and she always misses her home. When Mrs. Sen says home, she does not mean her apartment in America, home for her is her home in India- "But then Eliot understood that when Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables." (IOM,116) She finds her life in America irritating and bore. Thus, in order to cure her boredom, she baby sits an eleven years young boy named Eliot. But Eliot's mother is concerned about the fact that Mrs. Sen can't drive. Mrs. Sen is attached to India and remarks- "Yes I am learning, but I am a slow student. At home you know we have a driver."(IOM,113) Though she is physically in the United States, she always longs for India. She has been physically displaced from her home. She completely becomes nostalgic about her memories of India.

Eliot observed that it was two things that made Mrs. Sen happy in the alien country she lived. The first thing was the arrival of letters from her family, and the second was Fish. It was her custom to check the mailbox every day after the driving practice. And buying and eating fish represents her way of staying close to home back in India, while she is living in the United States. Mrs. Sen said- "she had

grown up eating fish twice a day, Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they are lucky.”(IOM,123) Fish was an essential part of her daily life back in Calcutta and it shows her sense of displacement in the United States because she can't find appropriate fish in the United States.

Eliot also observes the cultural difference between the two nations while his stay with Mrs.Sen. Mrs.sen asks Eliot if the neighbours would arrive if she screams. She says that back in India, all they had to do was just raise the voice a bit, and the neighbours would be there for help. She shared her life, her joy's and sufferings, her Indian memories with Eliot. She always talks about her life in Calcutta. It shows how she misses her previous life in Calcutta and reveals her homesickness for her homeland. She wants to emotionally escape the place with her daily activities. Instead of learning how to drive, she spends her days cooking and doing the household chores. Thus, by the character of Mrs. Sen, Lahiri shows the emotional exile the immigrants faces when they are forced to leave one's native place.

In short, Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies" presents the theme of loss of identity, the sense of belonging and displacement. The stories interpret the emotional pain and affliction felt by the characters. It represents the character's sufferings and struggles in a foreign land. Her characters are from South-Asia who wants to connect both to their host country and also to the country of their origin. And in doing so, they suffer from the sense of alienation from both the countries. The first- generation stresses to connect to their roots, whereas the second generation wants to connect with the host culture. The stories also shows the difficulties of relationship, the problems of communication and a loss of identity for those in diaspora. The characters are torn between the two worlds and they struggle with the feelings of exile. She discusses the dilemmas faced by the displaced beings. Whether the character is a woman recently immigrated to America or a botanist who came to America from Pakistan, all the characters display the effect of displacement in a diaspora. Some are homesick, some are lost in the new world and some misses their family. Whether the story is set in

America or India, it speaks with universal eloquence to anyone who has ever felt the yearnings of exile or the emotional confusion of the outsider.

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