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**JHUMPA LAHIRI'S: INTERPRETER OF MALADIES: A NOVEL OF DIASPORA AND
CROSS-CULTURAL IDENTITY**

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ABSTRACT

As Lahiri points out, her status as a racial —other creates ambiguity about her identity. The stories give the readers the subtle way in which the fictionist probes into various maladies that disrupt relationships between protagonists living in exile. As they cope with life in the new world, their emotional turmoil continues to be the focus of Lahiri's attention. Being an immigrant herself, Lahiri makes her soul searching study very absorbing, interpreting maladies as the dynamics of cultural identity and diaspora continue to intimidate her characters. Imbued with the sensual details of both Indian and American cultures, these stories speak with universal eloquence and compassion to everyone who has ever felt like an outsider. Like the interpreter of the title story—selected for both the O. Henry Award and The Best American Short Stories—Lahiri translates between the ancient traditions of her ancestors and sometimes baffling prospects of the New World.

Key Words: Racial, ambiguity, cultural identity, diaspora, immigrant

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most significant writers of the Indian diaspora in the present time. Her prose is scattered with details of traditional Indian names, food, cooking and wardrobe, giving character and flavour to her stories. The rhythmic sentences and her adept talent for depicting people and landscapes lull the reader. This is illustrated in the following excerpt from *The Treatment of Bibi Halder*:

At her insistence, we showed her our own photo albums embossed with designs of butterflies, she pored over the snapshots that chronicled the ceremony; butter poured in fires, garlands exchanged, vermilion-painted fish, trays of shells and silver coins. (IM 160)

The sharp contrast between India and America is visible at almost every step and in every story. Lahiri is very objective in her comparison.

While she brings out the warm, loving nature of the Indians, she also notes down the benefits of being in America. In spite of all the independence, luxuries and comforts provided by America, the immigrants experience a dire need to meet and talk to people from their own land. They do miss the love and affection of their own people. Lilia observes her parents closely who used to trail their fingers at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world. (IM 24)

Interpreter of Maladies is replete with references to Indian food items. Food, though apparently a trivial matter, plays a very significant role in society as well as in nation. It symbolizes privilege, economic class and social position. For immigrants and non-residents, food becomes associated with their identity. It induces a sense of belonging in a foreign land. Here, familiar items of

food bring immense pleasure. Hence, it becomes a significant aspect of cultural exchange and bonding. Jhumpa Lahiri uses food and dining as a vehicle to display the deterioration of familial bonds, community, and culture through the transition from Indian to American ways of life. This is most evident in the short stories *A Temporary Matter*, *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, and *Mrs. Sen's*.

In the story entitled *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, food comes as a fistful soil from the motherland. Food is the factor that binds Mr. Pirzada with Lilia's family. Mr. Pirzada comes from Dacca whereas Lilia's parents are from India. But they relish the same food and this establishes affinity between them. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands: "Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea." (IM 25)

Lahiri's *Mrs. Sen's* describes food as Mrs. Sen's home, family, friend and her own country. She is a typical Bengali for whom fish is inevitable. Absence of fish in the diet for some time makes her sulk like a child. She shares her passion for Bengali food with Eliot. Whenever the fish arrives at the local stores, it is the greatest news for her.

The Third and Final Continent revolves around the life of a Bengali gentleman who pursues his studies in Britain and his job in America. In spite of their contact with three continents, he and his wife still maintain their cultural identity and food is one of the most important factors that help them in retaining their Indianness. Even in America the smell of steamed rice (IM 192) and a dish of chicken made with fresh garlic and ginger on the stove (IM 193) makes his apartment a home.

Thus, food is one of the most significant links binding the non-residential Indians to their motherland. Even in India, most of these characters speak English, but English food has not become an intrinsic part of the diasporic identity. Not only the food items but eating habits also build up an Indian atmosphere in an alien land. Lilia observes the way Mr. Pirzada has his meals, calmly creating a well in his rice to make room for a second helping of lentils'. The

wife and the husband in *The Third and the Final Continent* are anxious whether their son would retain his Indian way of eating food: "We drive him to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die." (IM 197) The representation of the Indian culture is inherently present throughout her stories. Yet, it does not become exaggerated. In spite of the differences in ages, nationalities and religions, Lahiri's characters demonstrate the universality of life experiences. In *The Third and Final Continent*, we see the cultural differences between India, London and the U.S. through the eyes of a young Indian man. The story depicts not only the isolation of the immigrants travelling to a foreign country, but also describes the yearning and craving for love that lies in every human heart. Through the interaction between the young man and his aged landlady, the author shows how soothing and comforting life can become if there is someone who can just listen to you for a few moments regardless of the age and the nation to which one belongs. The young man's simple gestures everyday could fill some colour into the life of the old and lonely landlady: "I gave her a bit of my company, and assured her that I had checked the lock, and told her that the flag on the moon was splendid. Some evenings I sat beside her long after she had drifted off to sleep ... On Fridays I made sure to put the rent in her hands." (IM 189)

These characters —live in exile, as Lahiri herself observes, and these are —defining and redefining the Indian-American diaspora identity|| in particular and immigrant patches to this promise land in general. Love, tradition and identity issues are always at the heart of the story and of the characters. Who find happiness are those who can embrace their present circumstance while at the same time never forget their Indian roots. We learn about Mrs. Sen who sits on her floor everyday chopping vegetables in the same way she did in India, with the same knife she used there. Her adherence to an insistent Bengali identity is evident in the fact that she doesn't even use a conventional western knife. She brings from India a special Blade carved like the prow of a Vikings ship' used for cutting food ingredients. The

blade which is called *bonti* in Bengali, is not a mere tool, it is in Mrs. Sen's recollection the symbolic center of a community of Indian women. If *bonti* symbolizes Mrs. Sen's Bengali identity, her vexed relationship with the car represents the failure to forge a successful Bengali-American self. Ashutosh Dubey suggests that Mrs. Sen's stubborn refusal to learn driving can be seen as a subconscious way of her resistance to the dictated terms of this new world. —Brought up in a culture where she could rely on a Chauffeur-driven car, Mrs. Sen is simply unable to master the quintessentially American skill of driving. —To gain access to the fish she craves, she has to call her husband at work and coax him to go to the seaside shop that sells the fresh catch. (IM 117)

Although in other stories in this collection, we are presented with some immigrant women, as in *Interpreter of Maladies* and in *The Third and the Final Continent*, who may find a balance between Bengal and America, Mrs. Sen, early in the story, asserts of her home in Calcutta: —Everything is there....Here is nothing (IM 118). It suggests that Mrs. Sen's psychological state is not conducive to adaptation and assimilation. Perhaps it is meant to see the story as a snapshot of a woman in the early years of her life as a struggling immigrant. However, there is a point which is worth contemplating: this story is not written by someone from the community of the first generation of immigrants but by Jhumpa Lahiri, as a member of the second generation and as an academic, who is supposed to, a large extent, has been immersed in American culture through education and living. The point is that she is not yet a part of America as its founders suggested.

Lahiri's collection echoes both the traditional identity politics of immigration to develop balance and harmony in the new world and modern identity politics of locating the hole in post-American texture of human geography which keeps silence about the place and significance of the groups. While the former politicizes identity of immigrants as free individuals with the whole democratic society on the assumption of the rule of majority, the recent settlers understand freedom of individuals within the cultural, religious and ethnic groups to protect their liberal identity in a multicultural context. As John Fonte argues, while rereading Francis Fukuyama's

article published in Journal of Democracy (2006), —today multiculturalism [is]understood not just as tolerance of cultural diversity [to value individuals], but as the demand for legal recognition of racial, religious or cultural groups|| (Fonte 2006). Therefore, although the readers of Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* are oscillated between balanced and imbalanced cases of the immigrants, they are illustrated with such characters floating in the ocean of India and Indians.

The stories with an American setting indicate a changing national cast of real and fictional characters. For instance, Mrs. Sen, the protagonist of her eponymous story, is a fish out of water for feeling diminished without a daily regime of fresh halibut (fish): at least other 50000 immigrants from Bengal share her tastes. *The Third and the Final Continent*' is a descriptive and emotional piece that portrays the isolation of immigrants travelling to a foreign country.

Many characters of Jhumpa Lahiri are also derived from autobiographical experiences. Bibi Haldar, for instance, is one such character. Lahiri has herself said in an interview that for that story, she took as her subject a young woman whom she got to know over the course of a couple of visits. She never saw her having any health problems – but she knew that the woman wanted to get married.

The characters are semi-real and most of them are composites, but situations are invented. Mr. Pirzada is a man who actually went to Lahiri's place but she was only four then, not ten. She had seen photos of him in the family album but knew only that he was a Muslim. She had no details. Their relationship is imagined. Mrs. Sen is based on Lahiri's mother who babysat in their home. She saw her one way but imagined that an American child may see her differently, reacting with curiosity, fascination, or fear to the things Lahiri took for granted. In the presentation of woman, Lahiri doesn't stray too far beyond societal parameters. She does not go deep into the psyche of woman or does not unravel each and every emotion for her primary theme is that of expatriates. Though the presentation of Indians and Indianness is her chief aim, her characters have universal traits. Her stories are emotional chess

games, focusing largely on the subtleties of the characters' internal processing. With their fragile emotional states, hesitant gestures and tightrope wanderings on the brink of psychological rupture, characters are waxed into exploring assorted facets of morality, alienation, list and dysfunction. A taxi driver in the title story fantasizes about a married passenger who confesses her deepest secrets to him with hopes of either insight or absolution. *Sexy peeps* into the complexities of intercultural infidelity with a married man; and it is declared that only —relations|| will —calm the blood of a village outcast afflicted with a most mysterious ailment in *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar*. In *The Third and Final Continent*, versions of solitude and isolation are displayed with cultural and generational twists through the young man and his landlady. All these characters manifest the universal traits i.e. the need for love, warmth and even physical relationship. Lahiri portrays her characters from an objective point of view and is quite non-judgmental about them. However, she breathes unpredictable life into the characters and the reader finishes each story reseduced, wishing she could spend a whole novel with its character.

Interpreter of Maladies is the result of the writer's desire to force the two worlds she occupied to mingle on the page as she was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life (Lahiri, *My Two Lives*). The stories, set across national, but also generation, or gender frontiers, contribute to the writer's finally finding an identity of her own, reconciling her two selves as, —like many immigrant offspring, I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen (Lahiri, *My Two Lives*). Consequently, the collection may be interpreted as the writer's journey into her new, even if not necessarily true, self, a journey of initiation into the major adaptation problems of the contemporary world. The writer's journey, partially recorded in her stories, evolves from the condition of the individual for whom one plus one did not equal two but zero, my conflicting selves always cancelling each other out|| to that of the individual finally aware that one plus one equals two, both in my work and in my daily existence, [the] traditions on either side of the hyphen dwell[ing] in me like siblings, still occasionally

sparring, one outshining the other depending on the day (Lahiri, *My Two Lives*)

On a first reading, Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories seems to offer an image of the complicated cultural relationships between India and the West, investigating the troubled position of the displaced individual caught between two cultures which, in most cases, he/ she finds unfamiliar. On a second, more in-depth reading, all the stories record journeys across visible and invisible frontiers that the characters must transgress in order to find their real self.

Lahiri explores the idea that identity, especially for immigrants, is something that must be sought. We gain a sense of identity through family, society and culture. For the culturally displaced, this is a difficult endeavour. The speaker in *The Third and Final Continent* searches for his identity across continents. He is born in Asia, travels to Europe to study, and finally immigrates to North America. Although he has adapted to the British way of life as a student, it is not a true cultural integration as he lives in a house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like [himself] (IM 173). He attempts to keep his cultural identity intact by keeping the most trivial of Indian traditions alive, such as eating egg curry (IM 173). When he is posted to America he relies on the Britishness that he has learned in London, converting ounces to grams and comparing prices to things in England (IM 175) as a survival strategy. His search for identity is further strained by his arranged marriage, more or less to enroot his new job in America, to a woman he has never met. In America, his cultural conflict is manifest in his refusal to eat hamburgers or hot dogs (IM 175), as the consumption of beef is sacrilegious according to his Hindu beliefs.

The speaker is burdened with a fragmented sense of identity; constantly pulled in opposite directions between Indian culture and the need to assimilate in America. When he meets his centenarian landlady, Mrs Croft, he is bewildered by her age and her repetitious phrases while admiring her strength in surviving for so long. In contrast to his relationship with his own mother, whose rejection of life had further exacerbated the speaker's sense of emotional isolation, through his fondness for Mrs.

Croft, and his admiration for her ability to accept the inevitable, he gradually learns that, although he is bewildered by each mile [he has] traveled ... each person [he has] known' (IM 198), life is a strange amalgam.

In contrast with the speaker, his wife Mala is able to maintain her identity because she takes on the role of a traditional Indian wife. The speaker finds their relationship strained, however they were strangers (IM 192) until during a visit to Mrs. Croft, who measures Mala through her own innate sense of decorum rather than her exotic dissimilarities to the American ideal, declares her to be a perfect lady (IM 195). The speaker sees only their differences, whereas Mrs. Croft appreciates Mala's grace and charm. The speaker's ability to adjust is, Lahiri points out, a human adaptation. He has discovered that the ability to feel at home no matter what country he lives in comes only from having a strong sense of self. The ambition that had first hurled [him] across the world (IM 197) is part of his ability to know himself and to recognize that the strength he gains from his origins is the ideal foundation on which to build a strong identity. The frontier itself requires a more nuanced interpretation. It is not only the visible, national, in particular, frontier, between cultures that people have to cross, but also the invisible frontiers which separate individuals belonging to one and the same culture. The frontier is an elusive line, visible and invisible, physical and metaphorical, amoral and moral (Rushdie 411) and the idea behind Lahiri's stories is that we all have to fight our share of frontier wars. Jhumpa Lahiri seems to fictionally agree that the journey creates us. We become the frontiers we cross (Rushdie 410). And this is mainly because she herself, although born in London and then spending the rest of her life in the United States, was, however, born to Bengali Indian parents, which inevitably made her be looked at as an immigrant and the immigrant's journey, no matter how ultimately rewarding, is founded on departure and deprivation, [although] it secures for the subsequent generation a sense of arrival and advantage (Lahiri, *My Two Lives*).

It is primarily because of her origin that the critics were tempted to include *Interpreter of Maladies*, and her subsequent productions, in the Asian American literature section and to approach it

as a sample of Asian American writing. Yet, we consider that Lahiri's artistic intention is more specifically associated with her desire to move beyond the stereotypical image of Indianness and, through her writing, to find an identity and discover a voice able to help her overcome the stigma of marginality (Hoffman 268).

Out of the nine stories, three are set in India, whereas six are set in America, focusing on the lives of first or second generation Americans of Indian origin. According to Michiko Kakutani, Many of Ms. Lahiri's people are Indian immigrants trying to adjust to a new life in the United States, and their cultural displacement is a kind of index of a more existential sense of dislocation. (Kakutani 48)

Yet, apart from the setting of some of the stories and the clearly indicated origin of the protagonists of some other, Lahiri's collection seems to resist the stereotypes of Indianness and the clichés associated with the inevitable clash between the East and the West. The writer is more inclined to do away with prejudice and go beyond the stereotypical images that in most cases underlie and undermine these relationships. The encounter between the East and the West, the migration of individuals across national frontiers is nothing but a pretext for Lahiri to probe deep into the difficulties generated by the encounter between the self and the Other, into the condition of the troubled modern self and, more importantly, to investigate human nature. In this respect, Jhumpa Lahiri's writings develop along lines characteristic for most contemporary fiction, equally interested in the essence of the individual consciousness and in the self as the converging point of various cultural forces, considering both the private and the public spheres and the way in which they interact and influence each other.

Lahiri's stories explore human relations in a cultural context, but the writer's approach to culture seems to be in terms of the two possible paradigms, large and respectively small culture. Culture is thus looked at both as the large ethnic, national or international entities and as any cohesive social grouping with no necessary subordination to large cultures (Holliday, Hyde, Kullman 63). Therefore, none of the stories exclusively focuses on the

encounter between the large cultures or on the one between and within the small cultures, but rather on the tension generated by the fact that individuals perform evolve in both. Lahiri's characters seem to confirm that dislocation is the norm rather than the aberration in our time, but even in the unlikely event that we spend an entire lifetime in one place, the fabulous diverseness with which we live reminds us constantly that we are no longer the norm and the centre [...]. (Hoffman 275)

It is no longer and only the clash between national cultures that represents the writer's main interest, although some of Lahiri's protagonists do seem to conform to the typical image of the contemporary migrant, the individual severed from his roots, often transplanted into a new language, always obliged to learn the ways of a new community [...] forced to face the great questions of change and adaptation (Rushdie 415). It is the case of the protagonist of *The Third and Final Continent* who looks at himself from the very beginning as the typical migrant. He says, I left India in 1964, with a certificate in commerce and the equivalent, in those days, often dollars to my name. [...] I lived in north London, in Finsbury Park, in a house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like myself, [...] all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad. (IM 173)

It is also the case of Mrs. Sen in *Mrs. Sen's* or Shoba and Shukumar in *A Temporary Matter*. Lahiri's attempt is to see beyond the visible frontiers and to plunge deeper into the springs of human action. That is why she frequently deals with problematic relationships between individuals within one and the same society, be it American or Indian. Many of her stories treat marriage and the tense relationships within couples.

This Blessed House focuses on the troubled relationships within the couple. At the urging of their matchmakers, [Sanjeev and Twinkle] married in India, amid hundreds of well-wishers (IM 143) just to realize soon how different they are and how lonely they felt. Miranda, the protagonist of *Sexy* also feels insecure in the relationship she has with a married man, the story being about her becoming aware of her displacement and loneliness.

A Temporary Matter is about a couple growing estranged from each other after the death of their child and how they become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible (IM 4). It is fully set in America, but Shoba and Shukumar are of Indian origin. The story is far from analyzing their inability to adapt to a hostile cultural environment. It rather focuses on the deteriorating relationships between a husband and a wife after the death of their child and, although the two would be expected to stick together given the tragic incident and the threatening cultural environment, the walls separating the young couple become even thicker in spite of their common origin. They find it impossible to communicate and get estranged to the point of separating.

A Real Durwan is set in India and features only characters whose origin is not commented on since they are natives in their own country. The protagonist of the story is a sixty-year-old woman, deported to Calcutta as a result of the Partition, whose problems of adaptability to a new culture are brought to the fore. No one doubted she was a refugee; the accent in her Bengali made that clear (IM 72), which is why she is always inclined to exaggerate her past at such elaborate lengths and heights (IM 73) in order to protect herself against the aggressiveness of the new cultural environment. From the point of view of the Westerner inclined to prejudice and stereotyping, the story might be read as focusing on the cruelty of the Indians and their indifference to the Other, since Boori Ma, accused of theft by those whom she had served for years in exchange for a shelter, is cruelly thrown into the street. Yet, if one forgets that the story's setting is Calcutta, one realizes that the story is about failed human relationships, about indifference and cruelty caused by poverty. Out of the nine stories, one seems to have a more accentuated political content, in the sense that, because of an explicit reference to the Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971, the reader is tempted to see it as dealing with contemporary political issues.

[Mr. Pirzada] came from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, but then [1971] a part of Pakistan. That year Pakistan was engaged in civil war.

The eastern frontier, where Dacca was located, was fighting for autonomy from the ruling regime in the west. (IM 23)

The story, however, narrated from the point of view of the child Lilia, definitely resists politicizing, bringing to the fore instead issues related to identity and intercultural communication. It is the child's way of perceiving the world and her consciousness that represents the story's main interest. Lilia is the one whose initiation depends on her becoming aware of the difference between the self and the other across the visible and the invisible frontiers. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, [...] drank no alcohol [...]. Nevertheless my father insisted that I understand the difference and he led me to a map of the world taped to the wall over his desk. [...] Mr. Pirzada is Bengali, but he is Muslim,|| my father informed me. Therefore he lives in East Pakistan, not India. (IM 26)

Yet, although Lahiri's work may be interpreted as essentially focusing on the problems of immigrants, her real subject is miscommunication. The relationships in her stories are a series of missed connections|| (Brians 196). It is not so much the visible frontiers that the writer seems to be obsessed with as the invisible ones that do tend to keep people apart. The individual in Lahiri's stories is not simply Indian or American, Indian in America, or Indian in India, or American of Indian origin in India. The individual is rather the focus of much more complicated cultural relations and tensions. Culture, therefore, for Lahiri, is not understood in an essentialist manner, as national culture, homogeneous and unitary, but as a fluid, creative social force which binds different groupings and aspects of behaviour in different ways, both constructing and constructed by people in a piecemeal fashion to produce myriad combinations and configurations. (Holliday, Hyde, Kullman 3)

Ever since *Interpreter of Maladies* was published, she has been variously proclaimed to be an American writer, an Indian American author, an NRI (non-residential Indian), and an ABCD (American born confused desi). Her writings are described as diaspora fiction|| by Indian scholars and immigrant fiction by American critics. (Shuchen 126) It is just by

overcoming our tendency to label and to see and interpret the world in black and white that we are able to read Lahiri's stories as what they really are an insight into the essentials of life, but also an investigation of the condition of the individual in the contemporary world. According to Brada Williams,

[...] a deeper look reveals the intricate use of pattern and motif to bind the stories together, including the recurring themes of the barriers to and opportunities for human communication; community, including marital, extra-marital, and parent-child relationships; and the dichotomy of care and neglect. (Williams 114)

Lahiri's stories bring to the fore issues related to identity, intercultural communication, the cultural clash, stereotyping and etherizing, and see all these problems as having to do with human nature rather than being strictly associated with the condition of the immigrant or Indianness.

[The] nine stories have in common certain themes and motifs, such as exile, displacement, identity, loneliness, difficult relationships, and problems about communication. (Shuchen 126)

Essentially, Lahiri's stories deal with the encounter between self and other, individual identity being in most cases the result of a mirroring effect. Although ethnicity seems to be central to all the stories, Lahiri is too little interested in ethnic aspects and Indianness is seldom, if ever, exaggerated. She resorts to India either as the setting of her stories or as place or cultural set of customs and beliefs most characters refer themselves to in order to define their identity. The stories also feature characters that are either Indian or Indian American. Yet, what Lahiri tries to avoid is the exoticism associated in the mind of the Westerners with either the locale or the people. She rather investigates and draws attention to problems of more general human interest that have nothing to do with India or being Indian either in India or America.

The stories may be considered equally heterogeneous if analyzed in terms of the narrative technique employed. Two of the stories, *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* and *The Third and Final*

Continent' are first-person narratives. The former is narrated from the point of view of a ten-year child, the latter from the perspective of an Indian emigrant in America. The rest are third-person narratives, but the story is filtered through the consciousness and sensibility of a more or less involved character. It would be difficult to say whether Lahiri's choice of method has anything to do with a certain pattern she has intended for the stories. But the effect she has obtained is a kaleidoscopic one. The reader is offered the possibility to look at the issues the stories deal with from various angles, although we cannot speak about a multiple point of view narrative.

Interpreter of Maladies attempts to offer an interpretation of the maladies of the contemporary society and of the individual inevitably caught between here and there and yet belonging neither here nor there. Just like Mr. Kapasi, Lahiri would like to serve as an interpreter between nations|| (IM 59), but mainly as an interpreter for the modern individual's anxieties and torment.

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