



## JHUMPA LAHIR: THE STORY TELLER PAR EXCELLENCE IN DIASPORIC WRITING, IDENTITY CRISIS AND CULTURAL CONFLICTS.

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### ABSTRACT



#### Article Info:

Article Received 02/02/2016

Revised on: 15/03/2016

Accepted on: 30/03/2016

Jhumpa lahiri (1967), born of Bengal parents, was awarded Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000 for her debut collection of short stories entitled "*Interpreter of Maladies*", (1999). Her very first novel "*The Namesake*" (2003) made her more popular. Her second short story collection "*Unaccustomed Earth*" (2008) has again established her as one of the most excellent and commendable fictionists of the world. Not only a Diaspora writer of Indian origin, but she can also be called an American writer, because of her constant obsession with the American way of life. Her narrative world shuttles between India and the U.S.A. The imbibing of influences of various past or contemporary authors and her excellent narrative technique establish her as one of the towering figures in the World Literature.

Her first collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* has made her suddenly famous almost overnight. It is her first creative work which has received tremendous response and made mark on the contemporary literary scene. According to *The New York Times* Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the best twenty young writers in America today. Her work exemplifies the role that the Diaspora plays in shaping of an artist's imagination.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Identity Crisis,Culture.

#### Citation:

**APA** Bhaskar,V.K (2016) Jhumpa Lahir: The Story Teller Par Excellence in Diasporic Writing, Identity Crisis and Cultural Conflicts.*Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 3(1), 110-114.

**MLA** Bhaskar,Vijay.K, "Jhumpa Lahir: The Story Teller Par Excellence in Diasporic Writing, IdentityCrisis and Cultural Conflicts,"*Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL* 3.1(2016):110-114.

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A short story writer has to have exceptional skills to create three-dimensional characters though we see them only for a short time in the story. There must be a sudden twist or surprise or shock in the twist of the plot revealing some unexpected endings. For example in all the stories of O. Henry, we see unexpected endings. The protagonists of Lahiri stories are usually or mostly living in the USA or the vice versa. In the very first story *Interpreter of Maladies* set in Boston, we find that the characters move to India especially to Bengal and Orissa. (For sightseeing, **A Temporary Matter**). Lahiri's characters are of all type normal, abnormal, strange, eccentric, whimsical, and freakish and so on. But they would never resemble one another. Shoba's duty was in the office downtown where she searched for topographical errors in textbooks and marked them. It was in a code she had once explained to Shukumar and would do the same for his dissertation when it was ready for submission. He felt jealous of her specificity of her duty, so unlike the allusive nature of his. In his academic abilities he was just a mediocre student who had a facility for absorbing details without curiosity. "Until September he had been diligent if not dedicated summarizing chapters, outlining arguments on pad of yellow lined paper. But now he would lie in their bed until he grew bored, gazing at his side of the closet which Shoba always left partly open, at the row of the tweed jackets and corduroy trousers he would not have to choose from to teach his classes that semester". P.04

This same lack of ability to communicate combined with the loss of identity one feels in an alien culture is described by Mukharjee in the story entitled *A Father*. Mr. Bhomic was in US at his wife's insistence. As a government engineer in Ranchi he had to go through alone and humbling process before he finally got his immigrant visa. However, in Detroit he was lowlier man. When he realizes that his un-married daughter Babli is pregnant, he blames his wife who was responsible for their moving to the US. Though they lived comfortable life in this new alien land, Mr. Bhomic knows that a dozen times a day he made these small trade-offs between new-world reasonableness and old world beliefs. As Kalpana Wandrekar says: Schizophrenia can be the ailment of aliens. (37)

He could not give up many of his old beliefs but did not have the courage to admit; his daughter too was equally confused; girls like Babli were caught between rules, that's the point he wished to make. They were too smart, too impulsive for a backward place like Ranchi, but not tough nor smart for sex-crazy places like Detroit. (P72). The story ends on a violent note whereas in Lahiri's story *A Temporary Matter* the couple is able to bridge their chasm of silence.

Mridul Bordoloi points out:

Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories entitled *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) has 'home' as its major trope of, firstly, valorizing a general spatial fixation and, secondly, locating a point of departure with the 'real' and/or 'imagined' home away from one's reach. Some of the stories, taking different trajectories of exploration, yet arrive at the axial position of deifying and remembering the home of one's nostalgia - 'real' home one does not, cannot and is not allowed to feel too attached with. (29)

Indians who have settled abroad cannot forget the homeland they have left behind. They have to realize the need to adjust socially, economically and culturally. In the story **Mrs. Sen** we see the psychological upheavals and reactions that an immigrant has to face. When Mrs. Sen said they were living. They are unable to move away from the past to make a clean break with their own culture – or difficult aspects in their lives. They recollect the childhood, their memorable days of their youth unable to reconcile to the crazy sexy life of modern foreign cities they suffer and they feel lonely isolated, alienated and therefore, the process of acculturation has become essential. Sometimes it may be painful but immigrants have no choice but to become a part of this new cultural landscape where they settle coming all the way from their homeland. As the writer Meena Alexandar pertinently asks: How long does one have to live somewhere to make it one's home anyway? (64)

The issues of Resistance and protest among the indigenous, settlers, and diasporic communities of the common wealth had been investigated under



political historical, anthropological, social-microscopes by hordes of eminent luminaries. Going beyond the continual pre-occupation with colonizing forces and Narcissism of racial awareness, within a short sphere, let us try to negotiate the territories of human soul viewed as humanity looking back to pre-colonized cultural and aesthetic moorings of ancient wise India represented in the writings of Tagore. Where one talks of the urge to reconnect people who are suppurated, torched, unfairly and loss their lands, nothing can be more appropriate than this tug of Universal Brotherhood. As a representative literature of Diasporic problems, let us examine Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* for remedies of its maladies.

When one cannot connect with the universal collective unconscious due to barriers in the corridors of nationality caused by colonialism or other schisms, people facing identity crisis float about in the periphery of existence. The word perepharality here has been used in this context only. So, to bring these uncertain and confused people (for example Lahiri's characters) back to centre, the 'universality' of artistic and humanistic vision is necessary. The term universality is here used to emphasize the need for spiritual relationship of man with man in the entire world. For universality locates its language now within the national condition.

Jhumpa Lahiri's works are replete with the images of loss and longing. The narratives are necessarily the narratives of pain. She refers to her constant listening to the stories of inconveniences her parents or the friends of her parents encountered in their lives. She feels her sense of pain, alienation, and marginalization, to be a kind of inheritance from her parents. (w.w.w.pbs.org). Home, homeland and food are the most vital aspects of nostalgia. As such we find in her works the metaphors of food and home which make their presence strongly felt in her works. Portraying all her protagonists with their several senses of exile, Jhumpa Lahiri relates them with their fondness for food, etc.

The works of Jhumpa Lahiri have led her to be counted among leading writers like Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Gita Mehta, Shashi Tharoor, Manju Kapur, Shobha De,

Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai and others. The basic theme of her writings is migrant experience relating to different sociological components. They include religion, race and culture based upon loneliness, homelessness, rootlessness, nihilism, existentialism, cultural confrontation in the globalized society, inter pooling, inter netting cross culture, search for roots or identity, above all diasporic dilemma.

The diaspora situation presents hybridity, a dialogically interlinked plurality of social voices or heteroglossia. The Diaspora is derived from Greek word Dia (through) and spora (to scatter) which means scattering or dispersion. It was originally mentioned in the context of Jews or Jewish communities scattered in exile outside Palestine. It carries within it the ambiguous statue of being both an ambassador and a refugee. The requirements of the two roles are different. While one requires the projection of one's culture and the ability to enhance its understanding, the other seeks refuge and protection and relates more positively to the host culture. During the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the term Diaspora is being applied to dispersal of any ethnic group or community outside the country of their origin.

In the works of Jhumpa Lahiri come up conjoining of ethnic identity with that of the national culture (which) is not an attempt at assimilation within the dominant culture, but the preservation of an imagined homogeneous ethnicity attached nostalgically to a distant homeland. Here is involved a unique in-between sensibility created from the conjoining of the two cultures the native and the alien. Diaspora Protagonists are divided between two conflicting and contradictory culture – that is, the native culture and the accultured culture. Their nostalgia impels the contra-acculturation as they become unable to resist the temptation to celebrate their native cultural practices.

Jhumpa Lahiri in her debut novel *The Namesake* weaves a story covering three decades. It is about the Ganguli household in the U.S.A and shows a fine-tuned sensibility along with psychological realism. The Ganguli couple's immigrant experience is contrasted with the acculturation of their American-born children. The naming of their son as Gogol and later changed as



Nikhil represents a conflict among different identities. Lahiri also describes Gogol's relations with his American girl friends and his short-term marriage to a Bengali girl also born of Indian immigrant parents. Through her tender narrative, Jhumpa Lahiri underlines the strenuous efforts needed to mediate between cultures and social practices.

Jagdish Batra points out:

In the process, the in-betweenness spills over into the lives of the second generation also. It is a deeply moving and finely wrought family drama centered around the Ganguli couple, first generation Indian immigrants, whose experiences in the U.S are pitted against those of their children, complicated further by the choice of name for their son – all of which lead to the clash of cultures resolving into a sense of hybridity and in-betweenness. (151)

Ms. Lahiri writes about these people in *Unaccustomed Earth* too. Her characters who are mostly immigrants from India and their American – reared children, exiles who straddle two countries, two cultures, and belong to neither – face some social, familial and cultural problems. They are used to enjoy freedom to accept the rituals and conventions of home, and yet too steeped in tradition to embrace American mores fully. In this case or aspect Ms Lahiri writes about these people with an intimate knowledge of their conflicted hearts, using her lapidary eye for detail to conjure their daily lives with extraordinary precision. The dazzling and delightful thought provoking story *Unaccustomed Earth*, the very first story of the collection, is not meant for the original Indians who have settled in America but for the next generation born and brought up in the alien land facing the conflicting two cultures, i.e., Indian and American.

In the stories of *Interpreter of Maladies* the writer articulates the feelings and emotions of inhabitants like herself, people who have immigrated to another country. People everywhere are curious to know about her name and appearance. If she says that she is from India that is not exactly accurate either because she was not born there nor has she lived there. Her search for identity is difficult and

that is why she makes a multicultural commitment. Her characters' search for self-recognition has a kind of autobiographical element or authorial intention which interests the readers. Therefore, all these stories appeal to all as they show various kinds of immigrants and the similarities and differences of their experiences conveyed by someone who has firsthand knowledge of the situation.

With *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri burst upon the literary scene out of nowhere just as Arundhati Roy did almost a decade ago. The coveted acclaim from the Pulitzer Prize committed spurs rave reviews, many honorable but few deplorable as well on Lahiri and her *Maladies*. *The New York* upholds her as one of the twenty best writers under the age of forty.

The journal finds in her a wonderfully distinctive new voice and a writer of uncommon elegance and poise. She is accusing the Pulitzer Prize Committee for selecting her for the prestigious award which "might have belonged elsewhere... Possibly to someone with years of toil, tears, sweat and blood" (The Journal of Indian Writing in English. 50)

There is negative side also for the book *Interpreter of Maladies* as some people commented "she is appalled by her "utter artificiality", "over dramatization", "vicarious descriptions", "surface reality," and "uncanny theme and weird atmosphere". (Ibid)

There is positive evidence to emphasize that this couple Shukumar and Shoba have made genuine efforts for acculturation in order to lead a comfortable, harmonious and dispute-free life. But the occasional and temporary break-down of electricity bring the couple together.

As Sumana Roy rightly observers:

Shukumar and Shoba are exiles who are trying to locate space through time. It is only when the electric lights are off that the electricity of their closeness lights on them; their area of darkness is flooded by the flashlights of memory. (72)

Unfortunately, for the couple the repair work in that area is finished ahead of schedule.



Therefore, it put an end to their communion in the dark yet they have survived the worst crisis of their life, at least temporarily. In this respect, this is a highly psychological story in which light stands for the conscious reality that may be troublesome. This conscious reality is also the contrasting mindset of the couple asserting it when there is light all around. Darkness, nonetheless, signifies the strong undercurrent of subconscious desire for love unconditioned by ego or will. Therefore, even when the light comes, Shoba switches it off, and prefers to dine in the candlelight. Ultimately, this darkness has resulted into their self-knowledge, for the better or worse: "They wept together for the things they now knew" (P22). In this patch-up between them just a *Temporary Matter*? Or could it last forever? Because all the time Shoba had been looking for a separate apartment and despite their novel but *dark* way of communication, for she needs 'sometime alone' P.21. Moreover, she has been troubled by the final disclosure of Shukumar, so far unknown to her, that the stillborn baby was a boy and the nurse had suggested Shukumar to hold the dead baby close to him for sometime which would enable him to bear his loss more easily. Above all, loss of a baby, is always more intense and unbearable for a mother than for a father. What Jhumpa Lahiri also suggests here is that it is always not so easy to reconcile the conflicting claims of two different mindsets suffering from *the strange disease of modern life*, especially, when the only point of reconciliation in the form of a baby who lost.

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