



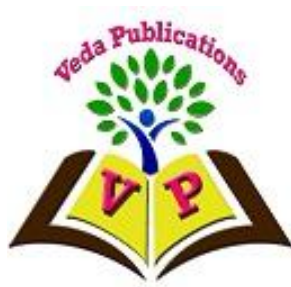
THE CULTURAL CONFLICT: AN ANALYSIS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

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ABSTRACT



The present paper tries to analyze cultural and social themes that we face in the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the most dazzling authors of diaspora. The topic of culture is always a matter of interest especially when it has to do with an alien setting. Lahiri's characters represent different social walks of life and always find themselves caught in two different worlds, one that they have left behind and other in which they try to adjust and thus face a cultural conflict. This cross cultural conflict is always present in most of her stories. The immigrants especially in America easily become accustomed to the tradition and culture and find it suitable to settle there but the craving for their homeland never goes from their head and heart. They see the America from the Indian perspective and it is the perspective which brings the conflicting thoughts though they get a better ambiance and opportunity.

Keywords: *Cultural Conflict, Diaspora, Immigration, Assimilation, Transnational.*

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To represent the cultural conflict has always been a favourite topic for the literary writers such as V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharathi Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai and many more. The basic reason is that most of them have found themselves in such conflicting situations in their own lives. They were born at a place and then migrated to another country or land that is very much different from their native places as far as cultural and emotional perspective is concerned. Most of the time, we see that people try their best to mould themselves according to the new situation and condition and to some extent, they manage it successfully. But the craving, heart-rendering and passion for their culture, tradition, place and people still dominates their consciousness where they find themselves torn between two cultures.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a distinctive writer of diaspora, presents the same tormenting conflict in her novels and short stories as she herself faced the same situation. She was born in India (Bengal) and in her childhood moved to America. She almost led her whole life in America but in spite of that she could not detach herself from her native roots. Most of the time, we find her talking about India, Indians especially Bengalis; setting, surroundings, tradition, and customs of India. It seems that her body is living in America but her mind and soul roam in India.

In her first dazzling debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, she has presented this cross cultural differences in all her stories. Her characters struggle hard to adjust themselves in new places, foreign countries and at the same time face the identity crisis. Her stories seem to be semi-autobiographical as she herself could not properly adjust in America. We find a striking similarity between the life of Jhumpa Lahiri and the lives of several others characters of her stories.

The first story of her collection "A Temporary Matter" is set in Boston in which an Indian couple Shukumar and Shoba have been presented as the leading characters. Here the temporary matter is an unusual power-cut in America but somewhere it is connected to the problems prevailing in India as well as in the life of Shoba and Shukumar. Shoba gives birth to a dead baby at that time when her husband was far away for a paper

presentation and this incident creates a gap in their relationship. Though it was usual in America to break the first marriage and both of them had properly Americanized themselves, but the Indian roots from which they had grown up, prevents them even to think about it. They become used to avoid each other. The power-cut takes place at the time of their dinner and becomes a kind of medium for the conversation between Shoba and Shukumar and also reminds Shoba of her native place in India. We see the craving of Shoba for India when she says- "It is like India, sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch. I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark. The body just cried. It must have been so hot" (11). Again she says- "I remember during power failure at my grandmother's house, we all had to say nothing" (12).

It was in the dark when Shoba finds herself able to confess and when light comes before its scheduled time, she confesses to Shukumar that she is leaving his home and has already rented an apartment. Now Shukumar reveals the truth which he had decided not to tell her and tells her that he had arrived at the time of the baby's birth and held the baby before the burial. "Our baby was a boy", he said, "His skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighed almost five pounds. His fingers were curled shut, just like yours in the night." (22). In the end, we see that Shoba turns the light off and both of them weep together for what they had done. The power-cut plays a symbolic role in the life of Shoba and Shukumar, has its connection from India. The temporary matter is not only of power-cut but it is also related with the relation of Shoba and Shukumar. Had they been American, they would have left each other, but their Indian roots ultimately reunite them. Laura Anh Williams concludes, "Although the story is told from Shukumar's perspective, Shoba has agency outside of his knowledge, as demonstrated by her refusal to restock the pantry or cook for her husband, actions that correspond to her development of an independent self that Shukumar knows nothing about. Finally this agency allows her to move past their tragedy to a new life that does not contain Shukumar's nutritionally and psychically consumptive



and exhaustive presence and practices". (Williams 72)

Jhumpa Lahiri's second story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" presents the relationship between an Indian family and their friend Mr. Pirzada, a Bangladeshi migrant. The narrator of the story is a ten year old girl Lilia who is not aware of the history of the Indian subcontinent related to freedom struggle, civil war of East Pakistani etc. We see that Mr. Pirzada, Lilia's father and mother take dinner with one another while at the same time they listen to the evening news. Though they are now in America but they want to know what is going on in their native places. It shows their longings for their respective countries though they are living in a better and happier ambiance. Mr. Pirzada talks about his past life in Dacca. He had a three story building at Dacca, wife and seven daughters. We feel that Mr. Pirzada has a sense of loss, he has left behind a life that has its own significance and can't be deleted from his heart.

The story also throws light on the partition between India and Pakistan and on the civil war of East Pakistan, the nation of Mr. Pirzada. We see that India and Pakistan can't tolerate each other, people have the sense of Hindu and Muslim but in America, far away from their countries, they don't have this kind of thought. As Avtar Brah would put it, "the construction of a common 'we'" (184) is more important to them. Mr. Pirzada, a Muslim, has come for a project and taking the hospitality of an Indian Hindu family. Even sometimes, he sleeps at their home. They are enemy in India and Pakistan but in America they are united. May be they have a sense of insecurity that brings the people of similar culture in a far different culture and society.

The title story of the collection, "Interpreter of Maladies", presents the Indian setting, brings before us an Indian family, settled in America, have come to India for a holiday to visit Konark Temple. The central character of the story is Mr. Kapasi, who is a cab driver and also an interpreter in a clinic. Jhumpa Lahiri can be said that as a writer of human psychology and consciousness, she beautifully represents the dilemma, confusion, pain, suffering and agony of the characters. Here, in this story again, she focuses on different aspects of human lives. Mr.

and Mrs. Das are living a happy life with their three children Tina, Rony and Bobby. But are they really happy? As the story moves, it becomes quite clear that there is a great gap between Mr. and Mrs. Das.

Another striking point which hits to our mind repeatedly is that they seem to be torn between two cultures. They look like Indians as it is obvious because of their Indian roots, but they have dressed themselves in an American way. The way Mr. and Mrs. Das handle their children, clearly shows their American life style with which somewhere in their unconscious mind, they are struggling. In a way, we can say that in the story, Jhumpa Lahiri has presented Mr. Kapasi as an epitome of the Indian culture while on the other hand Das family is presenting the American way of life. Though Mr. Kapasi, the title character, finds an affinity with Mrs. Das but the gap between them can't be ignored. Mr. Kapasi finds it quite strange and different from the Indian tradition when Mr. Das ask his daughter about Mrs. Das by calling her first name- "Mr. Kapasi found it strange that Mr. Das should refer to his wife by her first name when speaking to the little girl" (45). Further in the story when children see the monkeys, they get excited and shout by referring to them as 'monkeys'. But Mr. Kapasi tells them- "we call them Hanuman. They are quite common in the area." (47). Here Jhumpa Lahiri presents the religious aspects with which Indians especially Hindus consider monkeys as a symbol of God Hanuman while for an American or European it is just a common monkey. Even when the children indicate that the driver is sitting on the wrong side of the car, presents a sharp contrast with America. In India, drivers sit on the right side of the car, as do Mr. Kapasi, while in America, it is just opposite and it becomes a strange thing for the children who are just familiar with the American way.

Another difference that the readers face is the relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Das that is completely different from the life of Indian husband and wife. In India, we see that husband and wife don't express their emotions for each other but in it doesn't mean they don't have the emotions or feelings. Though they don't express themselves apparently, but they keep a strong intimacy, attachment for each other which is beyond the



limitation. But in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Das, we see that they are quite frank, behave with their children like an elder brother and sister, not like parents. On the apparent level they have great intimacy but as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that they lack the emotional attachment especially from the side of Mrs. Das as she is suffering from a guilt consciousness with which Mr. Das is completely unaware of. She even finds Mr. Kapasi as a suitable person to talk about her past instead of her husband. Interestingly enough, the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Das was not an arranged marriage, rather Mrs. Das had fallen in love with Mr. Das at a young age and later they got married with the permission of their respective families but it can't be called a typical arranged marriage. Even Mrs. Das frankly talks to Mr. Kapasi about her sexual relation with Mr. Das. This was quite unusual for a person like Mr. Kapasi, who has never seen his wife naked. Even he does not approve the infidelity which Mrs. Das has committed though his own marriage was not a happy one. His dream of getting a good friend in the form of Mrs. Das shatters at once. Lahiri, at the end of the story, symbolically represents the vast gap between two cultures when Mrs. Das slips the address of Mr. Kapasi. Jhumpa Lahiri also presents many other aspects of Indian culture through the medium of Konark Temple, Mr. Kapasi and many others which is quite different from those of America and Americans.

In the story "Sexy", Jhumpa Lahiri again deals with the question of infidelity and sense of guilt through those characters who respectively represent India and America. They seem to be creating a balance between two cultures. The title character of the story is a young American woman named Miranda who is engaged to a married Indian (Bengali) man Dev whom she met just a week ago. Because of his physical features, Miranda thinks that he is either Spanish or Lebanese. His features impress her at once. She likes to spend her time with Dev whose wife has gone to India to visit her near and dear ones for a few days. It makes things easier for Dev and Miranda who spend every night together. It seems quite strange as Dev daily talks to his wife on phone. Miranda does not realize what she is doing until she comes to know about her friend Laxmi's cousin's husband who is engaged to someone else quite

similarly with the relation of Dev and Miranda. Laxmi tells her that her cousin's husband had told about his relation with an English woman, half of his age, to his wife. It was so even when they have a boy. It was unbearable for Laxmi's cousin as she falls sick, even Laxmi finds it unmanageable and gets furious.

In this way Jhumpa Lahiri presented two stories in her story "Sexy" and both are quite similar and linked with each other. In both cases Indian males are involved and they don't realize or even have the sense of guilt for their wives, the things are just opposite though Dev's wife is unaware of his relation with Miranda. Miranda, an American, takes it lightly to have an affair with a married man but for an Indian woman, it would be a sin. Miranda even does not realize what will happen when his wife comes. She seems to be affected by what Laxmi tells her about her cousin. Laxmi, living an American life, says that she would have killed him if she had been her cousin. But for her cousin, it is impossible. Ultimately it is Rohin, Laxmi's cousin's boy, who makes Miranda realize what she is doing is futile and it is of no importance if she continues her relation with Dev. Her dreams shatter when the boy calls her 'sexy' and on her asking what he meant by it, he tells her "it means loving someone you don't know" (107). It hits direct to her heart as Dev had called her 'sexy'. The boy further explains her that it was exactly done by his father and makes her realize how one can love someone whom he/she does not even know. She realizes that she should not continue her relation with Dev.

It is obvious in Lahiri's fiction that the readers encounter the cultural clash. But here, in this story, she focuses more on the human relation and emotion especially of women though the cultural conflict is always present there.

"Mrs Sen's" again presents the pain, suffering and loneliness of an Indian Bengali woman living in America where her husband is a professor. She becomes caretaker of an eleven years old boy Eliot, just to pass her lonely afternoons when her husband is on his work. Mrs. Sen tries her best to become familiar with the tradition and culture of America but finds herself unable to remove the gap between American and Indian society. Fortunately, the little boy Eliot understands the dilemma, agony



and problems which she Mrs. Sen faces in her day to day life. Eliot finds it strange, the way Mr. and Mrs. Sen use to live their lives in their small apartment where Mrs. Sen tries to recreate a new India but the fact is that she is in United States. She misses the community, neighbors and the friends to talk and to spend time. In India she had plenty of friends to visit and to chat and for the help when there is any kind of need. But in America, things are completely different. There is no one to visit without any purpose. The agony of Mrs. Sen can be seen when she says to Eliot- "At home that is all you have to do. Not everyone has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and the whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news to help with arrangements" (116). Even Eliot after this statement comes to know that when she talks of home, she means by it India, not her apartment. He realizes that she lives just for two things; letters from India and whole fresh fish from the sea. These two are the things which give the feeling of home to Mrs. Sen. Fish becomes symbolic of her connection with home in an unfamiliar place far away from her native one.

On the other hand, Eliot is completely aware of the Indian culture, becomes familiar with it by the life style of Sens. It becomes quite strange for him when he sees Mrs. Sen in a sari, putting vermilion in her head and in a complete Indian look. The sharp contrast between Indian and American culture becomes obvious in the conversation of Mrs. Sen and Eliot-

"I must wear the powder every day," she explained when Eliot asked her what it was for, "for the rest of the days that I am married."

"Like a wedding ring you mean?"

"Exactly, Eliot, exactly like a wedding ring. Only with no fear of losing it in the dishwater."(117)

Mrs. Sen also tries her best to adjust in an unfamiliar world. It is not she is just involved in her nostalgic world. She tries to befriend with people of that society especially with the mother of Eliot who always treats her just a caretaker of her son Eliot. It makes her condition pathetic that in spite of her effort, American culture does not belong to her. She

even learns driving which is common for Western culture unlike the Indian culture. The craving which she feels for her home can't be ignored in anything, it does not matter what it is-

"Mr. Sen says that once I receive my license, everthing will improve. What do you think, Eliot? Will things improve?"

"You could go places," Eliot suggested. "You could go anywhere."

"Could I drive all the way to Culcutta? How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?"

Mrs. Sen seems to be the representative of all those women who goes to a foreign land with their husbands after their marriage and try to readjust their lives in a place without any near and dear ones with whom they can share their happiness, success, suffering and pain.

The stories and book thus gives the ample examples of successful cultural translation. Lahiri's characters reveal almost every facets of life, their migration from their native land to their settlement in abroad and thus bring forth different aspects of human life. The stories are the reflection of what Indian immigrants really experience after leaving the country.

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