



DIASPORIC WRITING OF JHUMPHA LAHARI WITH SPECIAL REFERENC TO INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

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ABSTRACT

Diaspora refers to the movement of the population from its original homeland. The word Diaspora is a transliteration of a Greek word that means "to sow throughout" or "to distribute in foreign lands" or "scatter abroad." Diasporas are deracinated population leaving ethnic and cultural origin in a motherland other than where they currently live. Their economic, social and political affiliations cross borders of nations. Diaspora studies presume the existence of displaced groups of people who retain a collective sense of identity. The writers of Indian Diaspora practice a variety of literary forms and represent an extraordinary diversity of ethnicities, languages, and religious traditions. The element of homesickness, longing and a "Quest for Identity" or "Roots" mark the Diaspora fiction. Diaspora writing mostly becomes a response to the lost homes and to issues such as dislocation, nostalgia, discrimination, survival, cultural change and identity. This article is a study on the diasporic writing of Jhumpha Lahari.

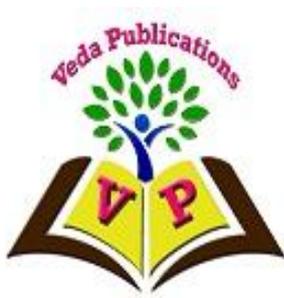
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Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to the second generation Diaspora community. "Jhumpa" Lahiri was born in London and brought up in America by a mother who wanted to raise her child to be Indian, she learned about her Bengali heritage from an early age. She was the daughter of Indian immigrants from the state of West Bengal. Her family moved to the United States when she was two. Lahiri considers herself an American, stating "I wasn't born here, but I might as well have been."

The writings of the Diaspora writers due to reasons of their movements but the tension of living in between reflected through their works as Rushdie says in his essay "The Indian Writer in England", "that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (Rushdie 1983: 76)

Lahiri has been acclaimed a dominant diaspora writer depicting the complexities of immigrant experience in diaspora. The recurrent theme in Lahiri's writing is the bitter-sweet experience of emigrant to America from India. Her characters are often caught in a cultural indeterminate state excited about their new home but grieving the loss of their country of origin. Her characters speak about the glory of common life, "I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. . . . As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination." (Lahiri, IOM 198).

"All Diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diaspora refers to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport...They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by specters, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements." - (Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic imaginary*)

Interpreter of Maladies is a collection of nine short stories. It was released in 1999. Interpreter of

Maladies received the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Lahiri has won many awards for this collection. These awards and honours include The Transatlantic Review award from the Henfield Foundation, the Louisiana Review Award for short fiction, The O. Henry Award for Best American Short Stories, The PEN Hemingway Award, The New Yorker Debut of the year Award and The American Academy of Arts and Letters Award.

Interpreter of Maladies is about the experiences of Indians who live in an alien country and how they are deeply crushed under the burden of alienation and rootlessness. The collection attempts to be simultaneously both an anthology of outstanding short stories and virtually a casebook on relationship between the sexes. The stories depict different aspects of the Bengali migrant experience. The stories examine the difficulties the central characters have in integrating and relocating their identities beyond their familial homes. The stories address sensitive difficulties and the disconnection between first and second generation United States immigrants.

Lahiri focuses on immigrants or expatriate Indians who have been on the move from India to United Kingdom and to the United States or are on a short visit to their native country, either way confronting surprising, even baffling, cultural differences. The stories present Lahiri's inter-continental journey during which she gets herself accustomed to both the cultures by her long stay abroad and regular trips to India during every summer. It seems that for Lahiri, the western culture forms a part of her emotional make up. Her writings are scattered with the details of traditional Indian names, food, flavour and wardrobe which collectively give shape to her stories. Three of Lahiri's stories are set in India and employ the narrative voices and indigenous experiences of Indians living in India. She focuses on people meeting each other, or separating, or on their subtle tensions and quiet moments of happiness or pain. Lahiri portrays Indians abroad, who face displacement, adhere to their native culture, attempt to integrate themselves into their adopted homeland and suffer tensions over moral and emotional issues. Lahiri has direct experience of these continents.



A common thread running through Lahiri's collection of stories is the experience of being 'foreign'. Her characters long for a meaningful connections but they don't find what they expected. Those trying to an unfamiliar world don't always succeed. Some are homesick, some are misunderstood and a few return back. No matter where the story takes place, the characters struggle with the same feelings of exile and the struggle between the two worlds by which they are torn loneliness and constant sense of alienation prevail in them. Some of them miss Indian culture, festivals, relatives and friends. They are preserving Indian culture and traditions in America and other foreign countries.

In one of the stories of *Interpreter of Maladies*, Mrs. Sen is the main character. In "Mrs Sen" Lahiri chronicles the struggle of a woman who finds herself cut off from her milieu. She leads an isolated life within her apartment. She is unable to pick up American habits. To reduce her boredom and loneliness she works as a babysitter and looks after Eliot, an eleven year old American boy. He quickly becomes aware of Mrs.Sen's bewilderment in a strange new culture. She alarms him by asking: 'Eliot, if I began screaming right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?' At home in India, she explains, '... just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighbourhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements'(116). Often forgetting her own identity and donning the mask of the Americanised immigrant becomes too demanding for her. When her English begins to falter, she complains: 'Everyone, this people too much in their world' (121). This feeling of not fitting in is explained by Leon Mann thus:

A state of embarrassment is caused giving rise to uncomfortable self consciousness in a situation in which the individual is aware that negative attention and critical judgment is focused on himself as a result of inappropriate actions which label him as either clumsy, low status or deficit in proper breeding and good manners. (15)

Mrs. Sen fails to learn driving. It is a symbolic gesture of the resistance she offers to her new life. It is basically a refusal to fit in and adapt. She fails in

other ways too, in adjusting to the American society. Her life centers around cooking Bengali meals and re-reading the aerogrammes from home and listening to cassettes and tapes. She is afraid of losing her past identity and diffident of getting reconciled with the present one. Food in the stories is a talisman, a reassuring bit of the homeland to cling to. Spices and flavours waft through like themes in a piece of music: 'From the kitchen my mother brought forth the succession of dishes: lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in a yogurt sauce...' (31). References to such Indian food show the difference between the American culture that is to be embraced and the Indian culture that must be savoured.

Jhumpa Lahiri shares the identity crisis suffered by her women characters. After spending thirty years in the United States, Lahiri says, 'It is home to me but I feel a bit of an outsider too.' Her characters are Asians, many of whom have come to America for a job or for higher studies or because of a political crisis. Though their identities are disturbed, they become assimilated to the American society. Later they are reconciled with the American culture with their new identities. Lahiri does not lament the loss of cultural identity. Her women characters are rather comforted when they adjust to their new world and discontented at the estrangement from their original cultures.

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