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Cross Cultural Comparison: Intertextual Connectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies

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Abstract

Migration of people across borders has become a global phenomenon on an unprecedented scale. The globalisation of world economies coupled with an ever-growing demand for labour has enhanced the scope for more migrations. The terms diaspora or exile or expatriation-- all synonyms, give a sensation of alienation and detachment.The up rootedness from the old culture creates first trauma and then turmoil as the newcomers try to adjust to the new environment. They are haunted by some sense of loss. One can find in them a yearning for 'home' to go back to their lost 'origin'. The present paper focuses on Jhumpa Lahiri's first collection of short stories Interpreter of Maladies, where she describes the diasporic post-colonial lives of Indians and Indian Americans and also makes her reflections on the theme of class resentment and fickle mindedness of the society. Lahiri with a scintillating art of writing describes the life of the emigrants who feel that their feet are planted in two separate boats, one which belongs to their homeland and the other is a perplexingnew land before them. This leads in creation of Imaginary Homelands as Rushdie says ''they straddle two cultures and their identity is at once plural and partial''. The ambivalence continues and they have questions and dilemmas to migrate permanently and settle in America. On one hand there is distressing life of Boori Ma and Mrs Sen, on the other hand there is vivaciousness of Twinkle.

Keywords: *Dislocation, Trauma, Identity Loss, Adjustment*

Introduction

The phenomena of dislocation, although associated with colonialism and its aftermath, has a large impact on the post-colonial studies. Indian writers and specifically diasporic writers, have made a noteworthy contribution in the world literature. The issues of marginalization, cultural insularity, social disparity, racism, ethnicity etc. are the major concerns of these writers while addressing the problems that arise from the transnational space created by a fluid community that is neither at home or outside. The migrants often have a life in dilemma, oscillating between the attractions of home and those from the new world.

The word "diaspora'' was earlier referred exclusively to the repeated scattering of the Jews away from the kingdom of Judea. Edward Said, a Palestinian Arab, born in Jerusalem was an American citizen, who through his *Orientalism* introduced a theory of migrant sensibility."Orientalism" refers to the 'Orient' or East, in contrast to the 'Occident' or West, and often, as seen by the West, "a form of radical realism". In Said›s analysis, the West essentializes the Eastern societies as static and undeveloped—thereby fabricating a view of Oriental culture that can be studied, depicted, and reproduced. Implicit in this fabrication, writes Said, is the idea that Western society is developed, rational, flexible, and superior, while Oriental societies embody the opposite values (Mamdani 32). "The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West,

particularly in America, is disheartening. There exists here an almost unanimous consensus that politically he does not exist, and when it is allowed that he does, it is either as a nuisance or as an Oriental. The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny" (Orientalism 35). According to him the main actors in Orientalism are the French and British cultures and empires (from the beginning of the 19th century until the end of WWll) and the US after (WWll). He said East is a workplace for colonial administrators, soldiers and academicians Edward Said considered himself to be an outsider as he had an American citizenship though born in Jerusalem. One could really sense a feeling of isolation and detachment in him. He says, "that today I can neither return to the places of my youth, nor voyage freely in the counties and places that mean the most to me'' (A O C NY times).

Said points out his being "out of place'' his looking at his people's lives through the eyes of third party photographer. He was both Palestinian and New Yorker, while neither describes his identity accurately. He owned no real estate, which also manifested his wandering character, "a traveller who is not interested in holding territory, who has no realm to protect,'' in Said's own words (Viswanathan 457).

Richard Ben Cramer on his review on Edward Said's *After the Last Sky* says, "Wherever the Palestinians dwell they are outsiders, defined not by their qualities or their own perception of self, but theirotherness. On their ancestral lands they are 'non-Jew' or the 'Arabs of Judea' and Samaria'' (A O C NY times). These are the labels imposed by their conquerors. Among their fellow Arabs, except in Jordan, they are aliens. In West, they are regarded as refugees, as worst as terrorists.

The terms diaspora or exile or expatriation-- all synonyms, give a sensation of alienation and detachment. The political upheavals caused by European wars, decolonization and above all the effect of globalization, new technologies of communication, increased capital flows, information and travel have accelerated the movement of people and their cultures across the world. Globalization has created complex inter connection across the borders. It is not only centred to the movement of people but also the capital that travels across nations. Cultures too have acquired a mobility. Diaspora has undeniably brought changes in the demographics, cultures, epistemologies and politics of post-colonial world but one can certainly find a yearning for 'home', to go back to their lost 'origin'. They are haunted by some sense of loss. These immigrants lead a divided life, who feel their feet planted in two separate boats, belonging to two traditions. One of their homeland and the other- the new land before them, which leads to the creation of Imaginary homelands, as Rushdie says while straddling two cultures, "our identity is once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" (15).

Diaspora is undoubtedly the space of overlapping boundaries, but these boundaries do not lead to the politics of hybridity; on the contrary, it constitutes a politics of segregation. Rushdie says, that migrants and children who are born in Britain of migrant parents or even of migrant grandparents may be legally British, but their citizenship is in reality second class, as it is commonly assumed that to be English you have got to be White.

The present paper focuses on Pulitzer prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri's first collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), where she describes the diasporic post-colonial lives of Indians and Indian Americans and also makes her reflections on the theme of class resentment and fickle mindedness of the society. It depicts the experience of diaspora and acquaints its readers with the complexities and nuances of such an experience. Lahiri within stories sets up contrasts between characters to highlight her views about human nature and relationships. The collection transmits cultural knowledge through

literature-as-rhetoric that depicts variety of plots and the diverse society of immigrants

Lahiri was born in London to Indian (Bengali) parents and spent her adolescence in Rhode Island. She did her graduation from Boston University. She feels strong ties to her parents' homeland as well as the United States. Her love for her homeland has made her travel extensively to India and have experienced the effects of Colonialism and issues of diaspora as it exists. Growing up with ties to all three countries created in Lahiri a sense of homelessness and an inability to feel accepted. Lahiri explains this as an inheritance of her parents' ties to India, "It's hard to have parents who consider another place "home"-even after living abroad for 30 years, India is home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here. There's nobody in this whole country that we're related to. India was different-our extended family offered real connections." Yet her familial ties to India were not enough to make India "home" for Lahiri, "I didn't grow up there, I wasn't a part of things. We visited often but we didn't have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never fully with us" (Lahiri'sInterview with Vibhuti Patel in Newsweek International, 9-20-99.

There is a feeling of detachment and aloofness in Lahiri as a person, though in a subtle manner, she reflects this through her writings. She deals with the themes of identity, immigration and marriage anxieties in her writings. Her characters are the citizens of two countries, their first country and the new country. They are physically in the new place but psychologically their minds are in their host country. The first story *A Temporary Matter* presents a life of husband and wife, Shukumar and Shobha whose life was full of joy but started drifting apart after the death of their first born child. Each one feels uncomfortable in others' presence. The earlier concerns about paying the bills, the matching of colours, the interior of the house, which she was so much bothered, does not disturb her anymore. Now she treats the house as a hotel. Their child (born dead) has created a distance between them. It's difficult for Shobha to deal with the situation as she blames Shukumar for being irresponsible towards the child and her, as being away to Baltimore for the conference at the time of her delivery. Both of them avoided each other. "He and Shobha had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible'' (4). In addition to all this estranged relationship, her announcement, "I've been looking for an apartment and I've found one'' (21) was another blow to Shukumar.

The power cuts in their area force them to spend time together by candlelight. They restart talking and sharing. The poignancy of the situation is revealed when Shukumar informs Shobha that it was a baby boy and the sex of the boy was kept a 'secret' and now in their shared grief "They wept together, for the things they now knew'' (22). Their separation thus comes to an end. The separation between the two is 'temporary matter' and they have been able to save their marriage.The enforced "darkness" becomes a pretext for discovering their latent, subconscious fears, anxieties and dark secrets. By the time the week is over, they have already reached a point of no return. It's during a series of harmless little games around dinnertime they discover the fragile, delicate nature of their relationship.

The title story *Interpreter of Maladies,* brings to light, the difficulty that Indians face while alienated from their host country and the way Indian Americans are caught up between the two cultures. Mr and Mrs Das are born and brought up in America but their parents have moved to live in India after retirement. Mr and Mrs Das visit India along with their children. They are Indians but not of India, and their dress and manners are completely American. They are more like any other tourists to India. Mr and Mrs Das seem to take pride in status as a stranger to India, although India is their parents' home. Mr Das tells Mr Kapasi (a guide and an interpreter) about his American roots with an "air of sudden confidence''. "The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children

in stiff, brightly coloured clothing and caps with translucent visors" (pg.44). Lahiri through the life of Indian Americans highlights the difficulty in communicating between Indians and Indian Americans. Mr Kapasi feels that it is easy to communicate with the foreigners who are non-Indians rather than with these Indian Americans. There is an enormous gap between Indian Immigrants that they have left behind in India. That gap widens further between the immigrants and second generation Americans born in the US. This gap results in misunderstanding and miscommunication.

The story *This Blessed House* is based on the theme of cultural integration. Indian male Sanjeev graduated from Ivy League American university, works in a corporate at a very respectable post in the US. He is married to a modern Indian woman whose parents are Indian immigrants, settled in the US. She is broken away from the stereotypical image of an Indian housewife who is supposed to have a strong sense of duty towards her husband and home. This is a story of two contrast stereotypes together. There is a tension between oriental culture and western culture. Twinkle's gradual discovery of the Christian symbols appeals to her sense of curiosity and wonder whereas they irritate Sanjeev. While Twinkle feels that their 'house is blessed' (144). Sanjeev verbally resists Twinkle's attempts to display the symbols of Christian identity in the new home they are building together by asserting his own sense of cultural identity, rooted in Hinduism (137). There is a difference in integration into the host country between Sanjeev and Twinkle. While Sanjeev is an Indian immigrant to the country, Twinkle is born in the United States of America to Indian parents who are immigrants from Calcutta. The 'Christian paraphernalia' (137) are important symbols of integration into the Western host country. While the discoveries of integration are looked up by Twinkle excitingly and acceptingly but on the other hand they are threatening to Sanjeev for his cultural identity (142). On one hand if new strange symbols of integration are welcomed by Twinkle as they have a place and a history in her life, they are discarded by Sanjeev on the other. His moving into America and his success in the corporate world doesn't signify his integration into the host country and acceptance of its culture. Twinkle is an American born citizen of Indian parents, who has already spent her childhood going through the process of integration into American culture. Whereas Sanjeev is going through this process. Twinkle accommodates well with the Indian clothes and accepts the symbol of Christianity into her home easily.

In the story *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,* Lahiripresents the cultural unanimity between Indian family and Pakistani young boy Mr Pirzada in the foreign land. The notion of home and the resulting dilemmas of dislocation are presented in a subtle and inconspicuous manner. Mr Pirzada is from Daccawho suffers from the agony of separation from his family-- wife and seven daughters who are in his homeland Dacca. While dining with Lilia's (a small girl of 10 years) parents, he keeps his pocket watch "set to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead on his folded paper napkin on the coffee table" (30). Lilia remembers how her parents and Pirzada had watched the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, bloodshed and killing on T.V with sad hearts and shared their feelings of past and present displacement. Like children of the other immigrants, Lilia's world is limited to studying American history and geography, filling in the names, dates, capitals in the maps of 13 colonies. Her mother understands that Lilia is an American as she was born in America and has little understanding of the politics of India and Pakistan. She misses Mr Pirzada after his return to his own country and realizes the anguish of once being separated from one's blood relations, "It was only then, raising my water glass in his name, that I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months'' (42).

In the stories like *A Real Durwan* and *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* Lahiri exposes the

extreme isolation and alienation experienced by the main characters.They are always perceived as outsiders and diseased. In *Bibi Haldar*lack of communication leads to isolation; she is isolated because of her illness; she is unable to communicate her needs to those around her because she is marginalized by society. Isolation leads to displacement, which marks the central theme of the story.

In 1947, the South Asian subcontinent was divided in to two countries, India and Pakistan. The partition created a mass migration of Hindus and Muslims from India to Pakistan. Writing about Punjabi Migrants in Britain, Dhooleka Raj says: Partition is remembered and recounted or forgotten and hidden, but sometimes, it emerges in specific contexts. Resurrected and imported to Britain through visits by elder generations, 'Partition becomes a beginning point and an anchor for many peoples' life stories (Raj 58). It was the time when people lost even their identities along with their possessions. *A Real Durwan* is the story about Boori Ma, sixty-four years of age, who did not migrate to India from Pakistan for financial reasons but for political reason. She is portrayed as sweeper of the stairwell and a Durwan of Mr. Chatterjee apartment, although she hails from a well to do family before the partition. Throughout the story, Boori Ma's identity is attached to those keys that are stolen at the final stage of the story. She suffers from the agony of separation from "her husband, four daughters, a two-storey brick house, a rosewood almari and number of coffer boxes whose skeleton keys she still wore'' (71). Lahiri relates Boori Ma's hardships, such as her inability to sleep, her appearance, her age but mainly her past; her deportation to Calcutta. This conveys the impression of loss and how it can inevitably lead to loneliness. she tells stories of her past: her daughter's extravagant wedding, her servants, her estate and her riches. She cannot forget her identity related with her first homeland. As she claims: "Yes, there I tasted life have I mentioned that I crossed the border with just two bracelets on my wrist? Yet there was a day when my feet touched nothing but marble. Believe me, don't believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them" (71).The theme of loss is emphasized throughout the story, through the words spoken by Boori Ma. As long as Boori Ma works hard for the people, despite her old age, she could manage to live in the apartment. Boori Ma doesn't have any room to live in. Underneath the letter boxes at the mouth of the alley, was her home. Renovations in the building makes her shift on the roof top. But the monsoons make her staying very difficult at the roof top. The return of Dalals would bring her a new bedding, but before she is able to manage for her new bedding, she is rejected on the grounds of poverty. She is thrown out of the apartment, suspected on the grounds as an informer to the robbers when few things from the apartment are found missing. She is a "victim of changing times'' (72). Her lack of wealth and stature is a strong reason of being condescended by others.

The story *Mrs. Sen's* exposes the life of a baby sitter of 11 years old child Eliot. Mr. Sen works as a university teacher and spend time at his workplace, with a result, Mrs. Sen leads a lonely and alienated life at home. The story depicts the real difficulties faced by Indian wives in an alien land, without friends and family, struggling to cope with the new surroundings they cannot call their home. Mrs. Sen's cooked dishes which she serves to Eliot's mother as a mark of Indian hospitality are not liked by her. Mrs. Sen feels bad and insulted many a time by her remarks and always feels restless and uneasy. she has reminiscences of her early life in India.Many a times she would flung open the drawers of her closet filled with saris and would cherish a desire to wear them. "When have I ever worn this one? And this? And this?'' (125). Whenever she says 'home' it means India and not the apartment where she sits chopping vegetables. "they would sit in an enormous circle on the roof of the building, laughing and gossiping'' (115). Her loneliness is depicted through the manner in which she waits for the letters, plays cassettes of people talking in her language and goes nostalgic

while giving an account of her Calcutta life to Eliot. She feels depressed on comparing her happening life in India to impassive life in foreign land. "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). But now dislocated from her land she yearns for her own people "I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence'' (115).

*The Third and Final Continent*story tells us about the life of the narrator in America, who has an unsettled life in the beginning, going through two immigrations, one from India to England and then to the USA, but after marriage he moves on to a stable life. The writer brings to light the 'Pureness'-the defining quality of the East, which is undefiled by the metropolitan chaos of the West. Instead of showing us the romanticized version of the West, we come to see the everyday mundaneness of immigrant life through daily buying of the milk, eggs and cornflakes. The narrator tries to get used to the Western style of living as eating milk and cornflakes instead of his staple food rice and fish. But after being accompanied by Mala- his wife, goes back to his former days of eating Bengali food as eating steamed rice and chicken curry made with fresh garlic on the stove (193).The narrator who migrates from India to England and then to America, who tries to keep his best to get adapted to the Western culture without diminishing his own Indian culture, like on weekends lounging barefooted in drawstring pyjamas, drinking tea and smoking Rothmans, or setting out to watch cricket at Lord's (173). The life of the narrator reflects the life of Lahiri herself, who has adapted herself to the alien life like the narrator.

Regarding the treatment of the diasporic experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's work Aruti Nayar in her article "An Interpreter of Exile" rightly observes that: … Lahiri negotiates the dilemmas of the cultural spaces lying across the continents with a master's touch. She says that stories of Lahiri bring out successfully the predicament of the Indians who trapeze between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind and other encountered but not necessarily assimilated.

In the stories of Lahirithe feeling of dislocation is emphasised not through any dramatic statements, philosophical theorising but rather through fleshing out of seemingly minor details. The characters display the compromising attitude. The pushing and pulling between cultures results in much tension in the protagonists' lives as they vacillate between old-world demands which is of traditions and the new-world demands of contemporary living and relationship No linguistic gyrations or efforts are there to impress, subdue or awe the reader into submission. One can notice that use of irony is not scathing or caustic but it is mildly laced with empathy. Lahiri possesses a rare sense of objectivity and sensitivity and one can feel that even in her early writings like *Interpreter of Maladies.*

Reading Jhumpa Lahiri is somewhat like discovering the truth behind the words of her character. Ordinariness is, no doubt, pervasive in these stories but it never fails to excite the imagination of the reader. What really bewitches the reader is, that Lahiri tries to leave him to wonder whether such grippingly memorable tales can actually be spun out of the stuff that our mundane lives are often made of.We come across mixed feelings of the different characters. There is a contrast of characters, on one hand there are tragic lives of Bibi Haldar and Boori Ma and poignancy of Mrs. Sen and on the other we find champagne like Joie de vivre of Twinkle making her Indian husband settle in the American surroundings, thus creating a new life in foreign culture. "In fact relationships, language, rituals and religion, all help these characters maintain their culture in new surroundings even as they build a hybrid realization as Asian Americans'' (Katrak: 2002:05).

The global media and markets that shape our lives beckon us to a world beyond boundaries and belongings. *Interpreter of Maladies,* even though depictsthe issues of social disparity,

racism and cultural narrow- mindedness but we also find there is a hope of growth and a hope of new life, specifically, in the story *The Third and Final Continent*, the protagonist sees a hope and ambition of life through the next generation, his son. In this world of globalization, where there is no space for discrimination, there is a bond that binds the world no matter of what religion, caste or creed he is of. This bond is the bond of love and humanity that binds the immigrants to the host country.

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