

The Immigrant experience in select short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri

S.Vasuki

**Ph.D Full Time Scholar
Government Arts College
Tiruchirappalli -22**

Dr . N.Ananthavalli

**Associate Professor of English
Government Arts College
Tiruchirappalli -22**

Abstract

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Diasporic literature deals with many factors like cultural identity, alienation, marginalization. Immigration is one of the important elements of diaspora. We always confuse immigrants with immigrant experience. Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories focus on the immigrant experience especially the experience of both the first and second generation immigrants. The majority of the characters in the short stories resemble Lahiri and her relatives. The characters have relatives in India and their home is in United States. The main objective of the paper is to explore the immigrant experience in some of Lahiri's short stories and examine various responses to the immigrant experience.

Exiles play a significant role in Indian English literature. We always confuse immigrant with immigrant experience. An Immigrant is a person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country. Immigrant experience is the sum of memories of immigrants about their original home and their struggle with the realities of the new world. Jhumpa Lahiri has always been considered an important voice and the expatriate writers who search for an ideal world that is a blend of the past, present and future. In many of Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories one can come across the experience of both the first and second generation immigrants. Majority of characters in the short stories have a resemblance of Lahiri and her relatives. The characters have relatives in India while their homes are in United States. Here one comes across racial and cultural memory. Lahiri tries to show her efficiency in recording the behavior of Indian immigrant. They remind the immigrant of the Indian culture. But sometimes Indian culture is imbalanced. Lahiri shows how the immigrant parents take efforts to imbibe values of Indian culture and tradition in their children. Their children are forced to think about their homeland while following the

culture. Children try to live like Americans but they find the task of imitation, difficult. So they maintain distance with the Americans. When the immigrants are Indian Americans, they can be neither American nor Indian in their adherence to and adaptation of culture.

The *Intrepreter of Maladies* is a well written collection of stories where the characters are caught in the journey of figuring themselves out as immigrants. America is just the background to these stories which may happen anywhere or to anyone. Lahiri's stories are realistic portrayals of contemporary situations.

In *When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine*, Mr. Pirzada is looked after by a ten year old girl. He is an immigrant and belongs to Dacca. He does not listen to the advice of his wife or daughter. Due to Bangladesh war the situation is very critical. Mr. Pirzada comes to visit Lilia's Parents regularly. Lilia's parents are Indian immigrants and Mr. Pirzada is Bangladeshi immigrant. Mr. Pirzada comes to Dine together in Lilia's house. The little girl sees that Mr. Pirzada takes a plain silver watch from his pocket and he keeps it in the coffee table. Mr. Pirzada does not adjust the time to American time, but he sets the watch to time in Dacca which is eleven hours ahead. With his heart and soul in his homeland he is unable to come to terms with the American time. The memory of his 'homeland time' acts as the bridge linking him to his country. The little girl says:

When I saw it that night, as he wound it and arranged it on the coffee table, an uneasiness possessed me; life, I realized, was being lived in Dacca first. I imagined Mr.Pirzada's daughters rising from sleep, tying ribbons in their hair, anticipating breakfast, preparing for school. Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged. [30-31]

Lilia is very affectionate to Mr.Pirzada who misses his children very much. At the end of the story the little girl is happy to realise that Mr.Pirzada has gone back to his family.

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. He had no reason to return to us, and my parents predicted, correctly that we would never see him again. [42]

In *Mrs Sen*, Mrs Sen is the title character in the story. Eliot is a eleven year old son of a single parent. Mrs Sen is a thirty years old wife of a mathematics professor. She is the caretaker of the small boy Eliot. She always remembers her past that she misses her family a lot. This story also

is narrated through the observations of an eleven year old boy who sees Mrs Sen and understands her loneliness and expatriate experience.

“At home that is all you have do. Not everybody has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements”. By then Eliot understood that when Mrs Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables. He thought of his own home, just five miles away and the young married couple who waved from time to time as they jogged at sunset along the shore. [116]

Mrs Sen is always thinking of her homeland and her memory and longing for her homeland makes her nostalgic. She is always in a reminiscent mood. She misses her language, food, traditions rituals, ceremonies and cultural values. She goes to her past and describes the wedding that happened in her family to Eliot. She recalls how women laughed and enjoyed and cut fifty kilograms of vegetables throughout the night and how this made all of them fall asleep the next nights and she says.

“It is impossible to fall asleep those nights listening to their chatter”. She paused to look at a pine tree framed by the living room window. “Here, in this place where Mr.Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence”. [115]

When she says about the neighbours, Eliot thinks of his neighbours. Mrs Sen’s experience is the immigrants experience as she is away from her homeland. But though Eliot is in his homeland he also experiences the same longing, whenever Mrs Sen asks Eliot whether he misses his mother, he just nods his head. Now Mrs Sen realizes Eliot’s feeling. She comes to a sad appreciation that both Mrs Sen and Eliot feel the same.

Mrs Sen also listens to the recorded voice of her relative on a tape. She informs this to Eliot

She turned off the tape. “These are things that happened the day. I left India”. The next day she played the same cassette all over again. This time when her grandfather was speaking, she stopped the tape. She told Eliot she’d received a letter over a weekend. Her grand father was dead. [128-129]

The experience of dichotomy, the swing between east and west, Indian and American, brown and white the clear binary opposition of immigrant experience is very obvious in *Mrs. Sen*.

In the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri, the characters are forced to think about India and its culture and they cannot live neither like an Indian, nor like an American. Like Trishank the mythological hero, they hang between two worlds, two cultures – the one they have left behind and the one they have forced themselves to live in.

In the short story *Interpreter of Maladies* Mina's family comes to India to visit the sun Temple at Konark. The family consists of the young couple Raj and Mina their sons Ronny and Bobby and their daughter Tina. They are taken by Kapasi, a tourist car driver from the hotel to Konark. The driver talks them and understands that Mina doesn't have interest in anything. They are all caught between American style and Indian culture of life. She doesn't share things with her husband. Although they belong to India, their dressing sense has a strong American influence. For example Raj wears shorts and a T.Shirt and the children are in bright colour American dresses.

A clean - shaven man, he looked exactly like a magnified version of Ronny. He had a sapphire blue visor, and was dressed in shorts, sneakers, and a T.Shirt. The camera slung around his neck, with an impressive telephoto lens and numerous lens and numerous buttons and markings, was the only complicated thing he wore. He frowned, watching as Ronny rushed toward the goat, but appeared to have no intention of intervening. "Bobby, make sure that your brother doesn't do anything stupid .[44]

Mina likes to live independently. She has a charming look and has the capacity to lead position which worries her much. Raj and Mina fight even for small things. Among all only Raj is strongly influenced by the culture of America. Kapasi notices that Raj calls his wife only by her name, and even the children call their mother by her name.

While describing the immigrant experience of her characters in her short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*. Jhumpa Lahiri employs some fictional techniques such as stream of consciousness and ends in doubting which gives freedom to her readers for giving their own conclusions. The sweet and bitter experiences of the immigrants presented by Lahiri in *The Interpreter of Maladies* have been studied from various responses to the immigrant experience.

Though most of the works of Lahiri have focused on cross cultural alienation that most expatriates live through, her short stories present crisper and more vivid images of issues of bi-culturalism, binary oppositions and dislocation. While Mr.Pirzada's dilemma is seen through the

eyes of Lilia, a eleven year old immigrant, Mrs. Sen's nostalgia is viewed by an eleven year old American child, Eliot. The third story portrays the image of an immigrant family's visit to their homeland where they feel alienated like outsiders. The short stories are three different responses to the dilemma of the immigrant experience.

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