

Dislocation and cultural displacement in *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract

It can be argued that, other than in some trading communities, migration of all sorts is due to varying degrees of political or economic necessities. It may be related to the inequalities created by capitalism, such as the demand for labour, the rise of poverty or famine and the basic demand for better social and economic conditions. This paper explores how dislocation and cultural displacement affect the minds of the diasporic characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies*. Lahiri, in her collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, has clearly brought out the mental crisis and sense of alienation felt by various immigrants from India.

This paper analyses the following short stories from the collection and examines how Lahiri deals with the question of identity, alienation, assimilation, integration and the plight of those who are physically and psychologically displaced. The story of "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" explores the mental crisis of Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani Bengali who becomes alienated and finds it difficult to understand the festivals, customs and manners of Americans; 'A Real Durwan' is the story about Boori Ma, a sweeper who migrated to India from Pakistan, not for financial reasons but for political reason; and "Mrs. Sen's" is a story of a Indian Bengali housewife, migrated to America with her husband, a university teacher. Displacement, whether forced or self-imposed, is in many ways a calamity for the immigrants. Using the ideologies of some of the Postcolonial thinkers like Bhabha, Kalra and Dufoix, this paper attempts to prove how diasporic writing makes it evident that despite peculiarities, there is an inherent exilic state in all dislocated lives, whether it be voluntary or involuntary migration. Growing up in America under the supervision of a mother who wanted to raise her children to be Indian, is no surprise when Jhumpa Lahiri puts so large an emphasis on the stories of Indians in what for them is a strange land.

Keywords: Diasporic Writing, Displacement, Hibridity, Alienation, Migration

Displacement, whether forced or self-imposed, is in many ways a calamity for the immigrants. By exemplifying writers both from the old Indian diaspora of indentured labourers and the modern Indian diaspora of IT technocrats, diasporic Indian writing shows that despite peculiarities there is an inherent exilic state in all dislocated lives whether it be voluntary or involuntary migration. However, a broad survey of the contributions of the second generation of the modern Indian diaspora in the field of Indian writing in English depict certain shift in concerns in comparison to the previous generation and thereby it widens the field of exile literature. This paper explores how dislocation and cultural displacement affect the minds of the diasporic characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies*.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in 1967 in London but raised in South Kingstown, by her father, a librarian, and her mother, a teacher. The influence of frequent childhood visits to India and parents who are still a part of the Indian world despite their immigration to America thirty years ago shaped her book. Growing up in America under the supervision of a mother who wanted to raise her children to be Indian, it is no surprise that Jhumpa Lahiri puts so large an emphasis on the stories of Indians in what for them is a strange land. Publishing her first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, in 1999, Lahiri has become a quick international success and an award-winning author.

'Diaspora' is a Greek word, derived from the verb *diaspeiro*, which was used as early as the fifth century B.C. by Sophocles, Herodotus, and Thucydides. Martin Baumann points out that "it was only in later Jewish tradition that the meaning of "diaspora" changed to designate both the scattered people and the locale of their dispersion" (Dufoix 15). In 1961, Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines the term "diaspora" as "dispersion as a people of common national origin or of common beliefs" and "the people of one country dispersed into other countries"(Dufoix 31).

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* is considered as one of the major texts in the branch of literary theory called Postcolonialism. Post colonialism deals with the interpretation and understanding the encounters between the western colonial powers and the nations that they colonized. Colonisation was not just an economic, military or political process but one that affected the culture and identity across the world. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha shows that binary divisions like East and West were unstable. He develops two key concepts, hybridity and mimicry.

According to him, hybridity is the idea that identities are made up of all the different cultures with which they have contact. When two cultures or nations meet, ideas, language, and material goods are shared between them. This process of sharing forces them both to adapt and

change. Thus, there can be no pure Western or Eastern culture or nation. Mimicry is the way in which a person or group adopts an idea from another culture. Bhabha also states that “hybrid hyphenations emphasize the incommensurable elements – the stubborn chunks – as the basis of cultural identifications” (Bhabha 219).

Interpreter of Maladies reflects the lives of Indian immigrants living in America. In these stories, Lahiri deals with the question of identity, alienation, assimilation, integration and the plight of those who are physically and psychologically displaced. The story of ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’ explores the mental crisis of Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani Bengali who becomes alienated and finds it difficult to understand the festivals, customs and manners of Americans and demands, “What is this thank-you? The lady at the bank thanks me, the cashier at the shop thanks me, the librarian thanks me when I return an overdue book, the overseas operator thanks me as she tries to connect me to Dacca and fails. If I am buried in this country I will be thanked, no doubt, at my funeral” (Lahiri 32).

Lilia, a ten year old Indian American has a little access to the Indian history and culture and she does not understand the frustration of her parents about the unavailability of ingredients for Indian food. She is caught between the traditions of her parents and the American culture. Similarly, Mr. Pirzada is new to the country’s Halloween culture. Thus the contradiction in their different citizenship plays a vital role in this story. For Lilia, and similarly for Mr. Pirzada, the relationship between identity and nationality is unstable and fluid.

As Kalra points out, “Diasporic subjects are carriers of a consciousness which provides an awareness of difference. This sense is a basic aspect of self-identity for diasporic subjects” (Kalra 37). For example, Lilia who has an Indian heritage, born and living in America, becomes acutely aware, from a very early age, that the food she eats and the language she speaks at home is different from that of the other children with whom she interacts. The effect of the Western colonialism can be seen when Lilia tries to read about Dacca from her school library. The following conversation with her teacher may justify the argument “Is this book a part of your report, Lilia?” “No, Mrs. Kenyon” “Then I see no reason to consult it,” she said, replacing it in the slim gap on the shelf. “Do you?” (Lahiri 37).

Her school education has taught her the American Revolution, the injustices of taxation without representation, and to memorise passages from the Declaration of Independence. She hardly knows the history of her own ethnicity, country and culture. According to Kalra, “ethnic or racial difference emerges against a dominant cultural force, which challenges the diasporic subject’s sense of identity” (Kalra 37). In *Diaspora and Hybridity*, Kalra refers to Stuart Hall’s statement and states that diasporic consciousness “forms a part of the work of identity production

and reproduction through transformation and difference. It is by recognizing difference rather than denying it in an attempt to be part of a homogeneous whole that diasporic consciousness may emerge” (Kalra 37).

‘A Real Durwan’ is the story about Boori Ma, a sweeper who migrated to India from Pakistan, not for financial reasons but for political reason. She was deported to Calcutta after the partition in 1947. Partition created a mass migration where people lost everything including their identity. Boori Ma’s constant repetition of her plight and losses since her deportation to Calcutta after the partition unearths the themes of displacement, alienation and identity crisis, as she suffers her financial and economic losses. Thus, “Forced exile becomes essential to the heightened sense of longing for home and is central to this understanding of diaspora” (Kalra 17).

“Mrs. Sen’s” is a story of a Indian Bengali housewife, migrated to America with her husband, a university teacher. The setting of their house, the costumes they wear and the instruments Mrs. Sen uses in her kitchen for grating are more Indian. It is also possible to notice that Mrs. Sen never tries to assimilate with the American culture. Even though driving becomes an essential skill in the U.S, she shows no interest to learn it. Instead, she is interested in buying fresh fish and cooking them for her husband. It can be seen as a reflection of her cultural propaganda in native Bengal that a wife should be a good housekeeper and care for her husband. This shows that ethno-cultural territories do not necessarily cross with geographical boundaries.

She refuses to accept her new environment and “when Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables” (Lahiri 128). Throughout the story, Mrs. Sen confirms her nostalgic memories of India, her family, the company of her neighbours and her desire to have fresh fish. Thus, “They bear upon them the traces of the particular cultures, traditions, languages and histories by which they were shaped. The difference is that they are not and will never be unified in the old sense, because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, belong at one and the same time to several homes” (Kalra 35).

Since the late nineteenth century, studies on migration have generally distinguished them according to two main factors: how people left, and why they left. Migrations could thus be classified as voluntary/involuntary and political/economic. The two are usually merged, with voluntary corresponding to economic, and involuntary to political. Linking these binary terms to immigrant or refugee makes it possible to consider the migrants’ evolution as natural. A voluntary economic immigrant is in the country to work, whereas a political refugee forced to flee opposes his or her country politically.

Dufoix, in *Diasporas* states that “a common situation is enough to create a common conscience”, “the ontological (ethnic, national, religious) relations between the dispersed people establish an effective link”, and “sharing the en-soi, (i.e., objective common characteristics) necessarily implies the pour-soi (i.e., the formation of a group self-consciousness)”. This makes “the "diaspora" an actor capable of thought and action” (Dufoix 87).

However, it can be argued that, other than in some trading communities, migration of all sorts is due to varying degrees of political or economic necessities. It may be related to the inequalities created by capitalism, such as the demand for labour, the rise of poverty or famine and the basic demand for better social and economic conditions. Lahiri, in her collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, has clearly brought out the mental crisis and sense of alienation felt by various immigrants from India. This paper concludes by quoting Kalra who states that “Unlike exile, migration, as such, does not necessarily mean that returning home is barred, even though not being able to return may act as a powerful source of nostalgia for home”(Kalra 18).

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