

## **THE SENSE OF IDENTITY, ALIENATION AND ASSIMILATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S FICTION**

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### Abstract

Pulitzer prize-winning author of Interpreter of Maladies, Jhumpa Lahiri is a diasporas writer, who in her second work, a novel, The Namesake acts as a dispassionate narrator visiting the private, limited spaces of Bengali immigrants in America, a world which is without an axis, collapsible, deceptive, where the state of exile is a cultural as well as an emotional denial. The second generation well known immigrant based in the USA , Jhumpa Lahiri could not separate herself from the Indian themes. While feeling the significance of family ties she has said: "I went to Calcutta neither as a tourist nor as an outsider and yet I also know that as different as Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way, in the way I didn't seem to belong in the United States." (2001:7) Identity crisis, marginality, nostalgia, alienation are her chief concerns. The life conditions of the Asian immigrants in the United States are mostly attempted in The Namesake. The crisis of identity in immigration and diaspora is not a new phenomenon in the literature. The difference can be seen in the perceptions and perspectives of each diaspora writer.

Keywords: colonialism – diaspora – alienation and isolation – identity – immigrant – crisscrossing lives – emotional loss etc

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Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London, in July 1967, and brought up in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. This idea of exile runs consistently throughout Lahiri's Pulitzer prize-winning book *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). It is a complex portrayal of the family life of Indian immigrants trying to saddle two cultures – their Indian heritage and the American dream. With remarkable insight, she gets deep into the psychological depths of her characters and reveals their inner world by a fascinating yet deceptively simple style. We come across more reality than in her fiction.

The characters encounter severe alienation due to a lack of personal possession, value, and success. The bare and blatant truth of the Indian caste system, as well as the power of materialism, is strongly shown in these two stories as a main motive of loneliness.

In a recent interview to *Newsweek*, Lahiri pointed out that the older she gets, the more aware she is, that she has "inherited a sense of exile" which strongly pervades her major writings. Lahiri's major concern is the "question of identity which is always a difficult one, but more so for those who are culturally displaced, like the immigrants are or those who grow up simultaneously." When asked how she felt growing up as the child of immigrants, Lahiri explained, "It was always a question of allegiance, of choice. I wanted to please my parents.....I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers... it was a classic case of the divided entity." Thus we can see that it is the complications of being a hyphenated American that informs her work completely. Lahiri's true genius resides in capturing the ordinary moments in the life of her characters and transforming them into works of art. She combined her authentic familiarity with the lives of the Indian diaspora and her gift for inhabiting the space of the characters while describing the most mundane experiences, thus making the readers identify with the characters.

With deft and precise strokes Lahiri too, like a true miniaturist, straddles between two worlds of Boston and Bengal with great ease. Her collection of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies* negotiates dilemmas of the cultural spaces, with a master's touch. Lahiri's success is in the fact that she has emerged as an interpreter of exile in its various nuances and manifestation. *The Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of nine stories, depicting the trauma and angst of the first generation and second generation Indian migrants to the United States. The themes range from the emotional struggle of love to immigrants battling new worlds. Her stories are marked by a sense of alienation, longing, loss, and hope which so often mark the immigrant experience, and which form a part of what she, her parents and friends too experienced as fellow immigrants. As she says in an interview, "I always say that I feel that I have inherited a sense of that loss from my parents because it was palpable all the time I was growing up, the sense of what my parents had sacrificed in moving to the US and in so many ways."

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Though most of the stories in this collection have an American setting, India especially Calcutta keeps rearing its head in the memory of its characters. Her earlier stories – *Areal Durvan*, *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* and *The Interpreter of Maladies*, are set in India. The first two stories center around women living on the fringes of the society and are exploited by their own people. India continues to form a part of the fictional landscape, as Lahiri draws heavily on the memories of her parents to depict an India, she did not know. Her stories though set in America, are full of details of the traditional Indian name, food cooking and wardrobe giving character and an Indian flavor to her stories.

Lahiri stories reflected the minutest details of displacement, as she had experienced it first hand. *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, *Mrs. Sen* and *The Third and the Final Continent* present the Immigrant's struggle to survive in this world where they try to fight their homesickness, and also convey the nostalgia for their own country which they have left behind. These stories provocatively present Lahiri's concern for the fading of origins.

*A Temporary Matter*, *Sexy* and *This Blessed House* bear a great closeness to Lahiri's own personal experiences. *A Temporary Matter* is a story of a young couple, Shukumar and Shobha, who have drifted apart after losing their child in a miscarriage. Neither of them has the capacity to provide emotional anchorage to the other. Both deliberately avoid each other. One day they find a small note in their mailbox, indicating that the electricity would remain disconnected for a few hours, every day for a week. In the enforced darkness the couple finds a pretext for discovering their latent, subconscious fears and dark secrets., and also about their 'little betrayals'. By the time the week is over, the couple reaches a point of no return and Shobha, the breadwinner walks out on Shukumar who at thirty-five hasn't progressed beyond being a student. There is a reversal of gender roles here with Shukumar doing all the cooking and cleaning, and being blamed for the miscarriage, whereas in India the mother would bear all the responsibility.

The spirit of exile and alienation enables the diasporic writers to seek refuge in their writings and establish a permanent place in the minds of their readers. Lahiri does exactly the same.

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