



Mind and Place: A Study of Cultural Conflict in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

Parveen Kumar

MA English, Department of English, BGSB University, Rajouri

Abstract: *In the existing scenario of multicultural societies, immigration is an extensively discussed phenomenon. Many writers have dealt variously with immigration and it has arisen as a new genre of migration literature. Migration is often difficult for those who find themselves culturally uprooted from a particular community to a new culture and society. The importance of culture is considered as a constituent factor in framing the identity. Jhumpa Lahiri is one such diasporic writer whose works clearly reflect the trauma and loss suffered by immigrants who suffer a cultural loss. The present study analyses Lahiri's collection of short stories entitled Interpreter of Maladies to understand the cultural dilemma and cultural tragedies of the characters whose maladies are too much extent cultural maladies.*

Keywords: *Belongingness, Culture, Dilemma, Immigrants, Loss, Miscommunication.*

Culture plays a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of ethics, values, norms, regulations, customs, traditions and other components of human societies. It ties one generation to the next and binds the human race into a complete whole. Our ancestral values are handed down to the next generations in the form of culture. It defines the identity of our being and provides a meaning to our existence. In all the spheres of life humans are guided by their culture. Culture provides us a sense of belonging and unity to a particular region and the people who live there. We share familiar beliefs with the people of our own culture and this boosts our emotional belongingness with others. Furthermore, it connects us with our ancestral values, helps us to self-realize our origin, offers us evolutionary enlightenment, promotes humanity to follow moral values, disciplines our life, teaches us the lessons of coexistence and cooperation, and ultimately preserves our heritage.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that humans are cultural beings because it is culture that uniquely separates us from the other life forms on Earth. A disconnection from our culture can lead to create conflicts around the cultural identity and questions our sense of belongingness. Feelings of loneliness, loss and isolation often accompany the experience of cultural uprooting. So, cultural identity is a contributing factor in the overall development of an individual's identity. The identity of a person is influenced by many factors of which culture is an indispensable part. Culture influences the way we live our life and develop our beliefs and values; therefore its maintenance is an extensively discussed subject in the scenario of contemporary multicultural societies.

Today migration from one country to another is a familiar phenomenon. A large number of people migrate cross borders for various reasons but, to begin life in a new country is not always easy. Mostly, people suffer a shock of culture as their cultural practices clash with what they used to do in the country of their origin. The loss of cultural norms, religious practices and customs threatens the identity and concept of self among the immigrants. A sense of alienation often haunts the first- and second-generation immigrants who are displaced from their own homeland to an entirely new world. The complex process to adjust into the new culture is accompanied by many psychological and social problems that affect the migrant populations in moral, linguistic, psychological, religious and other social and cultural variations.

Literature offers a valuable glimpse into the life of immigrants and their subjects. It provides a profound insight into the cultural tragedies of immigrants by portraying them with fresh perspectives. It takes up the responsibility to voice the experiences of those who suffer the loss of their homeland and culture. Writers emphasize several themes that revolve around the unique hardships of cultural settlement that is faced by many people overseas. Some prominent literary examples are Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1989) in which a Hindu woman faces identity crisis and changes her identity many times to adjust herself in the United States. In the novel *An American Brat* (1995) Bapsi Sidhwa portrays a young Pakistani girl and her attempt to flee from the conservative religious atmosphere of her native land to secure herself into culturally liberated society of Massachusetts. Shaila Abdullah's novel *Saffron Dreams* describes the struggles of an immigrant Pakistani mother who loses her husband in the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Centre. She raises a handicap child completely on her own while bearing the hostility of Americans who despise her cultural heritage. In the global era the concept of cultural identity is explored variously in literary circles. This has given rise to transnational discussions on the importance of culture in the formation of identity. Another universally relevant work is the Pulitzer prize winning collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* by acclaimed writer



Jhumpa Lahiri. She is a prominent literary figure in the realm of Indian English writing who has written famous works. Lahiri weaves her works around the contemporary subjects that are key in modern man's life. The recollection of immigrant experiences is one of the dominant theme in many of her works. As an immigrant herself, she often explores into the psyche of her characters who undergo the pains of identity crisis due to their cultural tragedies.

The collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* portray a fictional expression of cultural isolation, emotional remorse and loneliness that is felt by the people who live away from their country and culture. Considered as the debut book of Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* focus on the patterns of cultural interactions that take place between the carriers of diverse cultural traits. Lahiri endeavours to interpret the conflicting mindsets of people who suffer directly or indirectly from one or other cultural tragedy. She delves into the psychological depths of her characters to mark the internal struggles that underlie the immigrant experience. Ashutosh Dubey has rightly mentioned the power of Lahiri's works as, "her stories record the experiences of both first and second generation Indian immigrants and majority of her characters, like her, have relatives in India but their home, in unambiguous terms, is northeastern United States"(Dubey: 2002: 22). The stories consist of the longing and loss that often comes with the cultural clash in an immigrant's life. Some stories poignantly reflect the lives of Indian immigrants who navigate between the culture they have lost and the new culture they encounter everyday.

The book consists of nine short stories entitled "A Temporary Matter", "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", "Interpreter of Maladies", "A Real Durwan", "Sexy", "Mrs. Sen's", "This Blessed House", "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar", and "The Third and the Final Continent". The first story of the collection heads us towards Lahiri's world of immigrants. This story is a contradiction of traditional Indian family setting where the couple lives happily with their children. Here in the story the husband Shukumar and his wife Shoba live in a marital bond without uttering a word to each other. A deep analysis of the story presents the underlying idea of alienation and loss that is felt by most of the immigrants in a foreign land. Lahiri targets the marriage bond that changes its shape under the burdens of a new and different cultural background.

The second story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is presented from the perspective of a ten years old child Laila who thoroughly observes the experience of a Pakistani immigrant Mr. Pirzada. The setting of the story corresponds to the time of Indo-Pak conflict in 1971 and Mr. Pirzada is always worried and anxious for the safety of his family while living in a distant land to complete his research work. He always feel alone though surrounded by culturally diverse people. The story ends when he returns back to Bangladesh to live with his family having been unable to cope up with the circumstances.

Third story entitled "Interpreter of Maladies" deals with the expression of cultural division between the Indians who live abroad and the Indians who live in India. The 'interpreter' here is Mr. Kapasi who works as a guide to an immigrant tourist couple Mr. And Mrs. Das. He also works an interpreter for a doctor who doesn't understand the Gujarati language. It is a story of confessions that take different cultural meanings. However Mr. Kapasi fails to interpret the confession of Mrs. Sen and confirms the prevalence of misinterpretation due to cultural divides.

"A Real Durwan" is the story of an old woman Boori Ma who is deported to Calcutta after partition and works as a watchman in an old building. She is thrown out of the building after the incidence of a suspected thievery.

The story "Sexy" is based on an affair between an American Indian girl Miranda and a married Bengali man Dev. He entitles her 'sexy' due to her physical appearance but towards the end of the story Miranda realizes her mistake and withdraw herself from Dev. She understands that love is not only about physical communion but about emotional compatibility.

Another story that deals with emigrant experience is "Mrs. Sen's". Mrs. Sen lives with her husband and works as a caretaker for an eleven year old American boy Eliot who illustrates the harmony between the two cultures. However Mrs. Sen is not able to adapt the foreign culture and this frustrates her to a great level. She feels disconnected from the culture whereas Eliot feels a sense of disconnection from her mother and finds motherly warmth in Mrs. Sen.

In the manner of "A Temporary Matter", another story that deals with married life is "A Blessed House" in which a newly married Asian couple Sanjeev and Twinkle have just started their life in USA. There is a conflict among them due to disrespect of each other's ideas and likings. Sanjeev is an executive in a firm whereas Twinkle is a literature student with a liking for preserving antic monuments. The story presents Lahiri's idea of implying tolerance for cultural adjustment as well as adjustment in relationships.

"The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" is a story about desolation and suffering felt by Bibi Haldar due to a mental malady. She is left alone by her family to suffer her own torments. However she finds a way for herself towards the end of the story and delivers a baby boy who becomes a source for her healing.

The last story of the collection is "The Third and the Final Continent" that appears as a diverse taste while the same themes of immigration, cultural settlement and adjustment are also dealt artistically. It is about a Bengali graduate who lives as a tenant in the house of Mrs. Croft who is an old woman of 100 years. When his wife comes from India, he has to move to a new house but with a feeling of alienation and loss.

The present study tends to take two stories into main consideration and explores them to understand the presentation of cultural dilemmas as portrayed by Lahiri. The first story of the collection "A Temporary Matter" describes the disturbed marital



life of Shoba and Shukumar who are migrated from India and settled in U.S.A. Their conjugal life has come to a stage where they avoid each other due to the unfulfilled expectations of the past. Although they live in American culture but the Indian cultural psyche prevails over it and they expect each other to act like an Indian husband and wife. In Indian culture marriage is glorified as an key event of life that ties the individual in many other relationships. The partners are considered responsible for the emotional well-being of each other and marriage is not only a sexual partnership. Furthermore, procreation and rearing of the child is the test of cooperation between husband and wife. In Indian cultures, having the first child is considered as an auspicious event by both the parents because without a child, marriage is considered incomplete. The loss of child dries up the emotions of Shoba because of Shukumar's absence from the moment when she expected him the most. His absence from the hospital turns Shobha entirely into a miserable creature. The communication gap between both of them grows deeper as the time passes until one day the electricity department announces a power cut for few days. The situation between them completely changes during these power cuts as they confess to each other something they carried deep inside themselves. The fractured dialogue between them is reconnected by both of them when they fit themselves into their cultural role of a husband and wife. "A Temporary Matter" presents an example of cultural miscommunication due to the insufficiency of cultural familiarities between Shoba and Shukumar.

Both Shoba and Shukumar are factors to translate Indian culture in different stances. Shoba has more intense exposure to the Indian culture and her cultural knowledge of cooking, knitting, and maintaining household shows her familiarity with the Indian cultural background. The cultural difference between Shoba and Shukumar is primarily due to her longer exposure with the Indian culture. On the other hand, Shukumar wants to reconnect with her by using their cultural familiarities as a tool but, he also fails in his attempt. They are attached to their Indian heritage in different degrees and this fact fails their communication when they face a clash of cultural expectations.

However the game that the couple plays during the electrical shutdown expresses their attachment with their culture. Shobha is the one who plays as a confidant player whereas Sukumar's late interest in the Indian culture makes him appear as an unprepared player. His lack of contact with the native country of his parents is clear in these words, "Shukumar hadn't spent as much time in India as Shoba had. His parents, who settled in New Hampshire used to go back without him. . . It wasn't until after his father died, in his last year of college, that the country began to interest him, and he studied it's history from course books as if it were any other subject. He wished now that he had his own childhood story of India" (Lahiri 12).

The lack of cultural familiarities widens the communication gap between them and eventually leads to their separation. Their conversation only happens in the unusual darkness that ignites their need to understand each other and their unfulfilled cultural expectations. The darkness of the house unties their tongues, "Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again" (Lahiri 19). The dialogue between them breaks the cultural and communicative estrangement that they both suffer in their relationship. The conversation between them makes them realize their familiar cultural roots and history. Their alienation and loss is recovered by the secrets that they reveal to one another and closeness is felt by them with the disclosing of secrets one by one. They also come to realize the effect of not mourning the loss of their unborn child. The marital frustrations between them is a result of broken communication that is widen by the poles of past and present. The game of sharing conversation kindles the lamp of communication for them, "Somehow without saying anything, it had turned into this. Into an exchange of confessions- the little ways they'd hurt or disappointed each other and themselves" (Lahiri 18). At the end of the story they start their conversation with the lights on as the electricity has been restored on the fifth night. They start communicating the meaningful messages that bring out the end of their relationship that had become a burden for them. The story presents the complex cultural processes that are further entangled in the prevalence of heterogeneous factors.

Lahiri points out that communication is integral part for existence, both for societies and individual relationships as well. The lack of communication forces the characters in the story to undergo isolation and alienation both at personal and cultural levels. Miscommunications often lead to stress and widens the gap of misunderstandings as observed in the above analysed story. The truth can be wholly applied to immigrants who often feel culturally divided between their cultural values of homeland and their adopted culture and society.

Another short story that is also entitled as the name of the book is "Interpreter of Maladies". The story is set in India and presents the cultural conflicts between the western couple Mr. And Mrs. Das who are on a trip to India accompanied by their three children Tina, Bobby and Ronnie. However, Das couple originally bear Indian names as Raj and Mina and live as second generation Americans. They are guided by Mr. Kapasi, an Indian guide who initially perceives the difference between their Indian looks and artificial behaviour as Americans. He finds himself entirely different in morals and behaviour when he compares himself to his Indian counterpart who lives in the West. His cultural expectations are shunned when he greets Das couple in an Indian way but receives an American response. Moreover, he is also surprised by the negligent attitude of Das couple towards their children. He finds them lacking parental responsibility that is rarely visible in Indian cultural scenario. He observes, "Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents [. . .] it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves" (Lahiri 49). He finds Mr. And Mrs. Das as inadequately learned to take the adult responsibility as



parents because they appear to Mr. Kapasi more like an elder brother and sister rather than a father and mother. They appear to him as self-centered individuals who are little concerned about the other members of their family and their self absorbed nature contrasts them with Mr. Kapasi's cultural expectations from them as Indians. Mrs. Das appears to him as an indifferent mother and wife who does not fit into the cultural frame of either a wife or a mother. She eats her favourite puffed rice but does not offer it to anyone, paints her nails ostensibly crushing the innocence of her daughter Tina and treats her children, "as if they were strangers" (Lahiri 58).

On the other hand, Mr. Kapasi's cultural ideals of womanhood begin to clash with his character because of his sexual attraction towards Mina Das. He secretly admires her physical features and she also parallels his attraction by praising his job as an interpreter. The praise of his job by a western woman raises his self-worth and he contemplates over the circumstances of familial burden that led him to take the job. He begins to adjust Mira Sen into his Indian ideals of a wife and considers her western cultural ideology more suited to himself than her own wife's low opinions about him. He contemplates her flattering words, "She had also used the word 'romantic'. She did not behave in a romantic way towards her husband, and yet, she had used the word to describe him" (Lahiri 53). Mr. Kapasi admires the openness of Mrs. Das and searches for the romantic absence of love from his own marriage that is bound by the cultural Indian roots. His concept of family is shaped by his culture that doesn't allow him to raise above his duties as a husband whereas the western culture provides enough space to Das couple and provides them independence from parental obligations. He feels a need to transgress his own restrictive cultural norms and associate with the culture that relates to his own romantic ideals.

On the other hand Mr. Das, Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi all experience isolation in their marital life because of their unmet expectations and unfulfilled emotional needs. Mrs. Das discloses the secret of an extramarital affair because of her utter seclusion as a wife and mother. Raj's busy schedule widens the gap between both of them and amplifies Mina's agony and solitude. However, Mr. Kapasi observes Mina's confession of an extramarital affair from an entirely Indian cultural lens. So, he is not able to understand the trouble she has confessed to him. He considers Mrs. Das' confession merely as an act of betrayal against her husband and children. He works well as a linguistic interpreter but fails to fit into the work of a cultural interpreter. When Mrs. Das gets aware that she is misunderstood by Mr. Kapasi, she gives up the idea of any dialogue with him, "She opened her mouth to say something, but as she glared at Mr. Kapasi some certain knowledge seemed to pass before her eyes, and she stopped. It crushed him; he knew at that moment that he was not even important enough to be properly insulted" (Lahiri 66). The cultural clash doesn't allow the characters to understand the situation from each other's perspective. This clash impedes the idea of any cultural translation and results in the failure of characters to interact with each other. The inability of characters to cross the familiar boundaries of culture and achieve cultural flexibility.

Thus, the analysis infers that most characters of Lahiri's short stories collection *Interpreter of Maladies* fail to resolve their cultural dilemmas and to communicate across their cultural differences. Although they are attracted by the other cultures but they cannot foster their cross borders cultural understanding. Cultural miscommunication is a familiar instance and it can happen anywhere in the present scenario of multicultural societies as well. Lahiri signals the fact that in order to transgress the cultural boundaries the prerequisites are cultural flexibility, awareness and willingness to be open. She artistically portrays the cultural challenges that are a real problem in the present global society.

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