

Maladies of the Immigrants: A Review of Studies on Jhumpa Lahiri

Nimai Chandra Mondal*

Abstract: *Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies," an anthology of short stories and her novel "The Namesake" primarily deal with the crises which may be summed up by the Postcolonial critics as diasporic experience of the Indian Immigrants in America. Identity crisis, rootlessness, alienation, nostalgia, struggle for adaptation to the alien culture, assimilation, rejection – these are the main focal points of Lahiri. The studies taken up for review in this paper have analysed and interpreted the characters and their experiences from divergent points of view. Some of the scholars put more emphasis on the subtle psychological aspects of Lahiri's art of characterization; some others explain the Indo-American diaspora from the post-colonial theoretical stand point, while many others try to understand their experiences from the perspective of globalization and cosmopolitanism.*

Key Words: *Interpreter of Maladies, Diaspora, Immigrants, Postcolonial, Globalization, Cosmopolitanism*

Introduction:

Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian American Diaspora writer, was born in London and grew up in Rhode Island to Indian immigrant parents from Calcutta. Her debut collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* published in 1999 won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and Hemingway/PEN Award in 2000.

Most of her stories deal with the Indo-Americans from Bengal and their diasporic experiences in America as well as in India. The uncertainties and insecurities of the first and the second generation immigrants have been vividly and realistically depicted by Lahiri remaining detached and non-judgemental through out like a true artist. Most of the Lahiri scholars have categorized her characters into two sub-groups – the first and the second generation Diasporas on the basis of their level of experience and adaptation. Originated from a Greek term, the word **Diaspora** means 'to disperse'. According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin **Diaspora** refers to "the voluntary or forcible movement

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sree Chaitanya Mahavidyalaya
E - Mail Id: bumbubaba@gmail.com

of peoples from their homelands into new regions”. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998) It is the transliteration of a Greek word which means “to sow throughout” or “distribute in foreign land” or “scatter abroad”. So Diasporas are deracinated population leaving ethnic and cultural origin in a motherland other than where they currently live. Their economic, socio-political and cultural affiliations cross borders of nations. Therefore, diaspora studies presume the existence of displaced groups of people who retain a collective sense of identity. The elements of homesickness, longing and a “quest for Identity” or “Roots” mark the Diaspora fiction.

Jhumpa Lahiri herself belongs to the second generation Diaspora community. Though she was born in London and brought up in America, her parents wanted to raise their daughter to be Indian, and she learned about her Bengali heritage from an early age. However, Lahiri considers herself an American, stating “I wasn’t born here, but I might as well have been”. (Rachna, 2014) About the ambivalent position of the diasporic writers, Rushdie says in his essay, *The Indian Writer in England*, “that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost: that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.” (Rushdie, 1983)

Vijay Mishra in *The Literature of Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* says, “All Diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diaspora refers to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated in their passport They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by spectres, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements”. (Mishra, 2007)

Interpreter of Maladies and *The Namesake* are about the experiences of Indians who live in an alien country and how they are deeply crushed under the burden of alienation and rootlessness. The stories depict different aspects of the Bengali immigrant experience and examine the difficulties the central characters have in integrating and relocating their identities beyond their familial homes. At the same time the stories expose the disconnection between the first and the second generation immigrants in the United States. Here the immigrants or expatriate Indian Bengalis are on the move from India to the United Kingdom or the United States or are on a short visit to their native country, either way confronting surprising, even baffling cultural differences. A common thread running these stories is the experience of being foreign. Some of her characters are homesick, some

are misunderstood and a few return back. No matter where the story takes place, the characters struggle between the two worlds by which are torn. Loneliness and constant sense of alienation prevail in them. Food in the stories is a talisman, a reassuring bit of the homeland to cling to. References to Indian food, dress, music etc. are cultural signifiers showing the difference between the two cultures. Lahiri herself shares the identity crisis suffered by her characters, especially, her women characters. After spending 30 years in the United States, Lahiri says, "It is home to me but I feel a bit of an outsider too".

Here a number of relevant study papers have been selected for review in order to make a comparative analysis of their findings and to disseminate and generalize the common trends in this field of study. This paper also seeks to find out if there is any research gap and whether there are some unexplored aspects in the creation of Jhumpa Lahiri.

Result:

Aparna Sri, & V., Akash, S. (2021a) in their study have shown that Lahiri's first generation immigrants facing it difficult to cope with the foreign culture try to maintain their original culture and expect their children to follow their traditional culture. The possibilities of cross-cultural communication among the Indians and the Americans are present. This study reveals that Jhumpa Lahiri writes about the diaspora issues, including displacement, fragmentation, isolation, rootlessness, discrimination, marginalization, and identity crisis. Apart from writing about the diaspora experiences, she also writes about the ways to look beyond for the diaspora to adapt and assimilate into the new country. This has been shown in *The Third and Final Continent*. According to the researchers, Lahiri's personal experience as an expatriate helps her pen down all such intricate details about migration problems. Her expression of the emotional psyche of the diaspora looks genuine and authentic. This study also found out post-colonial subject in *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* in her dealing of issues like Mr. Pirzada's anxiety about his family, the civil war between East and West Pakistan etc. Mrs. Sen's alienation and nostalgia mark her inability to orient herself in the foreign land and the consequent homesickness for emotional reassurance. Being born and brought up in America Lilia (in *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*), the second generation immigrant cannot understand the difference between an Indian Hindu and a Pakistani Muslim because of their physical and cultural affinity. On the other hand Lilia's ambivalent position comes to the fore when she is seen as an Indian witch by the Americans at the night of Halloween. In their another study Aparna Sri, V., & Akash, S. (2021b) revealed that Jhumpa Lahiri's women characters like Mrs. Sen in *Mrs. Sen (Interpreter of Maladies)* and Ashima Ganguly in *The Namesake* migrated after marriage to find themselves doubly isolated in their newly adopted land. Eliot, the ten year old American boy observed Mrs.

Sen more attractive than his mother. Eliot's mother's refusal to take the food prepared by Mrs. Sen may be interpreted as her resistance to accept her in American society as a cultural outsider where as to Eliot Mrs. Sen is kind, considerate and caring. She is more vibrant. For Mrs. Sen "Everything is there". (Lahiri, 1999) These objects remind Rushdie's Imaginary Homelands as that takes one to the past with a sense of nostalgia. For Mrs. Sen fish symbolizes everything, her home, friends, neighbours and family. Here Lahiri projects food and cooking as a cultural signifier which relates home, memory, and identity of person. Likewise in novel *The Namesake* there are ample references to Bengali Indian food as they have a psychological impact on the people of the Indian Diaspora. But for the second generation immigrants such as Gogol and Sonia, these things are a constant source of shame and embarrassment. *The Namesake* portrays the differences between growing up in two different cultures, and the American myth of self-creation. This novel highlights various aspects of diaspora: such as the immigrants' sense of in-betweenness, rootlessness, and utmost desire to fit in the new social set-up. The scholars cited the example of Ashima's preparation of rice crispies (jhalhuri) in this regard. Here food is not merely a biological need required for sustenance. On the one hand it is strongly associated with ancestral root, religion, region and folk tradition; on the other hand it may be used as a mark of class, social aspiration and personal relationship besides defining our language, culture and ideology. In the preference of food lies the generation gap – the gap between the first and the second generation immigrants. The culinary taste of Ashoke and Ashima is in conflict with that of their children Gogol and Sonia. (Lahiri, 2005) The melting pot theory comes into picture while observing Gogol. Gogol embraces the liberal Western parenting style. These second generation Indians want to deliberately melt into the Western melting pot with their American culture. Gogol prefers continental menu of America. Here Lahiri uses food as a trope to explore the vicissitudes of the diasporic consciousness. According to the scholars memories and flashbacks also play a significant role in Jhumpa Lahiri. The address book is an image used by the author to depict the connection between the native land and the host land. (Aparna Sri, & Akash, 2021)

On the other hand Rao, D. B. M. (2016) in his study tried to contend that despite their diasporic aspects the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* have universal relevance. According to Dr. Rao, Lahiri delves deep into the psyche of her characters and reveals their inner world. Lahiri writes eloquently about the immigrant experiences and about the divide between cultures, examining both the difficulties and joys of assimilation. By citing the example of Shoba and Sukumar in *A Temporary Matter* the scholar contends that Lahiri excels as a story teller when she combines her own Indian reminiscences and the larger problem of marriage in a single frame. When the reader anticipates a happy reunion after the closeness that Shukumar and Shoba shared by exchanging untold experiences, it

feels like a douse of freezing cold water when Shoba announces her decision to move into a new apartment. Here the marital discord is thus skilfully shown to be temporary matter just as in the power-cut has been. The bond between the land lady Mrs. Croft (in *The Third and the Final Continent*) and the Bengali youth is beyond explanation. In spite of their cultural, attitudinal and generational gap, he develops fondness for her and her nature of acceptance of the inevitable. Dr. Rao opines that *Interpreter of Maladies* exposes facts and at the same time makes the reader deeply involved and reflective. By showing this effect he contends that Jhumpa Lahiri is not an immigrant writer, nor is she a writer of cosmopolitan, international, or global fiction; she is an American realist. (Rao, 2016)

Unlike Aparna Aparna Sri, V., Akash, S. (2021), Rao, D. B. M. (2016) has explained the characters and their experiences from a completely different point of view. While the former scholars analysed Lahiri mainly from the postcolonial cultural theory, the later has tried to establish her as an American realist. However, in both the studies the sound theoretical framework has not been properly explained. Dr. Rao has not shown the aspects of Lahiri which may be compared to the American realists nor does he compare her to any of the noted American realists of the nineteenth century. He has not put forward any argument in support of his statement or to refute the counter logic that Lahiri is considered an Indian Diaspora writer or a cosmopolitan writer of global fiction. There is lack of logical organization in this paper.

Nasser, S. A. (2015) has tried to focus on the various concepts of home from different perspectives as it appears in several short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri. The study revealed that “home” is not a static concept. It is a multidimensional concept shaped by many factors including the personal, physical, emotive, social, and cultural. He asserts that the concept of home repeatedly evokes certain words and themes, such as safe, comfortable, loving, caring, familiar, understanding, memory, identity and belonging. Moreover, Lahiri has skillfully created a literature revolving around the Indian immigrations in America. Meanings of home are disturbed, changed and lost when families and partnerships fall apart, as in the case of Shukumar and Shoba. Regarding Mr. Pirzada, “home” is where one’s family is. In the case of *Mrs. Sen*, memory plays a vigorous creative role. Home exists through her memories, as it connects her with the past. (Nasser, 2015) This concept of home is supported by the studies of Aparna Sri, V., Akash, S. (2021) and Begum, N. (2017).

Karthikadevi, C. G. (2015), unlike the previous studies has shown how Lahiri addresses the sensitive dilemmas in the minds of the Indians and Indian immigrants with themes such as marital difficulties, miscarriages and disconnection among the immigrants.

To her these stories are virtually a casebook of relationship between sexes. According to the researcher, much of the literature by women of South Asian diaspora is drawn from personal experiences and deeply intimate concern. Thus, it often relies on personal memory, and sometimes on the synthesizing of facts, events, people, settings from the author's own life, with imagined characters and events. This paper contends that Lahiri focuses on people meeting with each other or separating, or on their subtle tensions and quiet moments of happiness or pain. Her detached, impassionate style, structure, and characters force the reader to see the verisimilitude of the object. In Lahiri, home, homeland and food are most significant elements of nostalgia. Food is seen as a cultural signifier. This is again supported by the study of Aparna Sri, V., & Akash, S. (2021). Williams, L. A. (2014) also holds similar views about the function of foods in Lahiri. In her opinion, although food functions as an important metaphor throughout the collection, culinary knowledge and practice is especially important in *A Temporary Matter*, *Mrs. Sen*, and *The Blessed House*. In these stories food is the means for characters to assert agency and subjectivity in ways that function as an alternative to the dominant culture. Lahiri's female immigrant characters, in particular, work to complicate the comfortable association between "home" and food. However, the scholar has shown that food is a source of empowerment and control on the one hand and of powerlessness and domination on the other. Cultural ambiguity can also be seen when Bobby asks his father, observing Mr. Kapasi, who sits on the right side of the car and steers it, "Daddy, why is the driver setting on the wrong side in this car too?". (Lahiri, 1999)

The scholar has shown the cultural in-betweenness and vicissitude in Mrs. Das (in *Interpreter of Maladies*). Her Americanized part of identity urges Mrs. Das to take the extra-marital affair lightly, but her Indian conscious keeps her haunting, reminding her the sanctity of marriage which makes her sick in exile. Her psychic trauma is the result of her confused bicultural entity. On the other hand, Kapasi because of his typical Indian background and patriarchal ideology cannot understand the complicated situation. This explanation of the situation of Mrs. Das is also supported by another study conducted by Raj, S. A. (2016).

Raj, S. A. (2016) while analysing the characters of Lahiri, reveals the fluid identities of them like other contemporary postcolonial literary characters. He also contends that lack of communication and boredom within marriage was the resultant of the in-betweenness of the two different cultures. Karthikadevi, C.G. (2015) also has emphasised this aspect in Lahiri's characterization. In the story *A Temporary Matter* Shoba and Sukumar who are clearly Americanized, experience the insecurity and uncertainty of a staggering relationship which again add to the unstable life in exile. The marriage bond which is still considered sacrosanct in India is gradually slithering down under the pressure of American life style.

However, The scholar has seen Shoba's act of walking out of the marriage as an assertion of independence, identity determination and capacity to choose her own way of life and get rid of emotional and physical stress. (Raj, 2016)

Kapoor, P. (2020) in his study of marriages in three stories – *A Temporary Affair*, *Mrs. Sen*, and *The Blessed House* has shown that the differences between the social values, culture, traditions and language between the motherland and this new country America play a complex role in their marriages. The couples belong to India and settled in America but the problems they are facing are universal i.e. the issue of congenial relation between husband and wife. They are not satisfied with their present but they are not able to find a way out of this maze of disconnectedness. In their efforts to find some harmony, some balance in their conjugal life they redefine their marriages with new terms and conditions. His threadbare discussion and analysis of the relationships in these marriages reveal that the wives in these stories are independent and want equal footing on every front with their husbands. In these stories the marriages are not based on love, trust and warmth rather on needs and social necessity. The husbands like Shukumar and Sanjeev are trying to save their marriages. There is role reversal. (Kapoor, 2020) Here Kapoor's views on the women characters go in line with the studies of Raj, S. A. (2016) and Karthikadevi, C. G. (2015).

Begum, N. (2017) contends that Lahiri's characters are very often caught in a cultural indeterminate state excited about their new home but grieving the loss of their country of origin. According to her, these stories are scattered with the details of traditional Indian names, food, flavour and wardrobe collectively giving shape to her stories. Her way of interpretation of Lahiri has many things in common with Aparna Sri, V., & Akash, S. (2021) and Karthikadevi, C.G. (2015). They too reveal the significance of food and other Indian cultural objects in the life of the immigrant characters of Lahiri, especially, in case of the first generation immigrants. The scholar has shown that a common thread running through Lahiri's collection of stories is the experience of being foreign. Mrs. Sen's isolation, her failure to pick up American way of life may be taken as a symbolic gesture of the resistance she offers to her new life. It is basically a refusal to fit and adapt. Food in the stories is a talisman, a reassuring bit of the homeland to cling to. Like the other studies already discussed this paper too reveals that Jhumpa Lahiri herself shares the identity crisis suffered by her women characters. After spending thirty years in the United States, Lahiri says, "It is home to me but I feel a bit of an outsider too". This paper concludes that the characters are later reconciled with their new identities, the American culture. Lahiri does not lament the loss of identity. (Begum, 2017)

Harehdasht, H. A., Ataee, M., & Hijjari, L. (2018), unlike the other authors, investigate the internal ambivalence of Lahiri's second generation immigrant characters caused by the reciprocal influence of Host/Guest relationships. Her characters both emotionally

and mentally commute between the two worlds that correspond with home and its other. Importantly, Lahiri's second generation migrant characters are invariably subject to the hybridizing forces of American culture. On this point this paper is supported by that of Aparna Sri, V., & Akash, S. (2021) who have mentioned the functioning of melting pot theory. Bahmanpour, B. (2010) has also interpreted this process of transformation in the same way. (Harehdasht, Ataee, & Hijjari, 2018)

Like Aparna Sri, V., Akash, S. (2021) and Karthikadevi, C. G. (2015), the authors of this paper are also of the opinion that Lahiri's own experience of displacement and internal tension of belongingness help her dramatize the ups and downs of living a life of oscillation. They, unlike the other scholars, have put more emphasis on the second generation Indian American characters. This paper contends that 'hybridity' is assumed in common ethnic perspective as a 'scandal', because of lack of cultural purity. Through the analysis of the binary of homogeneity/heterogeneity, the researchers have tried to establish the precarious condition of the second generation immigrants – the hybrids like Gogol and Sonia in *The Namesake*.

Bahmanpour, B. (2010) opines that Lahiri has juxtaposed the discordant features of in-the –making identities in the batter of mixing cultures represented in *The Blessed House*. As diaspora, these two characters- husband and wife exhibit cultural identities in a state of fluidity and constant transformation and represent the disconnection between the first and the second generation immigrants. Both Bahmanpour, B. (2010) and Harehdasht, H. A., Ataee, M., & Hijjari, L. (2018), have analysed Lahiri from a strong theoretical perspective of Post-colonialism. (Bahmanpour, B. 2010)

On the contrary, Jackson, E. (2012) in her study of Jhumpa Lahiri has specifically tried to reveal the inadequacy and limitations of Postcolonial nationality concept to understand the diverse experiences of the Indo-American immigrants. Unlike the other studies discussed above, this paper has shown how the theory of globalization and cosmopolitanism may open up a completely unique dimension to the reading of Lahiri and other such diaspora writers. According to her, many people see globalization a sinister phenomenon; they equate it with homogenization, Americanization, and loss of indigenous identity. However, others see it as potential force for good in the world. They believe, it encourages people to look beyond the artificial divisions of nationality, ethnicity, religion, and other forms of cultural identity, to envision a world community that is inclusive without being homogenous. Jackson, E. (2012) then contends that many people overlook the dynamic side of globalization. . Every culture is always shaped by other cultures. Moreover, cultural effects of globalization are increasingly reciprocal. Acknowledging the usefulness of Postcolonial theory in analysing the power imbalances on cultural expressions, Jackson like many other scholars, exposes its limitations. In her opinion both Colonialism and Post colonialism are integral to the

history of globalization. So, a Cosmopolitan approach to literary texts can incorporate Postcolonial perspectives within a broader and more flexible analytical framework.

She asserts that Lahiri's stories could better be described as Cosmopolitan than Postcolonial because she moves beyond oppositional, emancipatory, or centre/periphery narrative themes. Cosmopolitanism integrates a philosophy of world citizenship which simultaneously transcends the boundaries of nation-state and descends to the boundaries of individual rights and responsibilities. A number of stories from *Interpreter of Maladies* deconstruct the binaries of power based on geographical location, geographical origin, and cultural identity. In the story *Sexy*, for example, Miranda – a white woman – can be seen as a rustic native from Michigan, while Dev – an Indian man – is figured as a sophisticated cosmopolitan superior in wealth and knowledge, who is more at home in Boston than the white American from the Midwest. Now Jackson questions, who is the colonizer and who is colonized? Who is the migrant? Who occupies the centre and who the margin? (Jackson, 2010) She also gives the examples of the child observers in stories like *Mrs. Sen* and *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* who fails to understand national and cultural divisions, thus, encouraging the reader to radically rethink them.

Discussion:

After a thorough analysis of the papers on Jhumpa Lahiri selected for review, it can be said that most of scholars (Aparna Sri, & Aksh, 2021; Karthikadevi, 2015; Raj, 2016; Begum, 2017) have understood the stories from the perspective of Post-colonial theory on diasporic experience. They have analysed the characters and their experience by using the common postcolonial concepts like sense of belongingness, centre/margin binary, hybridity etc.

On the other hand, Rao, D.B.M. (2016) has tried to establish Lahiri as an American realist. As has been already mentioned he has not properly developed his theoretical background in his paper. But at the same time it must be appreciated that he has thrown light to an important aspect of Lahiri, i.e., her art of characterization. In her character delineation Lahiri has dealt with the subtle psychology of the characters.

Keeping in mind the great contribution of the Postcolonial theory in the analysis of history, culture, art and literature, it can be said that Globalization has opened up new avenues in the history of literary criticism. The unstoppable process of globalization is accelerated by the technological inventions, especially, the information technology. This is truly an interconnected world. The wider concept of Globalization has incorporated the ideas of Colonial and Postcolonial. The concept of Cosmopolitan is set against the idea of diversity or heterogeneity. Besides it cannot be denied that cultural transformation and inter-cultural exchanges were always there. Globalization does not advocate for homogeneity, rather it calls for an attitudinal change. In this regard we can remember R. N. Tagore who long before the term globalization came into vogue, wanted to nurture the

concept of world citizenship at Shantiniketan. Lahiri herself being a second generation Indian American did not lament the loss of ethnic identity. Therefore, her fiction transcends the narrow boundaries of nationalism or ethnicity. As Jackson, E. (2010) points out Lilia could not understand the difference between a Pakistani Muslim and an Indian Hindu, Eliot likes Mrs. Sen more than his mother because of her caring attitude. Ashima, after her husband, Ashoke's death learned to live alone. Almost all the characters struggling for adaptation in the alien land have acquired the art of living in America. Elizabeth Jackson has not taken up all the situations and experiences in Lahiri. She has selected only a few examples. For example, the experience of Lilia at the night of Halloween when the white Americans were surprised to see the Indian witch (Lilia) on the road or the case of Eliot's mother not accepting the food prepared by Mrs. Sen. Jackson has not taken up the first generation diaspora characters of Lahiri. Therefore, her analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri seems incomplete. Though she contends that globalization and cosmopolitanism is the most viable alternative in our present day world, its application as an alternative theory in the field of art, culture and literature is yet to be properly established. In the analysis of the first generation immigrants characters Jackson has not applied this concept.

Conclusion:

After a thorough review of the above studies it may be concluded that none of the studies is complete in itself and is adequate to reveal all the subtle nuances of the stories. So a comparative study of the different theoretical approaches would guide the readers towards a better perspective and understanding of her characters and their complex experiences. More comparative studies with other noted expatriate writers may be carried out to understand the true contribution of Lahiri in the history of diasporic literature in particular and American literature in general.

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