



## A Critical Examination of Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies under the Lens of Diaspora

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### ABSTRACT

The study aims to trace the identity crisis that the female characters go through in the particular work of Lahiri. Hence, the main objective of the study is to examine all the social, political, and cultural factors that seem to offer a series of challenges for female characters in particular short stories, and ultimately put their survival at great risk. Meanwhile, the researcher has applied a qualitative paradigm of research along with the concept of orientalism as the framework of the study. The sample has been comprised of five particular short stories taken from a collection of short stories entitled “Interpreter of Maladies” by Jhumpa Lahiri by the implementation of the purposive sampling technique. The findings revealed that diasporic women suffer more than men while navigating to another land, they endure the agony of frustration, alienation, cultural dislocation, and identity crisis. They long for their past life relations, customs, and rituals in the meantime facing the problems of humiliation and degradation inside and outside of their homes.

## Introduction

The term “Diaspora” is derived from the Greek word “Dispeiro” which means scattering or dispersion. So, it can be defined as the dispersal of individuals from their original homeland for several purposes as to avail the opportunities for education, employment, marriage, and some other social factors that might exist behind the migration of someone (Koraa, 2016). Initially, the concept had been associated with the dispersion of Jews in Palestine before their permanent

residence. Hence, in this age of globalization, Diasporic writing can be noticed as the emerging genre determined to address the socio-political issues of cultural citizenship, global inequality, and cosmopolitan justice under the lens of several themes that are respectively imaginative reconstruction of the native land, nostalgic memories, and scattering identities. Hence, in the context of diasporic writing, the theme of identity has not only been an exercise done to unfold the multiplicities of location and subject-hood rather has been a greatest political issue of global justice, self-determination, cosmopolitan and cultural rights (Devi, 2021).

Jhumpa Lahiri is known as a second-generation Indian American diasporic writer, who was born to Bengali parents in London on 11th July 1967. However, later she was brought up in South Kingston, USA. After the completion of her studies, she came in with her debut collection of short stories entitled “Interpreter of Maladies” which not only brought great fame but enabled her also to win the Pulitzer in the year 2000. From that time to the present, the book has been translated into more than twenty-nine languages and is widely acknowledged as the best-selling book across the world (Nagaraju and Rajkumar, 2017).

Through her works, Lahiri has tried to explore the experiences of the Indian immigrants and their emotional attachment towards their own culture and native homeland at the same time, along with their utmost desire to set their way in this new land that has the potential to provide them better socio-economic conditions (Rao and Bhatt, 2018). She also talked about the identity of the diasporic people as well which has always been portrayed as confused and painful. She asserted that the situation of an immigrant has been dual, in the sense that he being a part of that foreign land always goes through the painful process of becoming a new self without realizing the fact that in order to obtain this purpose, he is required to let it go the ‘old one’ and this lack of realization puts him a constant state of mental torture. She raised her voice against all the inequalities being done to diasporic women also.

In most of her works, she seems to claim that in every culture and society, women have always been seen playing their household duties with a sense of sincerity and excellence but it is a pity fact that they never have been truly acknowledged by their families and society. This discrimination puts them in a state of depression and anxiety. It does not happen to the women who devote their entire lives to the fulfillment of the domestic chores but always remain strange, the women who are considered independent and strong enough to set their way also sometimes seem to face the same circumstances as the common and domestic women do (Yahthat and Panday, 2014). Hence, the study is focused on revealing the sufferings that the female characters of *Interpreter of Maladies* seem to going through while living away from their native country. So, the two main objectives of this study are mentioned below:

1. To reveal the identity problems of the female characters of particular stories selected from Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*.
2. To unfold the way, the female characters adapt to tackle the problems and challenges exposed to them in the particular stories selected from Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*.

## **Literature Review**

Rao and Bhatt (2018) did their qualitative research on the selected novels written by Lahiri. The main objective of this study was to explore the fact that how diaspora day by day is going to be the most dominant and influential aspect in South-Asian literature and the findings revealed that it happened because, in such type of literature, the reading audience is constantly being invited to

observe all the circumstances that the Indian immigrants are going through and the cross-cultural challenges they are confronting with.

Joshi (2020) conducted his research with the purpose of unfolding the diasporic structure of the selected works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Banerjee. The main objective was to find out how the Indian people were forced to be aligned while living in the multicultural society of America and what sort of identity crises they were going through. The findings revealed that alienation and identity problems were the result of cultural differences. There were two common cultures in the society respectively Indian and American. So, most of the characters due to being part of Indian culture were attracted to adopt the values of Western but in this way, faced a lot of resistance not only by their own people but also from the Americans as well who were not ready to give them an acceptance and always saw them as the strangers who do not deserve the education, social and political rights equal to them.

Sri and Akash (2021) conducted research on two particular short stories Interpreter of Maladies with an aim to explore the experiences of Indian immigrants who shifted to America and expected their American-born children to practice their Indian culture and norms instead of going for the adaptation of foreign culture and this situation puts their children into a dilemma where they find themselves unable to cut themselves off with the culture their parents are practicing and the foreign one which is attracting them to be the part of it.

Aruna (2022) explored the character of Mrs. Sen from Lahiri's same collection of short stories with the objective of unfolding the stress and depression that a female can go through as a result of cultural displacement and an individual's broken self. The study was based on a qualitative paradigm and the results asserted that Mrs. Sen stands for all the diasporic women who always felt a sense of alienation even while living with their families away from the native homeland and this thing reaches its peak when society also does not seem interested to give them a separate identity apart of their husbands and other male members of their families.

Rai (2023) did a qualitative study of Lahiri's work with the purpose of tracing its role in the discontinuity of classical diaspora. He applied the notion of orientalism as the framework of the study and in the finding section, the researcher asserted that Interpreter of Maladies looks to present the image of the post-modern diaspora and takes a bold step against the traditional one which believes in the myth of return in terms of celebration of diasporic people's struggle to adapt themselves into a completely unfamiliar world.

## **Methodology**

The study is based on the qualitative research method because this method has always been a tool to enable the researcher to get a deep insight into the scenario under investigation (Kumar, 2014). The notion of orientalism has been selected as the framework. As the source of data is concerned, a short story collection written by Jhumpa Lahiri an Indian diasporic writer has been the source of data. Meanwhile, the researcher selected five particular stories as a sample by applying the purposive sampling technique.

## **Analysis**

This section consists of five short stories from Jhumpa Lahiri's masterpiece "Interpreter of Maladies". Through these stories, Lahiri represents the difficulties of immigrants, especially women. For women, life outside their countries is more challenging than for men. The female characters in the selected stories like; Mrs. Sen, Boori Ma, Twinkle, Shoba, and Mala face

prejudice and mortification from the foreign country's residents. They are suppressed both by the members of their own homes and by the outsiders.

Women are always considered more emotional and attached to their cultural values, and homeland than men. These cultural values, traditional gender roles, and nostalgic memories of their past life do not let them fit in any other country's environment. For instance, when Mrs. Sen goes with her husband to the USA, she feels like a misfit in that social environment. She always longs for her past life, relations, food, culture, and music.

"It was always a whole fish she desired... 'To live so close to the ocean and not to have so much fish.'" (p. 66)

This quote showcases Mrs. Sen's frustration with the lack of familiar tastes and ingredients in her new environment, emphasizing her longing for the culinary traditions of her homeland and the challenges of adapting to a different food culture. In a diaspora community, Mrs. Sen scuffles with the cultural disruption and deracination. Fish is a main food item in many cultures which has nutritious and cultural values. Mrs. Sen's longing for the fish not only reflects her familiarity with culinary traditions but also her link with her past life, people, and roots. These lines express the difficulties of diasporic women in case of adapting to other cultures. Food is a cultural heritage and without the desired ingredients of food, she feels isolated and wretched on whom other culinary traditions are being imposed. She tries to find the same solace and comfort by living near the ocean as before but fails.

"Each afternoon Mrs. Sen stood in a grove of pine trees..... eager to greet a person she hadn't seen in years." (p. 64).

This line encapsulates the desire and yearning of diasporic people, especially women. The grove of pine trees symbolizes a place to shelter from her worries about adjusting to a new environment and culture. Her separation from her friends, family, and country leads her to feelings of nostalgia, and in a new environment, she tries to find familiar persons who can help her adjust to new settings. Though it had been a long time since she saw any person from her past life, her emotional attachment remained the same throughout all the years. In a country full of strangers she yearns for the familiar people and connections.

"One day she played a tape of something she called a raga; it sounded a little bit like someone plucking very slowly and then very quickly on a violin..... Afterward, she said, It is more sad even than your Beethoven, isn't it?" (p. 69-70)

While living in a foreign country Mrs. Sen tries to maintain a link with her cultural heritage through the introduction of raga which is a type of Indian music often played at specific times or seasons. She creates the same environment as was in her country at specific times to gain sensory pleasure and escape from the emotions of being lonely. When Mrs. Sen asks her husband Eliot to listen to the raga he tries to understand it by comparing its lyrics to Beethoven in this way both people exchange their cultural values. These lines show her emotional expressions toward her culture and her struggles to preserve her cultural heritage in the form of audio in an estranged environment.

"Another day she played a cassette of people talking in her language a farewell present, she told Eliot, that her family had made for her... As the succession of voices..... She told Eliot she'd received a letter over the weekend. Her grandfather was dead." (p. 69)

Mrs. Sen's act of playing the cassette reflects her emotions about her family, country, and culture. She somehow tries to be linked with her past despite the physical distance through the voices of the family members and the snippets of daily life recorded in the cassette. Living in the USA she longs for her home and the past life joys she left behind her. In a foreign country where every person and environment is unknown, the feeling of being alone and the person's yearning for the past begin to increase. Mrs. Sen had to leave her native land India, and her dear ones' and settle in a foreign country about whom she doesn't know anything where a sense of loneliness besieges her.

“For five days their electricity would be cut off for one hour, beginning at eight P.M.....where Shoba and Shukumar had lived for three years”. (p. 9)

Females as immigrants not only face the problems of language, culture, and ethnicity but also with the economic crisis. Economic instability is a common problem that diasporic people face. Shoba, the female character of the story 'The Temporary Matter', and her husband face economic problems in the new land, and due to these economic problems, she has to live with her husband in a small house for three years. She has to live with her husband in that kind of house where the electricity remains cut mostly.

“The more Shoba stayed out, the more she began putting in extra hours at work and taking on additional projects, then or he wanted to stay in, not even leaving to get the mail or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley stop”. (p. 9)

While her husband prepares for his exams she finds a job to support him but due to the gender inequalities, she finds herself unable to cope with the economic crisis. She works overtime to cope with the economic crisis but in return gets low pay in comparison to natives. She faces problems in making contact with other people and getting the appropriate salary. The separate busy life of the couple creates such kind of a distance between their relations that living under the same roof they become strangers to each other and don't share their feelings of happiness and distress.

“When friends dropped by, Shoba would throw together meals that appeared to have taken half a day to prepare, from things she had frozen and bottled, not cheap things in tins but peppers she had marinated herself with rosemary, and chutneys that she cooked on Sundays, stirring boiling pots of tomatoes and prunes.” (p. 11)

Diasporic women have to bear the burden of the outside and inside responsibilities of their families. Shoba and Shukumar have different cultural thoughts due to their upbringing in different countries. Shoba follows the customs, rituals, and cultures of India whereas Shukumar of America. Despite living in America she doesn't forget her native culture and whenever guests visit her she serves them typical Indian food. She cooks food to introduce her native culture to them and to maintain a sense of belonging to her roots. She lives a dual life by physically presenting in America and mentally in India.

Due to the emotional attachment to their homeland, women suffer more than men while living in an outside country because they cannot abandon their innate culture. Despite living in another country they carry the burden of their cultural values and the expectations of their community towards them. In India, it is considered that a woman is only perfect when she becomes a mother. Because of this cultural heritage, Shoba suffers a lot when she becomes pregnant. In the story, she wants to be a mother to maintain her social status but her husband doesn't want it due to the different cultural values and thoughts in which a man's focus should be on making his career. She quits her job and starts preparations for her baby against her husband's will. He only pretends to be happy in front of her but actually, he didn't want a baby.

“His heart began to pound. The day she told him she was pregnant” (p. 18)

In the story ‘The Blessed House’ the female character suffers from cultural displacement due to the distance from her homeland. She marries a man Sanjeev from India while she belongs to California where she doesn’t know anything and settles with him in America. The difference between their cultural ideologies also makes their relationship problematic. Moreover, due to his social status, he controls Twinkle in every matter.

“This you won’t believe. The switch plates in the bedrooms were decorated with scenes from the Bible. You know, Noah’s Ark and all that. Three bedrooms, but one is my study. Sanjeev went to the hardware store right away and replaced them, can you imagine, he replaced every single one.” (p. 75)

When they go to the new apartment Twinkle finds a lot of Christian religious things left by the previous owners. She gets attracted to them and wants to have all with her despite her husband’s will who wants to throw all the things away due to his perspective that when they are Hindu it is not good for them to keep Christ Statue and other Holy things with them. He doesn’t allow his wife to choose her religion according to her will. All the bedrooms in the house were decorated with different religious artifacts such as biblical scenes pictures, and wooden crosses which he replaced immediately. He gets control over his house and sets it according to his beliefs and religion without caring about his wife’s feelings.

“He thought with a flicker of regret of the snapshots his mother used to send him from Calcutta, of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without consulting a cookbook.” (P. 77)

In South Asian culture arranged marriage for women is a very common phenomenon. There the minds of both men and women are nourished in such a way that men consider themselves authoritative and women as weak and meek whose duty is only to obey their husbands. They are brought up with certain domestic qualities such as cooking food, sewing clothes staying at home, and doing household work. They are considered imperfect by their partners if they don’t come up to the set standards of their society. Diasporic women face pressure from their family members to fulfill their expectations and to keep their families and marriage as the priority. They are judged based on their ability to perform associated domestic tasks and to transmit cultural values to the next generations. Due to Sanjeev’s cultural perceptions, Twinkle finds it difficult to live her life there.

“He was of average height as well, and had wished ever since he had stopped growing that he were just one inch taller. For this reason it irritated him when Twinkle insisted on wearing high heels” (p. 75)

In a diasporic community, women have no right to live their lives according to their will. Sanjeev tries to change her appearance according to his idealized perceptions of a wife. He pressures his wife to dress up according to the traditional standards of society. In many cultures, those men are considered attractive and powerful and have authority over others who are heighted. However, due to his one-inch taller height than his wife, he feels an inferiority complex whenever his wife wears heels. So, when she wears he orders her to unyoke them and she has to suppress her desires in front of him. Heels are associated with charm, confidence, and femininity and women like to wear them to look smart and to match their dress. Migrant women face difficulties in maintaining their identities and living up to the expectations of the society in which they reside. Patriarchal rules and ideals pull them into a multitude of hardships. They are kept within the walls of the home and are trained to be subservient and obedient from birth. Therefore they have to obey the male’s authority.

In her stories, Lahiri not only discusses the issues of a couple but also the issues of the border and how political changes affect the lives of people. In her story "A Real Durwan" Boori Ma suffers due to her migration from Dhaka to Calcutta without her family. She loses her real identity and depends on the kindness of others. Her name 'Boori Ma' given by others, shows affection and kindness.

"At that time, she maintained, the turmoil had separated her from a husband, four daughters, a two-story brick house, a rosewood almari, and a number of coffer boxes whose skeleton keys she still wore, along with her life savings, tied to the free end of her sari." (p. 42).

Women mainly suffer in diasporic communities due to their emotional attachments to their past lives and relations. Boori Ma suffers from a sense of relocation, loss, and individuality due to her connections to her past life. Due to the political upheaval of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, she was separated from her family. This thing disrupts the social and economic stability of her and after coming to Calcutta (now Kolkata) she becomes compelled to work as a stairwell sweeper in a building to get shelter and fulfill her basic needs. But she still feels the pain of separation from her husband and daughters and the loss of her luxurious life which she used to enjoy all the time. The skeleton keys of coffer boxes that she carries with her always remind her of her double-story marbled house, servants, and her higher social status. She tells stories to people in the building from her past life happily but they didn't believe her. She lives her past life even in the present.

"On certain afternoons Boori Ma visited her fellow residents... and observed gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city." (p. 45)

Psychologically, immigrants experience a lack of belonging in their new country. They feel themselves as foreigners and outsiders. But still, to survive in a new society they imitate their cultural activities behaviors, and gestures. Due to her marginalization, she feels a sense of detachment and unfamiliarity with her surroundings. When she finds it difficult to make connections with people, who have different cultural backgrounds and linguistic accents she begins to observe their customs, manners, and actions. In this way, she gets stuck between her past and present life neither getting rid of her previous life memories nor moving on in her present life.

"Her back still itched, even after napping on the newspapers, and she was beginning to want some prickly-heat powder after all." (p. 45)

Immigrants have to face psychological, financial, and as well as the problems of resettlement. In this case, diasporic women suffer more than men, they have to adjust to meager resources in unfamiliar environments. She lives in a small room on a staircase landing which is dilapidated and without proper arrangements for ventilation. She is serving there as a durwan (doorkeeper) whose duty is also to clean the building twice a day without any salary. She sleeps on the floor of her room and sometimes on the terrace due to the intense heat in summer. Due to her financial problems, she is unable to get talcum powder in summer to soothe her. In spite of all the difficulties, she tries to make herself comfortable in this environment.

"So the residents tossed her bucket and rags, her baskets and reed broom, down the stairwell, past the letter boxes, through the collapsible gate, and into the alley. Then they tossed out Boori Ma." (p. 47)

Immigrants are not accepted by foreigners even after living with them for a long time. They are always differentiated, and relegated due to their marginalization. Boori Ma also faces the same

treatment when a basin gets missed from Mr. Dalal's apartment that she was especially taking care of at that time. Due to her low status, he is considered a thief by the residents and faces abuse and mistreatment. They humiliate her in front of the whole society by checking her belongings one by one and then asking her to leave the building because they no longer consider her trustworthy. She tries to convince them but no one believes her due to the blame of the neighbors. They throw her out of society without showing any sympathy toward her and as a result, she becomes compelled to wander street by street.

In the last story 'The Third and Final Content' Mala suffers from difficulties such as communication gaps, cultural disparities, and challenges maneuvering the complex immigration bureaucracy.

"Each of those nights, after applying cold cream and braiding her hair, which she tied up at the end with a black cotton string, she turned from me and wept; she missed her parents." (p. 93)

Mala and her husband are strange to each other because they meet after six weeks of separation next after their marriage. She doesn't know anyone there and the distance between her and her husband makes her feel isolated and depressed. She feels homesick and lost in the new environment and longs for the same comfort as was in her native country. She tries to normalize herself in difficult situations by doing her routine work but she fails in this attempt and begins to cry due to the separation from her relatives. Many diasporic women struggle with their inner selves when they try to align their past with their present.

"At one point the sari slipped to her shoulders. She readjusted it at once. There is no need to cover your head, I said. I don't mind. It doesn't matter here. She kept it covered anyway." (p. 98)

In India sari is widely worn and considered a symbol of grace and elegance. This traditional attire is passed on from generation to generation which represents its cultural heritage and customs. In spite of living in a different environment, Mala still follows the customs and culture of her homeland. She prefers to wear a sari and cover her head there in spite of her husband's attempt to make her feel at ease and adjust there she follows her rituals. She feels herself linked and comfortable in a foreign country whenever wears a sari.

## **Conclusion**

This study has successfully revealed the sufferings of diasporic women and how they face gender-related issues. Diasporic women suffer more than men while navigating to another land they endure the agony of frustration, alienation, cultural dislocation, and identity crisis. They long for their past life relations, customs, and rituals in the meantime facing the problems of humiliation and degradation inside and outside of their homes. They find it difficult to get a suitable job and salary equal to the men and to set in a new periphery while also maintaining their connections to their cultural heritage. All the diasporic women try to maintain their connections with their past life by adopting the culinary traditions, having similar foods, and music, and by wearing the same traditional dresses of their country. They are neither able to adopt their past life nor their present but stuck in between them. Moreover, they suffer both due to their gender and immigration, the homes they have to fulfill the imposed responsibilities on them, and outside due to their rituals, appearance, nationality, and culture they face the ill-treatment of the new land people which makes it arduous for them to adapt to the new environment. But despite the cultural adaptation and migration problems they manage everything resiliently and innovatively even with an insufficient amount of income.

## **Future Recommendations**

1. It will help researchers explore how cultural and social expectations hinder in the way of women to acclimatize themselves in new environments.
2. Researchers can compare Lahiri's portrayal of South Asian women with other continent women presented in diasporic literature.
3. It will provide help to the researchers to explore how readers relate themselves to the experiences of the female immigrant characters.

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