

**CULTURAL CONFLICTS AND DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERIZATION: A
COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S SELECTIVE SHORT STORY
COLLECTION**

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Abstract

Writings on social institutions are expressions of human values and culture expressed through literary reconnaissance. Literature at all times is the manifestation of societal transition and human behavior, captured through the lenses of the writer. This research paper is a study of the Indian value system and culture expressed through the writings of English-born American novelist and short story writer, Jhumpa Lahiri. Dealing primarily with the immigrant experience, this paper is an analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies, a 1999 collection of short stories, and her second collection of short stories, Unaccustomed Earth in 2008 which presents the life of Indians and Indian American characters and their living under this cultural transition. Caught between two worlds, the tales presented in the short story collections are poignant understandings of redefining Indian customs presented through individuals with Indian roots and American identity. This research project is a comprehensive study of the intricacies of relationships and psychological outbursts of broken identities happening through the process of immigration. Physical transformation leading to psychic distortion is skilfully articulated by Jhumpa Lahiri in both the collection of short stories that present her autobiographical discordance of being raised in a foreign land with an Indian background. The presentation of the immigrant experience, physical description, communication, and emotional strife is an illustration of the diasporic experience of the expatriates that talks about the alienation and disconnectedness towards one's cultural provinces.

Key-words: Culture; Identities; Immigration; Diasporic; Expatriates

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories are filled with autobiographical elements as they are intertwined with emotions for being an immigrant, living in America. As an American author of Indian origin, her keen observations and detailed understandings are vibrant in her depictions and presentations, which ornament the world of diasporic literature. Even though, diasporic literature is all about cross-cultural aspects, identity crisis, belongingness, up-rootedness, and displacement; it is also about multiculturalism as seen in the writings of Jhumpa Lahiri. She has the artistic skill to handle these sensitive issues with utmost care and perfection in her writings. Jhumpa Lahiri is an acclaimed artist known for her novels like *The Namesake*, published in 2003, and *The Lowland*, published in 2013. Her short story collections, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, brought her acclaim as a writer as she presents the narratives of characters who are Bengali-Americans.

Published in 1999, *Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of nine short stories, that typically capture the lives of Indian Americans and their experiences away from their place of origin. The nine stories titled, "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", "The Third and Final Continent", talk about the Indian sentiments, relationships, togetherness as well as the instability and isolation surrounding them.

Whereas, *Unaccustomed Earth*, published in 2008 is Jhumpa Lahiri's second short stories collection presenting Indian American characters and the cultural distortions in their mind. The collection is broadly divided into Part One which consists of short stories, "Unaccustomed Earth", "Hell-Heaven", "A Choice of Accommodations", "Only Goodness", "Nobody's Business"; whereas, Part Two: "Hema and Kaushik", consists of "Once in a Lifetime", "Year's End", "Going Ashore".

Objectives

- i. To understand the nucleus of family dynamics among Indians and Indian Americans.
- ii. To investigate emotional distancing and relationship complexities in diasporic spaces.
- iii. To discuss the themes of detachment, alienation, and displacement through the characters.
- iv. To analyze the similarity of cultural equations and emotions experienced by Indians settling in America.

Sense and Sensibility in *Interpreter of Maladies*

The storyline of “A Temporary Matter”, presents the life of the married couple, Shukumar and Shoba who are very detached in their conjugal relationship irrespective of being together. The night blackouts during power cuts gradually bring them together who earlier because of disagreements were losing the charm in their relationships. Irrespective of the hope that they will connect, the couple shows a strangeness which continues throughout the story.

The second story in the collection, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, presents Mr. Pirzada, a botany professor from Dhaka who left his wife and daughters after receiving a research grant from the Pakistani Government. As he comes in close association with Lilia, and her family, and enjoys dinner with them, Mr. Pirzada is mistakenly referred to as an Indian that is quickly rectified by her parents, as a Pakistani. For a girl of ten, Lilia, it becomes difficult to understand the difference between Pakistani and Indian, who are similar in looks and communicate in Bengali like her parents. The story captures the disturbing situations of the India-Pakistani war concerning East Pakistan and Mr. Pirzada’s reuniting with his family in Bangladesh followed by Lilia’s prayer every night.

The story, “Interpreter of Maladies”, also named as the title of the short story collection captures the life of Mr. and Mrs. Das, an Indian American. Came to visit India, they are followed by Mr. Kapasi, the tourist guide who minutely observes them. They act very childish and novice as parents. Gradually, Mr. Kapasi grows a secret liking for Mrs. Das who reveals that her son Bobby is born out of wedlock as she was having an affair.

With different storylines, the stories like “A Real Durwan”, “Sexy”, “Mrs. Sen’s”, “This Blessed House”, “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”, and “The Third and Final Continent”, presented in the collection “The Interpreter of Maladies”, talks about the different world existence and the myriad of emotions surrounding them.

Deconstructing Contradictions through *Unaccustomed Earth*

Written in 2008 Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* consists of four stories in Part 1 and three stories in Part 2 through the plotline and characterization that talks about personal details, and episodes taking place in the life of Bengali and Bengali-American families. Taking place during the 1980s and 90s the stories make a vivid understanding of cultural transition. The short story “Unaccustomed Earth” depicts Ruma, a Bengali-American of 38 years old who at present is residing in Seattle. She has a small family of three, Adam, her husband, and Akash, her son who is only three years old. They stay in a beautifully made, large home where Ruma spends her time nurturing her son. Meanwhile, Ruma is also pregnant with her second child. The ‘volta’ in the story happens as Ruman’s father is involved in a romantic affair shortly after her mother’s unexpected demise. Therefore, when Ruma proposes to her father to stay with her, her father declines the offer. He writes a letter to Mrs. Bagchi with whom he engages in a relationship which Ruma discovers. As the letter is written in Bengali, Ruma fails to read it even though she understands the significance and sends the letter to the desired destination by affixing a stamp to the postcard. Analyzing the story, firstly it somewhat talks about displacement in physical space, the boundary drawn between the father-daughter duo, the brewing romance between the father and Mrs. Bagchi, and the personal letter of the father sent by the daughter to another woman who is not her mother. Most strikingly, Ruma who is a Bengali fails to read a letter written in her language, her mother tongue. These aspects strikingly draw attention to the aspects of displacements, and identity, and question the belongingness of characters like Ruma.

The storyline of “Hell-Heaven”, presents the narrative of another Bengali-American woman, Usha, who talks about the experiences she gathered in her childhood. Her mother, a Bengali-American woman, left her father and married a man who relocated to America for studies. In spite of marrying the man of her choice, and coming out of the earlier arranged marriage with Usha’s biological father,

she remains unhappy and isolated in her own family. She falls in love later on with a man named Pranab as she meets her in Cambridge who is from the same hometown as Usha's mother. She and Pranab become great pals with no physical intimacy brewing between them. Pranab marries Deborah and moves and invites all their friends for a thanksgiving ceremony. We get to see that Usha is extremely fond of Deborah who gives her clothes that Usha desires, something that is strictly disliked by her mother who insists on her daughter wearing traditional and formal wear for the occasion. The story also captures how her mother almost tried to die by setting herself on fire in the backyard shortly after Pranab's marriage. The story captures the complications in relationships, indecisiveness, and fluctuations in emotions and how they affect the family ties.

"A Choice of Accommodations", presents the story of an Indian-American, Amit, who is married to Megan, a white American woman by birth. The story talks about the relationship between the two and the happenings as they decide to go on a vacation. They decided to visit Langford Academy, Amit's alma mater, to attend Pam's marriage who is the daughter of the headmaster at Langford Academy and who was the infatuation of Amit and all the boys studying in the academy. Amit never discussed about this with his wife Meghan, who is completely unaware of this. During the reception party, Amit makes a comment in front of a stranger named Felicia, seated next to him that his marriage ended with the birth of his second child. Later on, Amit fears that Felicia revealed the comment made by him during the dinner to Meghan. The story ends with Amit begging for forgiveness to Meghan and they get engaged in a sensual moment in the dormitory. The story depicts confusion, attachment, and unpredictability in relationships.

The story, "Only Goodness", presents the life of Sudha, a Bengali-American Woman in her 30s, and her younger brother Rahul. It presents Sudha, as a sister who is responsible for her brother's downfall. Rahul, an academically gifted child starts getting addicted to alcohol because of her sister Sudha who came home on a holiday from her college. Sudha and Rahul ensured that the thing remained unnoticed by their parents. Gradually Rahul loses his academic inclination and alcohol and is thrown from Cornell, whereas Sudha becomes her family's only hope and goes to London for her graduation where she marries a British, Roger. Rahul continues with his habits, robs his mother's gold, and moves to New York. After connecting with Sudha and informing her that he has changed, he insists Sudha and Roger go to a movie as he will attend to their son Neel. The story ends with Sudha finding Neel in the bathtub and Rahul losing consciousness after he finds alcohol hidden by Sudha. The story is unique in capturing the responsiveness, and sensitivity in relationships and how family members play a pivotal role in a child's life which if disrupted becomes a bane for the individuals in the future.

"Once in a Lifetime", talks about Hema and Kaushik and the characters revolving around them. Hema talks of her encounter with her childhood friend Kaushik as his family, the Chaudhuris relocated to Bombay when he was a child and has now returned after many years. The Chaudhuris were very attached to Hema's family when they were in Cambridge, which made them get closer again after their return. Kaushik, who is now a 16 year old attracts the eyes of Hema. Hema is also extremely close to Parul, Kaushik's mother, who is also extremely fond of her. The story also captures a moment when Kaushik reveals the reason behind his family's return to America. He says that Parul is diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer and her wish is to leave her last breath in America. This made Kaushik's father Dr. Chaudhuri buy a new house and fulfill her wish. The plotline gets distressful as Hema's parents in spite of knowing the reason behind their relocation, find the Chaudhuris at fault as they did not invite them to their new home. The story brings forth the irrationality of sentiments, disobliging behavior, and unexpectedness of people of the same community residing outside the country. It also talks of a lack of understanding and absence of emotional connection irrespective of belonging to one nation.

The short story, "Year's End" talks about the episodes following Parul's death as his father, Dr. Chaudhuri remarried an Indian woman named Chitra. Chitra along with her two daughters, Rupa and Piu moved to the new space, the house bought for Parul before her untimely demise. A Kaushik comes to visit his father, he is shocked by the changes done in the house which has no space for her mother's memories. He also sees that the stepsisters, Rupa and Piu are in a rift with a shoebox filled with his mother's photographs. Kaushik reacts very resentfully towards this and snatches the box by commenting that their mother will never be able to replace Parul. This episode even though was not

revealed by the sisters to Mr. Chaudhuri or Chitra, stained their relationship with Kaushik forever. We can also understand Kaushik's hatred towards Chitra who has taken her mother's place in both her father's life and the house bought for her mother. The story showcases, how the mother happens to become the emotional connect in the Indian household and how much it affects a family in her absence. As seen in most Indian family setups, the mother acts as the uniting thread between the father and the son, which fails after her death.

Conclusion

This research project entails a discussion of the role of literature in projecting culture, and human values. It captures the transition through changes in bonding and relationship. Furthermore, the paper also brings forth the aspects of diasporic literature that talk about belongingness, identity, self, and spatial representation in literature. It brings forth global perspectives and a universal outlook in literature. Through the narratives of the different characters who are Indian-Americans or have an association with India, the research paper tries to delineate the dilemmas of coping in the new space and the cultural drift remarkably noticed through them.

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