

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* as Postmodern Rupture on Classical Diaspora

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Abstract

This research paper illuminates how Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories' collection Interpreter of Maladies presents postmodern diaspora as the discontinuity of classical diaspora. Classical/traditional diaspora sees homeland as irreplaceable place. The immigrants eventually return their homelands. Lahiri's version of diaspora differs from traditional mode of diaspora. As a well-known Indian American writer, Jhumpa Lahiri is pretty admired for her chronicle of Bengali immigrant experience. Though she portrays an attachment of immigrants with their homeland, they do not necessarily dream of returning home one day. They continuously strive to adjust themselves in new milieu. Lahiri's characters in Interpreter of Maladies go on endeavoring to transform their sense of dislocation as their proper location. They constantly build up new identity using their memory combining with new ongoing experiences in new setting.

Keywords: *classical diaspora, postmodern diaspora, adaptation, new identity, immigrant, homeland*

Introduction

This paper aims at lighting how Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* presents different kind of diaspora from classical one. Classical diaspora celebrates myth of return whereas postmodern diaspora celebrates immigrants' incessant struggle to adapt themselves in the new world permanently.

Lahiri's characters involve in one way or either way for adapting them in the new land. For sure, they suffer much from nostalgia, homesickness etc. but, they do not surrender to the past. They constantly seek new identity perpetually. Lahiri's characters visit and revisit their homeland just to remedy their suffering from homesickness instead of surrendering to homeland. They somehow heal their internal pain in this way. Boldly facing transitional anguish, they always look forward and go persistently ahead. Rahaman reviews Jhumpa Lahiri's diasporic insight as:

The topic of migration, adaptation, or integration in the hosting communities is a recurring theme in Indian English literature as a large portion of the Indian Diaspora literature. It offers a creative depiction of the many ethnic identities. This literature expresses the personal perceptions or perspectives of the Indian immigrants.

These migrants "anew, through change or diversity" generate or recreate them self endlessly. (2023, p. 31)

Rahaman admits in reference to Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* that the topic of migration, adaptation and integration in the host country is recurring matter in Indian diaspora. Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* also falls in the same category. Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* in the same wave depicts creatively that the migrant characters go through change of diversity creating and recreating self endlessly. Mathivadhana Sinduja articulates Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* in the postmodern wake:

The title with a special note, 'stories of Bengal, Boston and beyond', signified the plots of the stories being designed across the nations. Like other forms of writing, diasporic writings are also influenced by the changes in the society and other developments. The author highlighted the post-colonial and post-modern effects on the lives of immigrants. (2020, p. 21)

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* portrays cross-national designations of the stories. Diaspora in global scenario gear ups to the postmodern premise. The impacts of characters in the stories are therefore the postmodern impacts.

In the story "A Temporary Matter", Lahiri portrays how the characters manage struggle to appropriate themselves in new land. As Mridul Bordoloi puts, "the focus is on home as an interstitial space of resistance where discursive strategies are adopted to delocate the self from his/her remembered past" (2013, p. 30). The distinct identity from the past as Bordoloi emphasizes is under struggle to be created in new setting.

Eleven year old Eliot begins staying with Mrs. Sen, who is a university professor's wife after school in the story 'Mrs. Sen'. Telling stories of her past life in Calcutta to Eliot, Mrs. Sen would chop and prepare food. Food is an important trope that Lahiri uses so often in her works, as Laura Ahn Williams states, "Food preparation becomes a way Mrs. Sen can construct her own identity and assert her subjectivity outside of any prescribed role as a newly immigrated spouse" (2014, p. 73). In the new land, Mrs Sen constructs her identity along with past experience as an immigrated spouse. It can be taken as a process of adaptation in the new world.

The American society has absorbed the characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* but, their identities are still attached with their South Asian origin. The stories of *Interpreter of Maladies* deal with the people who leave their homelands in the South Asian subcontinent. After that they live in their new home. Despite living in the foreign land, they oscillate between homeland and the host country. Though they oscillate, they are not in the mood of returning homeland. They are progressively forward looking even in oscillation.

Myth of Return Versus Postmodern Diaspora

The 'myth of return' has major significance in classical diaspora literature. The 'myth of return' is believed to be embedded in the minds of immigrants from their arrival. This paper examines how Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* ruptures this classical notion of diaspora.

This research illumines the process of identity formation in Indian-American setting from diasporic perspective on postmodern ground. The researcher follows several postmodern theorists in the wake of diaspora and critics like Lyotard, Linda Hutcheon, Homi K Bhaba, Stuart Hall, William Safran, Gabriel Sheffer, Yasmin Hussain and Laura Ahn Williams etc.

Postmodernism breaks any sort of boundary that be cultural, ideological, political, geographical etc. Linda Hutcheon posits, "... the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life ..." (2001, p. 12-13). This philosophy discontinues traditional ground of belief system, lifestyles, practices and normativities.

Similarly, the next postmodernist philosopher Leotard avers, "The nature of knowledge cannot survive unchanged within this context of general transformation. It can fit into the new channels, and become operational ..." (1984, p. 4). Leotard means that now is the time of transformation and knowledge cannot remain stable. It explores itself anew and go on functioning.

Leotard who contributed greatly in postmodern theory and literature further opines, "These new forms of circulation imply that investment decisions have, at least in part, passed beyond the control of the nation-states" (1984, p. 5). Today, everything flows in multiple directions without any restraint. The movement is divergent. Nothing even national boundaries limits it.

Similarly, Sheeba in her article "Postmodern Literature: Practice and Theory" presents the basic features of postmodernism as follows:

Ambiguity is a common practice in postmodern literature 2. Rejection of the ultimate faith on science 3. Anti-positivist and anti- verificationist stance 4. Individuality (subjectivity) Truth is a matter of perspective 6. Blurring the old distinctions 7. Globalization and multiculturalism ... (2017, p. 184-185).

Sheeba sheds light on postmodern features. Postmodernism rejects ultimate faith, verificationist stance, objectivity, final truth etc. It promotes globalization and multiculturalism. Expansion of people's mobility on the global level is the postmodern quality.

Now, nothing cannot stay intact from postmodern effect including diaspora. Postmodernism has shaken diaspora's classical stance too. Transnationalist and ethnonational diasporic writer Gabriel Sheffer pronounces, "Modern diasporas are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin-their homelands" (1986, p. 3). However, strong sentimental bonding with their countries of origin and the diasporic minority groups inherently link with their homeland, they never imagine returning to their homeland in modern time. They somehow fit themselves in the host country.

Ethnic diaspora writer Yasmin Hussain mentions, "Diasporic writing as a creative genre encapsulates the shared social and psychological preoccupations of whole dispersed generations and their offspring" (2005, p. 3). Social attribute and psychological conditions of dispersed immigrants and their descendants, the diasporic writing displays. Diasporic

writing condenses while displaying dispersed diasporic generations' psychological concerns. This psychology goes on creating identity continuously.

Ethnonational diasporic writer Gabriel Sheffer writes about the condition of diasporic characters: "complex, triadic relationship between ethnic diasporas, their host countries and homelands" (1986, p. 1). As Gabriel avows, diaspora sets forth three dimensional relationship between ethnicity, homeland and the host country, and this triadic relationship is the process of new identity. Gabriel also does not open the horizon for the reappearance to home. As Sheffer further defines:

Ethnic diasporas are created either by voluntary migration (e.g., Turks to West Germany) or as a result of expulsion from the homelands (e.g., the Jews and the Palestinians) and settlement in one or more host countries. In these host countries the diasporas remain minority groups. In their host countries diasporas preserve their ethnic or ethnic religious identity and communal solidarity. (1986, p. 9)

Generally, ethnic diasporic groups are created out of voluntary migration or expulsion from their homelands. However, Sheffer's communal solidarity consolidates seeking of future instead of recovering the past. As the adaptational practice, immigrants develop communal solidarity in the host country though they remain as minority groups separated from homelands. Sheffer sets out the following definition of a diaspora as well:

an ethno-national diaspora is a social-political formation, created as a result of either voluntary or forced migration, whose members regard themselves as of the same ethno-national origin and who permanently reside as minorities in one or several host countries. Members of such entities maintain regular or occasional contacts with what they regard as their homelands and with individuals and groups of the same background residing in other host countries. Based on aggregate decisions to settle permanently in host countries, but to maintain a common identity, diasporans identify as such, showing solidarity with their group and their entire nation, and they organize and are active in the cultural, social, economic, and political spheres. Among their various activities, members of such Diasporas establish trans-state networks that reflect complex relationships among the diasporas, their host countries, their homelands, and international actors. (2003, p. 9-10)

Sheffer beautifully theorizes the postmodern version of diaspora. Diasporic groups either are created voluntarily or forcefully. Though they remain as minority, they create identity based on communal solidarity. They are active in cultural, social, economic, and political domains. Sheffer means that the immigrants permanently settle in new land. Though they perform occasional visit, revisit or contact with their homelands, they do not return back to their homelands for settlement.

Homi Bhabha, known as "Mister In-Between" in the same light contends that diasporas exist in the interstices between nations and cultures. In this liminal gap, the identities are negotiated and reconstituted. Bhabha coins the term as "cultural translation" when a belief or practice is transplanted from one culture to another. According to Bhabha,

values and meanings get reconstituted and this reconstitution confirms immigrants' approach of adaption in new terrain. Bhabha states, "Splitting constitutes an intricate strategy of defence ..." (1994, p. 131). He means to say that the third space between home and host does not blur. Cultural beliefs transplant from home to host as cultural translation. Values and meanings reconstruct as per the places change. Immigrants go on adapting as the new terrains unfold. The process of adoption goes on creating hybrid identities.

Additionally, Yasmin Hussain further mentions, "Cultural identity is fluid, produced and reproduced so that it often results in "hybrid" forms of expression" (2005, p. 6). As Hussain opines, cultural identity is the matter of fluidity instead fixity. Such identity is made or remade. In such process, immigrants' identities amalgamate in hybrid form which also does not guarantee to return home.

Cultural and diasporic scholar Nityananda Pattanayak states regarding the unsolidified plight of diasporic groups, "... they lead one to cultural travel, to reminisce the culture of origin, the displaced space and time. They help soothe the pains of loneliness, thereby giving succour to survive in an alien land" (2013, p. 19). According to Pattanayak, immigrants soothe their pain of homesickness from visit to their original cultural sphere, recall memory and develop survival capacity in the new world. Visit and memory heal diasporic people. It helps calm their pain and suffering. They practice survival of the fittest in foreign land.

A pioneering cultural theorist Stuart Hall, in accounting for diasporic conditions, reminds us, "identity as a production, as always already incomplete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation" (2000, p. 21). Diasporic identity formation is continuous process which is never ending course. It is always under process. This Hall's statement also does not allow immigrants reverse their course of travel. As Hall argues further:

The diaspora experience [...] is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (1997. p. 119-20)

In this reference too, Hall asserts that diasporic identity is the process of constant becoming. It ever transforms. It always renews itself. Different versions of identities emanate from the same identity ceaselessly. It goes on becoming and not returning the past.

Another diasporic writer William Safran articulates classical version of diaspora unlike postmodern one. In terms of detailed interpretation of the term diaspora, scholar William Safran defines it by listing all the following features:

they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return---- when conditions are appropriate; they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland and to its safety and prosperity ... (1991, p. 17)

According to Safran, immigrants see their homeland as only ideal place. They see their homeland in the form of safety and prosperity. They treat their homeland as the place of restoration and return in appropriate time. James Clifford also discusses a diaspora in the classical light. He defines diasporas as follows:

Expatriate minority communities that are dispersed from an original "center" to at least two "peripheral" places, that maintain a memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland, that believe they are not and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host country, that see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right, that are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland, and of which the groups consciousness and solidarity are "importantly defined" by this continuing relationship with the homeland. (1994, p. 83-84)

Clifford posits that immigrants' ideal world is their homeland that they cannot forget their homeland permanently. They establish solidarity with their homelands eventually. Their relationship with their homeland last long. Their homeland becomes the matter of return and restoration after the time propagates.

Diasporic theorists and critics defend in two directions. Classical diasporic writers see homeland as irreparable, irreplaceable and indispensable sphere whereas postmodern diasporic writers see seeking new world as the sign of better life as Jhumpa Lahiri depicts in *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Struggle for Adaptation in *Interpreter of Maladies*

Lahiri's Characters struggle in America for permanent adaptation instead of returning homeland. They suffocate to succumb to the past. They always look forward and dream better future. Neither they discount their past warm feeling nor give up new experiences. Combining both the assets, they go on creating new fascinating selves.

In "A Temporary Matter" Shoba responds in Shukumar's remark 'We may have to eat in the dark.' as 'We can light candles,' Shoba suggested' p. (6). This reference reflects how Shoba and Shukumar are struggling to fit them in America somehow. Their attempt to kindle the light implies their effort to adapt in new land signifying diasporic Indian culture. Generally, in India, light is kindled as light sheds. Shoba's new lifestyle flavors with Indian Subcontinent's way of life:

It never went to waste. 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.(7-8)

Imageries of chutneys, stirring boiling pots of tomatoes etc. show how the characters are adapting themselves in new setting. Diasporic identities between host country and guest country are intermingled under the process of adaptation.

Characters visit and revisit India to minimize their hot sense of nostalgia. Though they visit and revisit India, they never think of returning India for permanent settlement.

Characters' visiting and revisiting India and Pakistan continues:

Various cities had been circled with lines drawn between them to indicate my parents' travels, and the place of their birth, Calcutta, was signified by a small silver star. I had been there only once and had no memory of the trip. "As you see, Lilia, it is a different country, a different color," my father said. Pakistan was yellow, not orange. I noticed that there were two distinct parts to it, one much larger than the other, separated by an expanse of Indian territory; it was as if California and Connecticut constituted a nation apart from the U.S. p.(29)

Lilia and her parents dwindle between India, Pakistan and America. She recovers her memory of the visit. By the visit, memory of visit pacify their temperature of nostalgia but they do not think of returning their homeland under stable basis.

The next story as title story "Interpreter of Maladies" serves important message on the point of this research. In this story, Indian American family is on vacation in India with their local tour guide.

In India's cultural site, Das family is in the visit: 'They were on their way to see the Sun Temple at Konarak. It was a dry, bright Saturday, the mid-July heat tempered by a steady ocean breeze, ideal weather for sightseeing (p: 48).' The sun Temple is one of India's heritage sites at Konarak where the Das family visits on the vacation. Das family seems to be Indian but attired as foreign in the following lines:

The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors. Mr. Kapasi was accustomed to foreign tourists; he was assigned to them regularly because he could speak English. p.(48-49)

Being Indian, Mr Kapasi speaks English and is equally familiar with foreign tourists. Das family's hybrid appearance formed by Indian and American feature constructs new adapted version of identity in this scene. In the following excerpt too, Das family seems to visit India, family's original homeland:

'You left India as a child?' Mr. Kapasi asked when Mr. Das had settled once again into the passenger seat. 'Oh, Mina and I were both born in America,' Mr. Das announced with an air of sudden confidence 'Born and raised. Our parents live here now, in Assansol. They retired. We visit them every couple years' p.(50).

This extract shows that Mr, Das declares that he and his wife were born and raised in America. They visit India every couple of years for their retired parents live in India.

This story clearly shows that the characters make temporary visit to their homeland for healing their internal wound but not for permanent settlement. This shows that the characters are making struggle to settle permanently in foreign land assimilating the sense of diaspora. The next story "Sexy" also portrays how the diasporic characters are struggling for adaptation in new context:

'It is the goddess Kali,' Mrs. Dixit explained brightly, shifting the dowel slightly in order to straighten the image. Mrs. Dixit's hands were painted with henna, an

intricate pattern of zigzags and stars. "Come please, time for cake." p.(106)
 Goddess Kali and cake are put together in a Dixit girl's birthday party. Goddess Kali signifies India, whereas, cake signifies America. Indianness and Americanness collaborate as strong sign of adaptation.

The next story "Mrs. Sen's" also reflects the scene of seeking new identity. Mrs. Sen has brought the cutting blade from India. She as in India enjoys chopping vegetables and cooking in neighboring group:

She had brought the blade from India, where apparently there was at least one in every household. 'Wherever there is a wedding in the family,' she told Eliot one day, 'or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all neighbourhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of the building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night.' p.(127-128)

This extract brings out the organicity of Indian manner of cutting vegetables, cooking food and celebrating wedding. Mrs. Sen creates new diasporic identity using Indian blade in American land. The women create such a scene of an enormous circle and slice the vegetables in new land which creates new sphere of identity. The characters do not go back home, instead create new homely manner in new panorama. Now the next story "This Blessed House" Sanjeev and Twinkle do not seem pure Indian:

'I hope you don't mind my asking,' Douglas said, 'but I noticed the statue outside, and are you guys Christian? I thought you were Indian.' 'There are Christians in India,' Sanjeev replied, 'but we're not.' p.(165)

Sanjeev and Twinkle's house is full of Christian symbols. Christ's statue stands outside their house. People see is if Sanjeev couple is Christian. In Douglas's inquisition, Sanjeev declares that they are not Christian. The mode of characters' adaptation in the new land is apparent in this story.

The diasporic identity creation goes on for the narrator of "The Third and Final Continent" as well. The narrator of this story moves from India to the United Kingdom and finally migrates to his 'third and final continent': North America. Fiance is the main reason for his migratio. As the narrator states in the first paragraph of the story:

I left India in 1964 with a certificate in commerce and the equivalent, in those days, of ten dollars to my name. For three weeks I sailed on the SS Roma, an Italian cargo vessel, in a third class cabin next to the ship's engine, across the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, and finally to England. I lived in north London, in Finsbury Park, in a house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like myself, at least a dozen and sometimes more, all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad. p.(189)

The narrator goes abroad carrying academic certificate. His one and only goal for going abroad is to establish himself financially. In this story also, diasporic identity formation goes on continuously. The narrator's visit and revisit to homeland is evident in the following lines:

We are American citizens now, so that we can collect social security when it is time. Though we visit Calcutta every few years, and bring back more drawstring pajamas and Darjeeling tea, we have decided to grow old here. I work in a small college library. We have a son who attends Harvard University. Mala no longer drapes the end of her sari over her head, or weeps at night for her parents, but occasionally she weeps for our son. So we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will never do after we die. p.(215)

The narrator of "The Third and Final Continent" mentions that he along with his family members visit and revisit his homeland Calcutta, India. They visit Calcutta every few years and bring back pajamas and Darjeeling tea. The narrator's family brings his son from Harvard for a weekend. It is because he could practice eating rice with his hand at home. He could speak Bengali language. The narrator's family is highly worried if his son diminishes his Bengali culture. In this context, the narrator and his family suffer transition of identity processing. Despite, transitional pain, narrator's family members never devise plan of return.

Quite naturally, Lahiri's characters suffer from unprecedented proceedings during diasporic tour, but, they never retreat back. They adventurously go ahead exploring novelty of life. They suffer transitional pain, but, do not forsake hopelessness in life. They always go ahead and never turn back. They make optimum utilization of their invaluable assets: past earned experience and unfolding new ones and go on creating novel identities.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* as Postmodern Diaspora

Lahiri presents postmodern diaspora through her collection of stories *Interpreter of Maladies*. She breaks the traditional diasporic notion of myth of return. She celebrates seeking of new life as the outlet of diasporic maladies instead of retreat to the past.

No doubt, the characters of Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* also feel the same feeling of nostalgia, homesickness, rootlessness, alienation and isolation as in classical diaspora. They also feel intense pain and suffering as in classical diaspora. But, Lahiri presents that the reclaiming of the past is impossible. According to Lahiri, time is always forward looking.

In classical diaspora, characters return home as the remedy of homesickness. Unlike classical diaspora, in postmodern diaspora, characters involve in nostalgia, reminiscence, memory, occasional visit and revisit to their homeland as the remedy of yearning for homeland.

Lahiri's characters never imaging restoration of the past as the remedy of the present pain and suffering. Instead, they arrange and rearrange perpetual visit and revisit to their homeland, they enjoy memory, go through self-reflection, nostalgia, recollection etc. as the real remedy of their longing for homeland. Classical diaspora takes feeling of nostalgia, homesickness, rootlessness, alienation and isolation as the source of suffering, but, unlike classical diaspora, postmodern diaspora takes those same feelings as the means of remedy from diasporic maladies, pains and sufferings. So do the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's

Interpreter of Maladies.

Lahiri's characters in the stories go on seeking better future through diasporic exploration. They go through the due course of diversity, difference and hybridity. They always decorate hope in their heart for better reality despite transitional discomfort. They continuously go ahead soothing their maladies. Lahiri's characters are highly optimistic, innovative, bold and revolutionary.

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