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“In-Between Worlds: Diaspora, Hybridity, and Belonging in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies”

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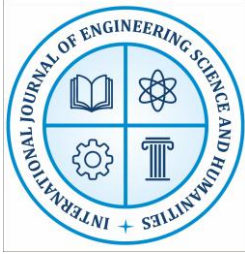
Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) gives a representation of diasporic existence through examination of the lives of Indians and Indian Americans struggling and negotiating between cultural memories and social realities of the United States. Not showcasing the traditional narrative of migration simply as a movement from geographical location to another, Lahiri represents it as a complex psychological, cultural, and linguistic process involving alienation, nostalgia, assimilation, hybridity, and the continuous reconstruction and reshaping of identity. This paper examines selected stories from the collection, especially “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Die”, “Mrs. Sen’s”, “Sexy”, “A Temporary matter”, “This Blessed House”, and “The Third and Final Continent”, through the theoretical lens of Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, Robin Cohen, Salman Rushdie, and James Clifford. Bhabha’s concept of the ‘third space’ illuminates the hybrid identities that are created through cultural encounters, while Hall’s understanding of the identity is a process of ‘becoming’ rather than any fixed essence, explains the character’s continuous redefinition of belonging. Brah’s concepts on “diaspora space” and “homing desire” complicate the conventional opposition between India and host land. The paper attempts to argue that Lahiri’s characters gradually move beyond a binary opposition between the two-India and America. Their identities are neither completely Indian nor completely American; instead, they turn out, emerging through process of negotiation, translation, and cultural interaction. Lahiri consequently transforms the experience of diaspora from a narrative loss into a complex process of ‘re-homing’ and ‘identity formation’.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, Diaspora, Alienation, Assimilation, Hybridity, Third Space, Cultural Identity, Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah.

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to the new crop of writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, VS Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee and others, who’s fiction works explore migration, exile, cultural displacement, and transnational identity. In her *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), comprising of nine wonderful stories, six of them set in the United States, and the remaining three in India; she examines the experiences of Indians and Indian Americans who negotiate between inherited traditions and the realities of the host culture.



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In pursuit of a different representation of “migration”, not merely as the oppositional force of ‘home’ and ‘homeland’, Lahiri has depicted identity as fluid, relational, and continually reconstructed. Her characters preserve memories, customs, and cultural practices while facing new social and cultural environments. Salman Rushdie’s description of the migrants as those who “straddle two cultures” aptly captures this condition, in which displacement can produce both alienation as well as new forms of belonging.

The popular concept of “diaspora” is central to Lahiri’s fiction. Robin Cohen identifies collective memory, attachment to homeland, ethnic consciousness and complex relations with the host society as important features of diasporic experience. Avtar Brah’s concepts further complicates the concept through her idea of “diaspora space”, where identities are shaped by intersections of ethnicity, gender, class, and generation. Homi K Bhabha’s concepts related to hybridity and the “Third Space” are indeed, relevant to Lahiri’s fiction, as her characters inhabit the cultural spaces between India and America, and do not belong exclusively to either of them. Also, as Stuart Hall views, cultural identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing process of “becoming”.

Diasporic Condition and the Problem of Belonging

In Lahiri’s fiction, the “diasporic condition” occurs with displacement. The migrant is physically located in one country but, he is, emotionally, culturally and imaginatively connected to some another country i.e. India. This produces a condition what may be referred to as “double consciousness”, in which the individual continually measures the present against the past memories and experiences. This reminiscing entraps them throughout their life.

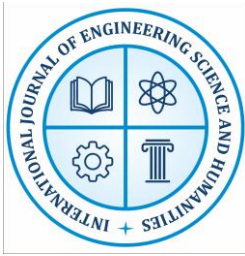
As Robin Cohen conceptualises on ‘diaspora’, it helps us to understand the strong presence of homeland consciousness in Lahiri’s fiction pieces. The Bengali immigrants in Interpreter of Maladies (1999) preserve their native food habits, language, religious practises, domestic rituals, and social networks. Their homes in America become miniature cultural extensions of Bengali ones. This may be associated with Lois Tyson’s “cultural imperialism” as:

“Cultural imperialism, a direct result of economic domination, consists of the ‘takeover’ of one culture by another, the food, clothing, customs, recreation, and values of the economically dominant culture increasingly replace those of the economically vulnerable culture until the latter appears to be a kind of imitation of the former...”

-Lois Tyson

Critical Theory Today (2014)

When one culture is to establish its hegemony over the comparatively ‘inferior’ or less ‘dominant’ culture, the food, clothing, customs, values, ways of recreation, “whole way of life” is taken over by the culturally ‘superior’ one. As in Lahiri’s work, The food, clothing, language, letters, fish, mustard oil and, familial rituals become cultural markers through which the displaced individuals make an attempt to reproduce familiarity.



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Despite all these, Lahiri does seem to have romanticise this process. The preservation of culture may provide emotional security, but it can also become a source of isolation. The migrants may reproduce the ‘homeland’ in such a way, that the host society begins to appear threatening as well as meaningless. This site of tension is particularly evident in “Mrs. Sen’s.”

Avtar Brah’s concept of “diaspora space” is also valuable here, because it prevents ‘diaspora’ from being treated as an experience belonging solely to the migrants. Such a diasporic space is produced through encounters among immigrants, native people, minorities on one hand, and the dominant structures on the other hand. In such a space, identities are “relational” rather than “isolated.” The immigrants do not, simply, enter and arena of ‘completed’ American culture, but the encounter itself produces new cultural formations.

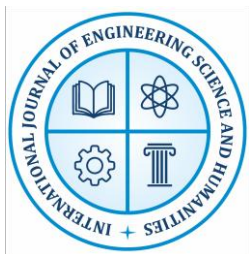
This understanding is also related to the idea of “assimilation,” that is often imagines as an one-directional process in which the immigrant seeks to abandon the culture of origin and adopts the culture of the host society. The underlying force behind the process of assimilation may be what Joseph Nye calls “soft power” i.e. the ability to attract culturally inferior cultures through culture, art, values, political values, foreign policies, attractive destinations, lucrative education systems, and much more. This entraps the relatively less dominant cultures into the dominant ones, thereby forming a mainstream that favours the dominant culture. (Ikenberry)

Cultural Memory and the Preservation of Roots

“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” is of the most powerful explorations of Jhumpa Lahiri about cultural memory, political borders and, diasporic belonging. The story is narrated by Lilia, a ten-year old girl whose parents are Bengali immigrants living in the United States. Mr. Pirzada, a Bengali Muslim from Dacca, visits the family’s home on regular basis during the political crisis of 1971. At first, Lilia comprehends Mr. Pirzada through visible cultural similarities. He speaks the same language as her parents, eats rice with his own hands, removes his shoes and shares many of their common customs. Her father, however, insists upon a political distinction that “Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian” (Lahiri 182), which introduces Lilia to the complicated relationship between cultural identity and political identity.

The story demonstrates that how national borders do not necessarily correspond to cultural boundaries. Herein, India, East Pakistan and later, Bangladesh become separate political entities, still the Bengali cultural world transcends to cross these borders. Lilia’s confusion exposes the artificiality of rigid identities. To her, Pirzada and her parents are culturally the same, although the adults know that religion, nationality and, Partition, all have produced political distinctions among them.

The story, thereby, anticipates Bhabha’s argument that cultural identity emerges in an “ambivalent”, ‘in-between’ space. Lilia occupies a similar ‘in-between’ space. She is an American by her upbringing, but is connected to her parent’s Bengali identity. Mr. Pirzada is



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Pakistani by identity, Bengali by language and by culture, and a diasporic visitor in America. The dinner table, as a result, becomes a miniature “Third Space” in which political borders are temporarily crossed.

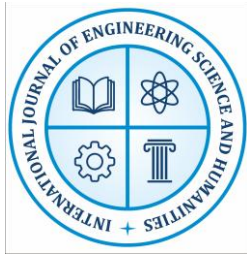
The act of dining together becomes important as it symbolically reverses the logic of Partition. Lahiri shows that how cultural proximity can survive political separation. The family does not erase the difference, rather, it creates a temporary space where the ‘difference’ can co-exist.

“Mrs. Sen’s” Alienation, Home and the Failure of Immediate Assimilation

If we say that “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” presents cultural memory as a source of connection, then “Mrs. Sen’s” demonstrates the ‘psychological cost’ of displacement when that sort of connection cannot successfully be translated into the new environment. Mrs. Sen lives in America but at the same time, remains emotionally attached to India. Her apartment is filled with certain objects and particles that are associated with her own homeland. The fish-cutting blade, the Bengali food, sari, letters and, stories about India, become instruments through which she regenerates a vanished social world. Her statement that in India “everything is there” expresses something that is more than mere nostalgia. It represents her inability to experience America as a ‘complete’ social world. Her conception of home is ‘relational’ as well as ‘communal.’ She remembers that how the neighborhood women gather together, to cut vegetables, laugh and, gossip. This domestic activity is thus, transformed into a ‘social ritual’.

The contrast between India and America may be captured in her observation that “Here in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence” (Lahiri 115). Herein, silence becomes a symbol, a symbol of ‘alienation’. In India, sound signifies communities, whereas in America, this silence signifies isolation. Though, the apartment is physically a home, but psychologically an exile space. Avtar Brah’s concept of “homing desire” is apt here. Diasporic subject at times, may experience a desire for ‘home’ without being able to return to an uncomplicated original ‘home’. Therefore, it may be understood that the desire is not geographical, essentially. Rather, it is a desire for familiarity, community and, emotional security. Mrs. Sen not only longs for Indian territory but also for the social relationships that made that territory meaningful.

Her fish-cutting blade becomes a material embodiment of this desire. It thus, connects her present body with a remembered collective world. The blade is not, simply a kitchen object; it is, a ‘cultural artefact’ that carries memory. Yet Mrs. Sen’s attempt to reproduce India inside America cannot completely succeed within itself. The surrounding environment does not really provide the social networks that she remembers. Her difficulty in driving, her isolation and, her emotional dependence upon Eliot, reveals the limits of cultural transplantation. The relationship between Mrs. Sen and Eliot is, therefore, significant. Eliot becomes a listener, who enters a cultural space different from his own one. Through him, Lahiri demonstrates that how cultural



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translation is possible even without complete assimilation. Mrs. Sen cannot and does not fully assimilate into America, but her relationship with Eliot thus, creates a small interpersonal “Third Space” (Bhabha 23).

Otherness and the American ‘Gaze’

Jhumpa Lahiri shows that how diasporic alienation is being produced not only through the media of ‘displacement’ but also by the ‘gaze’ of the “host society.” In “Sexy,” Miranda encounters Indian culture as ‘strange’ and unfamiliar, while in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” Lilia’s school and Halloween experiences here reveal that how her Indian identity still remain visible despite the fact that her upbringing be ‘American’. The fact that she was referred to as an “Indian witch,” demonstrates that the participation in American culture does not necessarily erase the ethnic difference.

Bhabha’s concept of the “Other” here helps to explain the tension that the identity is shaped through the interaction between the “self” and the “other.” Lahiri, therefore, questions the very assumption that assimilation guarantees “acceptance.” The immigrants may adopt the host culture, while being marked as “culturally different.”

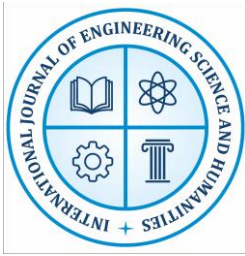
From “This Blessed House”

“This Blessed House” makes a shift from cultural alienation to cultural ‘hybridity.’ Sanjeev seeks order and coherence, whereas Twinkle easily embraces the Christian objects that are found in their new American home. Their house as a result becomes a “Third Space” (Bhabha 23), wherein the Indian and American cultural traces co-exist. Through the character of Twinkle, Jhumpa Lahiri challenges the idea of “cultural purity.” Her acceptance to unfamiliar cultural elements indeed does not erase her Indian identity, it rather produces a flexible and hybrid sense of “self.” This story, thus, presents the cultural difference not merely as a threat, but as a possibility for negotiation as well as transformation.

Gender, Marriage and Diasporic Identity

Jhumpa Lahiri also reveals that diaspora is shaped through gender and the domestic relationships. In “Mrs. Sen’s,” the home is able to preserve the cultural memory but, at the same time, becomes a space of ‘isolation.’ Mrs. Sen’s dependence upon her husband and the difficulty in adapting to American mobility, further expose the ‘gendered dimensions of displacement.’

By contrast, certain relevant characters like Twinkle and Shobha negotiate more flexible forms of marriage and ‘domesticity.’ Avtar Brah’s emphasis on the intersections of gender, generation and, ethnicity is indeed therefore useful. The diasporic identity is not experienced uniformly, but is also shaped by their social position. Assimilation, as a result, involves not merely the cultural change, but also the transformations in the gendered roles and the domestic life.



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“The Third and Final Continent” : From Displacement to Re-Homing

In this part, Jhumpa Lahiri has presented the most positive movement from ‘displacement’ to ‘belonging’. The narrator’s journey from India to America through England, shows that how diasporic identity is shaped by ‘routes’ as well as ‘roots’. His relationship with Mrs. Croft, gradually transforms the cultural distance into mutual recognition. Most importantly, ‘adaptation’ does not require abandoning the past. The narrator constantly retains connections with Calcutta while establishing a life in America. ‘Home’, thus becomes something that may be created than simply being recovered. James Clifford’s emphasis on “routes” further aides to explain this fluid and transnational identity.

Identity as Becoming: Stuart Hall

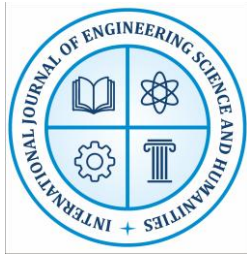
Stuart Hall’s famous concept of cultural identity as a process of “becoming” (Hall 77) provides an useful framework for Lahiri’s characters. Lilia, Mrs. Sen, Twinkle and, the narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” continually attempt to redefine themselves through memory, migration and, cultural encounters. Their identities indeed, cannot be reduced to mere ‘fixed categories’ such as “Indian” or “American.” Lahiri rather presents identity as something that is historically situated, relational and, continually reconstructed. Diaspora, therefore, not focusing upon producing a single identity, is an ongoing process of self-definition.

Bhabha’s “Third Space”

Homi Kharshedji Bhabha’s famous concept of the “Third Space” offers a central framework pertaining to the understanding of Lahiri’s diasporic world. Her characters inhabit certain space that is between Indian and American traditions and modernity, memory and experience. The dinner table in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” “Mrs. Sen’s apartment;” Twinkle’s house and the narrator’s trans-national life all function as ‘spaces’ of cultural negotiation. These spaces do not always comprise of two cultures, they produce new identities through their interaction. Lahiri therefore, transcends the binary division of Indian-American and presents “hybridity” (Bhabha 29) as a creative process, through which the cultural boundaries become negotiable.

Beyond Alienation and Assimilation

Ultimately, Jhumpa Lahiri complicates this binary division between ‘alienation’ and ‘assimilation’. Her characters do not directly and simply move from one condition to another condition. They negotiate between nostalgia, resistance, adaption and, hybridity. Mrs. Sen represents intense attachment to the homeland. Lilia embodies an emerging ‘hybrid consciousness; Twinkle embraces a cultural fluidity; the narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” achieves a more settled trans-national belonging. Cohen explains this attachment of them to homeland and the community, Brah does for their diasporic social space, hall does for the fluidity of identity, Bhabha does for their hybrid “in-betweenness” (Bhabha 21) and, Clifford does for their movement through “routes.”



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Thus, Lahiri presents diaspora not merely as something that is permanent homelessness but as a dynamic process of negotiating, belonging across cultures.

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) presents 'diaspora' not merely as a simple movement from one homeland to the another, but as an ongoing process of constantly negotiating the memory, belonging, cultural difference and, identity. Through certain characters such as Lilia, Mrs. Sen, Twinkle, and the narrator of "The Third and Final Continent," Jhumpa Lahiri has been successful in demonstrating that the experience of migration is marked by both: alienation and the possibility of new forms of belonging. Her characters neither completely abandon their inherited cultural identities nor, fully assimilate into American society; instead of that, they inhabit shifting spaces in which cultures interact, overlap and, transform one another. Homi K. Bhabha's "Third Space," Hall's notion of identity as "becoming," Brah's "diaspora space" and, "homing desire," Cohen's understanding of diasporic attachment, and Clifford's emphasis on "routes" collectively illuminate this sort of complexity. Lahiri further transcends the binary of home and the host land, presenting identity as relational, fluid and, continually reconstructed. *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), as this paper proves, suggests that displacement need not culminate in permanent homelessness; it certainly can generate new forms of cultural negotiation and "re-homing," through which individuals create meaningful belonging across geographical and cultural boundaries.

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