



*Journal of Advances and  
Scholarly Researches in  
Allied Education*

*Vol. V, Issue IX, January-  
2013, ISSN 2230-7540*

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### CULTURAL DILEMMAS IN JUMPHA LAHIRI: A STUDY OF INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

# Cultural Dilemmas in Jumpha Lahiri: A Study of Interpreter of Maladies

Mrs. Asha Sharma

Assistant Professor, Gaur Brahman Degree College, Rohtak

-----X-----

Post-colonialism is a specifically post-modern intellectual discourse and its aspects can be found not only in sciences concerning history, literature and politics, but also in approach to culture and identity of both the colonizer and the colonized nations. A major aspect of postcolonialism is the clash of cultures. The relationship of the colonial power to the colonized nation, its population and culture seems extremely ambiguous and contradictory. This contradiction of two clashing cultures and the wide scale of problems resulting from it must be regarded as a major theme in post-colonial literature. This paper to be presented on Jumpha Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* deals with conflicts her characters face. Struggles with interpersonal relationships and stress of daily existences, are universal themes to which almost anyone can relate. This work is enriched with sensitive dilemmas in life. Characters in this book experience the cultural as well as the generation gaps. She therefore comments on the effects of Western colonialism on Indians and Indian Diaspora. Lahiri has presented her experiences through her protagonists of how to live in a multicultural milieu. *Interpreter of Maladies* contains themes of conflict in relationships between couples, families and friends. Through these relationships she explores ideas of isolation and identity both personal and cultural. The characters in the majority of stories frequently encounter crisis of identity, which are tied to their inability to reconcile their American identity with their Indian identity. All the nine stories in the anthology set in America and India are united by the motifs of exclusion, loneliness and the search for fulfillment.

Post-colonialism is a specifically post-modern intellectual discourse and its aspects can be found not only in sciences concerning history, literature and politics, but also in approach to culture and identity of both the colonizer and the colonized nations. A major aspect of post-colonialism is the clash of cultures. The relationship of the colonial power to the colonized nation, its population and culture seems extremely ambiguous and contradictory. This contradiction of two clashing cultures and the wide scale of problems resulting from it must be regarded as a major theme in post-colonial literature. Post-colonial literature includes a vast array of writers and subjects. Jumpha Lahiri is one of those who has written about social and cultural

exchanges. Her way of writing offers a multi-perspective approach to the post colonial complex.

The author Jumpha Lahiri has led an exceptional life in her short life-span. Born to Bengali Indian parents in London, she also has been to Rhode Island. And now she resides in Greenwich village in New York. She has travelled extensively to India and has experienced the effects of colonialism there as well as the issues of the diaspora as it exists. This background has led to a unique multi-cultural perspective. At a press conference in

## CALCUTTA LAHIRI SAID

"No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country I travel to, that's why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile."<sup>1</sup>

Her goal in writing is to be able to interpret between two cultures. Her background has led to many of her stories about characters that are strange in a strange land. Many are immigrants that have to learn to carefully navigate the swampy waters between cultures.

Diaspora has become a regular feature of globalized world and majority of Indian writers in Europe have been dealing with the crisis or loss of identity. When an immigrant goes to another country he takes along the baggage of his roots which are ingrained in the culture. In a new world the values and morals of the old world come in clash and create a sense of loss. It also creates a nostalgic longing for the past to which they cannot go back. This longingness is acute in the case of those who have been forced into new culture like the Indian brides married in a foreign country. They undergo a sudden shock treatment and it is reflected in their behaviour.

*Interpreter of Maladies* contains themes of conflict in relationships between couples, families and friends. Through these relationships she explores ideas of isolation and identity both personal and cultural. The characters in both works frequently encounter crisis of identity, which are tied to their inability to reconcile their American identity with their Indian

identity. All the nine stories in the anthology set in America and India are united by the motifs of exclusion, loneliness and the search for fulfillment.

The book *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories From Bengal Boston and Beyond* interprets the maladies of dislocated people with double consciousness, double identity and double vision. The most pathetic figure in the whole collection is Mrs. Sen who is unable to shake off the past and still carries on the Bengali household routine in an American apartment. Through Mrs. Sen Lahiri has tried to give a touching and honest commentary on the inability of the women of Indian diaspora to adapt to the new life. She is homesick, listens to the recorded chatter of her family on the tape and the only time she displays excitement is when she makes a routine trip to the seaside to pick up fresh fish. Mrs. Sen and Eliot have been pressed against each other in the story to draw out the pathetic loneliness each suffers from. Mrs. Sen's inability to shake off the past and Eliot's placid acceptance of his life style are juxtaposed to expose the cultural difference.

Mrs. Sen tries very hard to become accustomed the ways and customs of the United States, but she cannot escape from the fact that in her words, "Everything is there."<sup>2</sup> Everything Mrs. Sen has known or loved is in India and one sees the effects of displacement in her actions. Mrs. Sen is assumed to be thirty but she is portrayed as acting much older. She has a sort of crisis of identity which can be seen when she flung open the drawers of the bureau and the door of the closet, filled with sarees of every imaginable texture and shade, brocaded with gold and silver threads.

Lilia, who is an American born Indian, second generation immigrant, does not share her parents' sense of alienation, but her interaction with Mr. Pirzada does unsettle her and make her aware of a different world that lies beyond. Lilia's parents missed their homeland. They lived in a different world and were disturbed that "Supermarket did not carry mustard oil, doctors did not make house calls, neighbours never dropped by without invitation."<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents belong to different religions and nations yet are culturally similar. A shared sense of displacement and rootlessness brings them together in a foreign land which is not theirs by birth but by adoption. Their sense of identity is derived from their native country which is 'home'. This home physically inaccessible is always accessible is one's memories. The sense of time is displayed. In Boston, Mr. Pirzada's watch is always set to Dacca time, the place he really belonged.

How geography and historical experience change identities is shown through Lilia's inability in understanding that how Mr. Pirzada could take offence if addressed as an Indian. Thus the story *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* throws light on the cultural

difference between an Indian family settled in the USA and a Muslim academic who is temporarily there and the only link between them is the common language. The psychology of an exile living in home and abroad at the same time is seen in these lines:

"Life, I realized, was being lived in Dacca first--- our meals, our actions were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged."<sup>4</sup>

The instance of an immigrant's identity being lost in the clash of cultures is the title story *Interpreter of Maladies*. Here a Young American couple traces their Indian heritage under the guidance of Mr. Kapasi. When Mr. Kapasi introduces himself, he presses his palms together in greeting, but Mr. Das squeezes hands like an American.

Lahiri has attempted to identify the discrepancies that exist between 'home country' and 'New home'. The story also reveals how far the Indian characters settled in the west have travelled from their cultural roots. Mr. Das does what is unthinkable in India. He refers to his wife by her first name 'Mina' and Mrs. Das only after some bickering agrees to taking Tina, their little daughter to toilet when Mr. Das points that he had given the child bath yesterday.

*Unaccustomed Earth* is also a reflection of life with two separate cultures, and how people cope with one and the other. The story explores some of the difficult gender roles in America such as Ruma's decision to leave her successful legal career to raise children. It also explores the family issues associated with Ruma's Indian heritage, including her sense of obligation to care for her father. What makes the story most compelling is the limited communication between the father and daughter, both afraid in some way to acknowledge that they have moved away from their culture of origin and have embraced aspects of the new culture.

*Interpreter of Maladies* brings to light many of the issue with identity faced by the Diaspora community. The stories revolve around the difficulties of relationship, communication and a loss of identity for those in Diaspora. The characters struggle with the same feelings of exile. Whether the character be a homeless woman from India or an Indian male student in the United States, all the characters display the effects of displacement in a diaspora. Lahiri's works are enriched with sensitive dilemmas in life. Character in her books experience the cultural as well as the generation gaps. She therefore comments on the effects of western colonialism on Indians and Indian Diaspora.

## REFERENCES

1. Indira Nityanandam, *Jumpha Lahiri: The Tale of the Diaspora* (New Delhi: Creative Books, 2005) p.13.
2. Jumpha Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999) p. 113.
3. Ibid. P. 24
4. Ibid. P. 30