

‘Home’ as a Recurring Motif in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

Dr Mangesh Madhukar Gore

Deptt. of English,
Sundarrao More ACS College,
Poladpur, Dist. Raigad (M.S.)
goremangeshm@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize winner (2000) short-story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000) is mainly known for its reflection of the diasporic sensibility of Indian expatriates, most of whom are Bengalis. While dealing with geographical displacement. Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize winner short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000), has convincingly shown the subtle psychology of expatriate Indians. Lahiri has shown in depth about how an individual becomes an exile and victim of alienation in his or her own home. One of the important features of this short story collection is the way it deals with the concept of 'home' with its different aspects in diasporic as well as native milieu. The Paper attempts to discuss 'home' as a constant image in the *Interpreter of Maladies*.

KEYWORDS

Expatriate; Dislocation; Nostalgia; Psychology; Human Relationship.

Jhumpa Lahiri who won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, was born in London to Bengali Parents and grew up in Rhode Island, U.S.A. Since she is of Indian origin and tries to interpret the maladies of immigrants through her short stories, she can be considered an expatriate writer of our time. This collection of short stories is her first creative work; the first edition of her book, published by Harper Collins, was sold out in a record time. It has received overwhelming praise from readers and critics. Like Bharathi Mukherjee, Uma Parameswaran and Meena Abdullah, Lahiri has been regarded as a significant writer of the Indian Diaspora. According to The New Yorker, Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the twenty best young writers in America today. There

have been many studies entirely focused on Lahiri's creative art, but two of the remarkable sources on Lahiri are by Bala (2002) and Nityanandam (2005). Bala's edited volume focuses exclusively on *Interpreter of Maladies*. Similarly, Bhatnagar (2001) has included Lahiri for a commentary in his encyclopedia.

Interpreter of Maladies has an interesting subtitle "Stories from Bengal, Boston and Beyond," It shows a wide range of her stories spanning three continents having their settings in London, Boston, Calcutta and even Dacca. The word 'beyond' indicates the universality of her stories, which tells us about the lives of immigrants navigating between their native culture that they inherited and the new one which affects them on various levels. Lahiri herself has noted that her texts represent the legacy

of belonging to two different worlds: "My writing these days is less a response to my parents' cultural nostalgia and more an attempt to forge my own amalgamated domain" (Bala 178). It is rightly observed that

... [these] stories tell of the lives of Indian in exile, of people navigating between the strict traditions they have inherited and the baffling new world they must encounter everyday. (Sahu 3).

In the first story "A Temporary Matter", 'Home' becomes a place where both Shobha and Sukumar seek to distance themselves from each other's presence. It was only after the power cut, that they decided to remain in each other's company and played the game of 'Confession'. This game of confession gave them much-needed relief from the burden of a tragic incident. Lahiri tries to show that alienation and dislocation are not only experienced by those immigrants who are burdened with nostalgia of their remembered past of their native land, but it may also be experienced by second-generation expatriates like Shobha and Sukumar who suffer more pangs of displacement. As they have 'no home of nostalgia' to fall back upon, the sense of alienation would become more acute. Sukumar, too, feels this void and "wishes ----that he had his own childhood story of India" (Lahiri 1999, 2). The decision of Shobha to leave the house and settle into the new flat indicates her determination to de-locate herself from the home which would have forever haunted her with the feeling of incompleteness.

The title story "Interpreter of Maladies" deals with the feeling of dislocation which is not entirely rooted when one is culturally displaced, but might be experienced anywhere. The strange and unexpected intimacy between Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi who have different cultural and location

backgrounds indicates the shared notions of their detachment from their home. For Mrs. Das, home becomes a site where she is constantly haunted with guilt and pain by the thought of her single adulterous act with her husband's Punjabi friend which resulted in her conceiving their second son, Bobby. She is unable to confess this past of 'guilt' and 'pain' for eight long years, which makes her suffer even more. Mrs. Das realizes her insular position, as a second-generation immigrant, cut off from all association with the country of her origin, and in a way, having nowhere to go to, or no one to talk to. Upon learning that Mr. Kapasi is an interpreter of maladies, some faint hope aroused within her, for that he might be able to relieve her of her painful memory. Ironically, we see the falling marriage of Mr. Kapasi from the point they lost their first child due to typhoid fever. His wife had also little respect for his job as an interpreter as she takes it as "all doctor's assistant" (Lahiri 1999, 53). Through this Kapasi couple Lahiri tries to show that despite being rooted firmly in his own home, one can experience the feeling of dislocation.

In the story "Sexy", the concept of 'home' as a centre of dislocation is given a new turn. Here, the feeling of dislocation is not experienced by an expatriate or an exile, but by someone belonging to her own home. Lahiri, by subjecting an American girl to the feeling which is generally experienced by expatriates, wants to portray that her stories are written purposefully to reveal the multicultural nature of the society which has begun to accept the expatriates as their equal, despite their cultural differences. The story deals with Miranda's striving to come to terms with the fact of her unsolicited love affair with a married Bengali man who leaves her both emotionally exhausted and alienated. As we know Miranda, who is in love with Dev, has only vague notions about India, especially Bengal. She is always curious to

know about India and Dev's birth place. Miranda seeks to locate home in a place that she can reach only by imagination. Her only Indian acquaintances except for Laxmi and Dev, were the Dixits, a family residing in their neighbourhood, where she had grown up in Michigan.

All the stories mentioned above deal with the theme of the search for a 'home' amidst the experiences of alienation. Characters like Shobha, Mira, Mr. Kapasi, and Miranda experience dislocation / de-location in different contexts. The search for a home amidst cultural displacement also implies that there would always be an attempt on the part of immigrants to re-create a semblance of the home consciously or unknowingly. This re-creation would involve a conscious rejection of the influence of the dominant culture and holding firmly to one's own native tradition. This rejection may be found in an uncompromising attitude adopted towards food, clothes, practice of religion and customs. Such factors can also be regarded as identity markers. Here, memory plays an important role.

In the story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", we see how Lilia's parents, being first-generation immigrants from India, were unaccustomed to life in Boston. They try to locate some semblance of their original home as they "used to trail their fingers, at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their parts of the world." (Lahiri 1999, 24). Hence, they were very eager to receive Mr. Pirzada, who despite being an East Pakistani, was still similar to them in many ways. Their search for home amidst foreign shores, in a way, gets fulfilled by the common language (Bengali) they speak, the typically Bengali dishes they like, the cassettes of Kishore Kumar they listen to and having successive cups of tea dipped in austere biscuits after supper.

Mrs. Sen of the story "Mrs. Sen's", although living in America, does not feel the urge to integrate or assimilate with the culture of the adopted country. She is proud of her Indian identity. Clothes/dress reveal her Indian identity. Her act of draping herself with the nine-yard fabric is a way by which she asserts her Indian identity. Food also becomes an important cultural measure/identity marker in this story. With Mrs. Sen's craving for fresh fish in a land where chopped and canned fish items were mostly preferred. Back home, she had grown up eating fish twice a day. But in America Mrs. Sen didn't get that much and that kind of fish which she used to eat back at home. The metaphor of food is an important aspect of Lahiri's writing. Almost all the stories in this collection have it as a specific identity marker. Lahiri's preoccupation with the food metaphor shows how the food habits of immigrants convey their unwillingness to assimilate with the dominant mainstream culture.

Mrs. Sen always distances herself against the ways, manners, attitudes and habits of the American people. She complains about the absolute indifference shown by the neighbours in the new land, as against her home where the mere raising of one's voice was enough to make "one whole neighborhood and half of another--- come to share the news, to help with arrangements" (Lahiri 1999, 116). Mrs. Sen's involvement in letters received from home and recorded conversation which she often heard portrays how memory recovers the past and plays a vital role in the lives of immigrants by making the pain of living amidst an alien land bearable.

'Home' is a recurring motif in *Interpreter of Maladies*. It is suggested here that home is not only a residential place but also a psychic construct that works as an identity marker. In almost all the stories, there is a longing for the native

land, 'home' the life led in India before they migrated to the US. Even the second-generation settlers are not free from the connection they have with the country of birth and of their parents. They have to inherit the memories of their parents on a psychological level. The first-generation settlers fear that the children may forget the traditions and culture of their parents and become completely Americanized. They have to keep the traditions of their forefathers alive in their children. The occasional visits to India also keep them in touch with their 'roots.'

The diaspora experience in literature and of Indian writers is conditioned by two major factors, the collective memory and its recurrence of the place/nation originally left, or the landscape of belonging, whether in once, twice or thrice displaced writers, and the material cultural and socio-political conditions that impinge on their present place of belonging. Her stories presented the lives of Bengali-Americans suffering through a variety of stages of loveless desolate life that reflect their cultural uprooting and displacement. The loss of native language and culture resulted in a degeneration of the immigrant's identity, what they aspired for and ultimately what they are, immigrants are not able to strike a balance between the two worlds, the one left behind and the other they have to live in. Immigrant experience is not simple and straightforward but it is traumatic and contradictory. Lahiri's stories portray the experience of cultural displacement and its consequences. The sense of rootlessness and alienation pervades through almost all the stories.

The story "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" deals with the theme of exile and alienation in the native milieu. It shows how Bibi Haldar has become a victim of alienation in her own home and society. This story is set in Calcutta. It also shows Bibi Haldar as an orphan since childhood who suffered from a hysterical disease of

epilepsy. She was staying with her relative in Calcutta. She was given a storage room on the terrace.

A space in which one could sit but not comfortably stand, featuring an adjoining latrine, curtained entrance, one window without a grille, and shelves made from the panels of the old door (Lahiri 1999, 169).

Bibi Haldar recorded inventory for the cosmetics shop that her cousin Haldar owned and managed at the mouth of the courtyard. Her cousin and his wife extract a lot of labour from her in running the shop without her knowledge. In return, they have given her food, shelter and sufficient clothes only. She has an ailment that baffles everyone. Her untold misery and suffering were partly caused by her physical illness which had not been properly diagnosed and partly caused by her unfulfilled desires and unrealized dreams as a young woman. Her only obsession in life is to get married. Every day she expected a man to come and offer his hand to her. She loved to hear from the other women the details of their marriage. Many times, she was frustrated about the unfulfillment of her desire. Even the doctors examining her pronounced that only marriage would cure her. But Mr. and Mrs. Haldar never cared to give any thought to Bibi's marriage. They make many excuses for the same as her marriage would involve a lot of expenditure. After insistence from neighbours, Haldar gave an advertisement for her marriage in the newspaper. "Girl Unstable Height 152 Centimeters seeks Husband" (Lahiri 1999, 165).

As is expected, this exercise of advertisement proved futile. In the pregnancy of Mrs. Haldar, Bibi is treated as an outcast. Mrs. Haldar feared her as an evil omen and wanted to get rid of her shadow, to avoid any harm to her child. Mrs. Haldar gave birth to a female child.

When her daughter suffered for five days due to illness, Mrs. Haldar again came under fear and blamed Bibi. At last Mr. Haldar opened his cosmetic shop and left the place with his wife and daughter. Bibi was left alone with Rs. 300/-. In a sense, Bibi became an immigrant in her own house. She survives only with the help of her sympathetic neighbours. The story takes a turn when a woman finds her pregnant. The search for the real culprit of her pregnancy ended in futility. She becomes a mother without marriage, delivers and nurtures the baby as her hysterical fits are cured forever. The story touches the hearts of readers as it is full of pathos. It shows the emotional exile of a simple and naive woman who becomes an immigrant in her own house.

In the beginning of the short story "The Real Durwan", Boori Ma is introduced as a refugee and at the end of the story we see her as a homeless exile. The writer wants to prove that geographical displacement is not the only condition for exile; a person may lose their identity even in their native land in this selfish and materialistic world. In fact, Boori Ma's life is a series of losses, misfortunes and sufferings. Her second banishment drags her into alienation, deprivation, uncertain future and physical and psychological disorder.

The story reflects that it is not only in America that the Indian migrants and their children undergo humiliating and discriminating experiences but the diasporas meet this kind of treatment in every dominant culture and nation. Being a Bengali, Boori Ma was sent to Calcutta after the partition. Though everybody is sympathetic to her, she is considered a refugee and is kept away from the shared activities of the locality. She faces a double displacement of being a non-Indian and belonging to a lower caste. Her dilemma is that she can neither go back across the border, which was once her home nor is she given a space in this new country, which was politically declared to be her home. She belongs to no country. Her identity changes with the shifts in history, politics and fortune.

As Sharma et al. note, Lahiri deals with diasporic sociological experiences like religion, racism, dislocation, identity etc. while also addressing complex issues pertaining to culture, nationalism, ethnicity, race, religion, politics and society. Varma and Seshan find Lahiri's work interesting from the point of view of assertion of identity, and the context of that assertion - apparently of concern to social scientists.

WORKS CITED

- Bala, Suman, editor. *Jhumpa Lahiri- The Master Storyteller: A Critical Response to Interpreter of Maladies*. New Delhi, Khosla Publishing House, 2002.
- Bhatnagar, M.K. *Encyclopedia of Literature in English*. New Delhi, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2003.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*. New Delhi, Harper Collins, 1999.
- Nityanandam, Indira. *Jhumpa Lahiri: The Tale of the Diaspora*. Delhi, Creative Books, 2005.
- Sahu, Nandini. "Two Dispossessed Habitats: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*". 2008
- Sharma, Kavita, et al. *Interpreting Indian Diasporic Experience*. Creative Books, 2004.
- Varma, Sushma J and Radhika Seshan. *Fractured Identity, The Indian Diaspora in Canada*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2003.

Dr Mangesh Madhukar Gore is presently the head of the Department of English at Sundarrao More Arts, Commerce and Science College, Poladpur Dist Raigad which is affiliated to the University of Mumbai. Dr Gore has a very keen interest in Indian Writing in English in general and expatriate (diasporic) literature in particular. He has done his M.Phil and Ph D on the diasporic sensibility in the writings of Jhumpa Lahiri.