

# Multifarious Faces Of Diaspora In The Works Jhumpa Lahiri

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**Abstract:** Diaspora is a term that encompasses cultural and emotional conflicts. Nationality and nativity contradict each other in the diasporic context. Nativity is an innate emotional bonding that creates a sense of belongingness, while nationality limits itself to the physical presence. Diasporic writings record the immigrants 'strivings to feel the warmth of native land in a foreign nation across the boundaries. Adaptation in a foreign country is highly influenced by the socio-cultural factors and in other words, these are the crucial factors in determining the immigrant life of an individual. Diasporic literature focuses on reflecting the realistic experiences of the people away from their homeland and also in breaking the myths surrounding their lives. Though India within itself has multicultural shades, Indian immigrants in other countries are still encountering the disillusionment and struggle to cope up with the different environment. The British colonialism in India plays a pivotal role in the migration of Indians to various countries, especially, England and America. Most of the Indian diasporic writings deal with the immigrants' social and psychological confrontations in these two countries and the effects are greater upon the women due to their social status. Jhumpa Lahiri had written vintage diasporic novels and stories in which she takes the readers across the nations to visualize the life of a migrant from a developing nation to a developed nation. As a woman writer, her representations of women characters are highly realistic and deeply moving. Her famous short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* includes nine short stories and each story projects the different dimensions of diaspora through the various characters sketched in the story. The paper attempts to decode the myriad diasporic elements in Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories and also to study the impact of diasporic experiences over the ages.

**Keywords:** Culture, Indian Diaspora, Immigrants, Nativity, Women.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut and Pulitzer Prize winning short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* showcases the intensity of diasporic emotions through the diverse characters portrayed in the stories. 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. Each story is unique in its way of narration and plot settings, which in turn analyses the manifold nature of diaspora and its impact on the individuals of distinct background. In one way or the other, diaspora arises as the result of modernism. It is a universal scenario, though its degree varies according to the socio-political conditions of the community. It is also quite obvious that the distinction is greater among the immigrants from developing nations. Being an American writer, Jhumpa Lahiri described the American experiences of an Indian and also the vice versa. The culture shocks experienced by the chief characters of the stories were vividly represented through the stories. The complicated relationships and the familial detachment were the offshoots of diasporic elements which were frequently found in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri.

## **2. DIASPORA – A MULTI DIMENSIONAL STUDY**

The first story of the collection titled, “A Temporary Matter” deals with the life of an Indian couple in a foreign land. The author portrayed the uncertain marital bonding of the protagonists and their struggles to maintain the relationship. The characters were highly modernistic and depicted the contemporary immigrant life. The female protagonist of the story, Shoba has been described as an individual with self-identity and self-dependent. She was in contrast to the previous generation women who were dependent on their partner to take decisions. “His own mother had fallen to pieces when his father died, abandoning the house he grew up in and moving back to Calcutta, leaving Shukumar to settle it all. He liked that Shoba was different”(6). However, this self-dependent nature created a sense of detachment between them. The death of their new born child collapsed their affinity and the regret for the loss resulted in a kind of diaspora in which they started leading a life of seclusion from each other. Though they felt the disturbance in their bonding, no efforts were taken to sort it out and they decided to adapt to the silence. Shukumar who stayed in house throughout the day, realized the changes more than Shoba who goes out for work. Shukumar’s compliancy to the disillusionment of their love has been pointed out as, “He learned not to mind the silences”[1].

The author used the third person narrative point of view to capture the emotions of both the primary characters of the story. While most of the diasporic writings attempts to record the female perspectives in which the characters experience depression and painful solitude in a nation away from home, Jhumpa Lahiri reversed the roles of the characters and depicted the female character more self-dependent than the male. The aspect added to the post-modern touch of the story and also focused on the fact that diaspora is not gender-biased. Shukumar being brought by his mother with much Indian influence, wished to smell the Indian fragrance which he was unable to feel in a foreign land and his longing to cherish the Indian memories has been remarked as, “He wished now that he had his own childhood story of India”[1]. In contrast to his desire for India, his relatives in India always expressed their obsession towards the life in abroad. “For some reason my relatives always wanted me to tell them the names of my friends in America. I don’t know why the information was so interesting to them” [1]. The kind of diaspora represented in the story is more internal and sensitive as it deals with the familial relationship and love. The loss of the child which has been seen as remedy to their lonely life intensified the gap and drifted them apart. The author demonstrated the modern immigrant life style which has vacuum for strong bonding and affection. “But now she treated the house as if it were a

hotel”[1]. Shoba’s attitude towards her family life has been reflected through these words. Eventually she decided to move on to a separate apartment living away from her husband and such a decision was an unimaginable scenario in a country like India which has framed set of cultural principles for a family life. Though self-dependence is an essential modern thinking for a woman, the immigrant life seemed to hold it as a hurdle for familial love and cordial relationships. [2]

The next story, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” recorded the diasporic emotions of 1970s, the period in which modernism didn’t hit hard in the lives of Indian immigrants. The author depicted the emotions of an Indian girl, Lilia, who was unable to detach from her native history and the major happenings in her motherland. Though she was miles away from India, she was eager to gain knowledge on the major socio-political changes in her nation. The story focused on the post-independent period in India and the major changes that followed independence. The Partition of India was a significant historical event which resulted in chaos and mixed emotions among the Indian people. The author in this story recaptured the partition and its consequences in the perspective of an Indian immigrant family. The civil war after independence affected the secularism of the nation and the partition made the people as refugees who had to flee from their land in search of a new native land. Though Lilia family had no direct connection to these transformations of post-colonial India, their bonding towards the people of their mother land made them to grasp the sufferings and to empathize with them.

Lilia, the protagonist of the story, a ten-year-old girl had a great affinity towards the daily visitor of her house, Mr. Pirzada. He belonged to Dacca which was a part of India before partition. Lilia found him as a bridge that connected her with her native soil in a foreign land. A small keepsake box given by her grandmother was her only object of Indian memory and she stored the chocolates given by Pirzada safely in the box as precious gifts. She commented on the safebox as, “It was my only memento of a grandmother I had never known and until Mr. Pirzada came to our lives I could find nothing to put inside it”[1]. These words highlighted the significance of Mr. Pirzada in preserving the native sense in the everyday life of Lilia. When Pakistan had been separated from India, it was not easy for Lilia to accept the fact proclaimed by their parents that though he was a Bengali, his religious identity as a Muslim denied that he was an Indian. “Now that I had learned Mr. Pirzada was not an Indian, I began to study him with extra care, to try to figure out what made him different” [1].

Another diasporic factor represented in the story was the education received by the immigrant students. Though Lilia belonged to India, she was instructed to study the history of America which in no way interested her. She always wanted to read the history of her own nation, in spite of the fact that now she was an American citizen. With a strong sense of detachment, she memorized the history of America as her sense of belongingness was miles away from her house. In terms of time, India being eleven hours ahead of America, Lilia made a strong mental note that, “Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged” [1]. Though Pirzada left to reunite with his family, Lilia’s affinity towards him never changed, which in turn symbolized her longing to be connected with her native land. This, Jhumpa Lahiri beautifully portrayed the little girl’s immigrant experience to show another dimension of diaspora.[3]

“The Interpreter of Maladies”, another story in the collection handled different aspects of diaspora. The setting of the plot was India and the author tried to present the perspective of cultural shocks experienced by an Indian tourist guide, Mr. Kapasi. Though the tourists from America were of Indian origin, Mr. Kapasi was unable to find any traces of Indianness in them. On the other hand, he was stunned with their family setup and detachment from each other and his mind tended to compare their family with his own bonding towards his wife and children. “Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day: it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves”[1]. Through her character sketches and plot, the author tried to derive the distinction between the native and immigrant Indians’ cultural values. Mr. Kapasi has been portrayed as a typical Indian who felt cultural shocks in terms of dressing, traditions, calling others by the first name and so on. Towards the end of the story, Mr. Kapasi being an interpreter of physical maladies had also succeeded in interpreting the mental maladies of the family and he also accepted the reality of cultural differences.[4]

Jhumpa Lahiri’s another short story, “A Real Durwan” takes up the different diaporic theme of time. The protagonist, Boori Ma, a sixty-four years old lady had been depicted as a person who was struggling to come out of her past and cope up with modern changing times. Throughout the story, she frequently collected her memories of her bygone prosperous days and neglected to accept the realities of the present. “Most of all, the residents liked that Boori Ma, who slept each night behind the collapsible gate, stood guard between them and the outside world”[1]. These lines symbolized the aspect that Boori Ma lived as a mediator between the India of the past and the post-colonial India. The theme of the story coincided with the present struggles to adapt to the changes in the digitalized world and these problems with adaptating the modernity symbolizes the digital diaspora of the contemporary world. [5]

“Mrs. Sen’s” was a story which realistically portrayed the female diasporic agony and efforts to regain the native culture in a different cultural environment. The author demonstrated the feminine diasporic aspects through the experiences of Eliot, an American boy, with Mrs. Sen. The technique of employing a native character’s perspective to record the mental sufferings of an Indian immigrant woman, proved to be unique and effective. Being taken care of Mrs. Sen in the absence of her mother, Eliot was fond of Indian way of living and motherhood. He experienced a different emotional ride with Mrs. Sen and realized her disillusionment. The author used several symbols such as wooden blade, fish and letters from India to express the Indianness influencing the life of Mrs, Sen and her longing for the native land. The story also signified the myth and misconception of being an immigrant through the words of discontent uttered by Mrs. Sen “They think I live the life of a queen, Eliot...They think that I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace”[1]. As she wished to go back to her native land, her relatives in India had a misconception that the life in abroad was more luxurious and comfortable. Mrs. Sen’s obsession for her native land had been more precisely described through her frequent listening to the audio cassettes with the voices of her family members. [6]

### **3. ALIENATION – OFFSPRING OF DIASPORA**

In the story, “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”, Jhumpa Lahiri handled the theme of alienation. Alienation is also a part of diasporic emotions. The chief character of the story, Bibi Haldar had been suffered from alienation due to her physical ailments. She had been longing for true love

and affection as she was being ignored by her family members. The impacts of mental ailments were stronger and painful than the physical ailments. "Bibi had never been taught to be a woman; the illness had left her naive in most practical matters"[1]. The story presented an accurate picture of a woman alienated from the realities of the world and her longing to lead a normal life. The author ended the story with a positive note in which Bibi being blessed with a child and started a fresh journey of hopes.[5]

#### 4. CONCLUSION

On the whole, Jhumpa Lahiri's stories have been regarded as the scrutiny of various dimensions of diaspora starting from the inner circle to outer circle, to put it in other words, from individual alienation to immigrant ailments in a broader sense. The distinction between nativity and nationality can be similar to the emotions connected with the terms home and house. Though the immigrant life has space to live, nativity is the embodiment of sense of belongingness and warm relationships. Cultural distinction is a prominent feature often discussed in the diasporic writings. Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories, apart from analyzing this factor, also focus on the diaspora of time and community.

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