

SENSE OF ALIENATION AND WOMEN MIGRANTS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S SHORT STORIES

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Sense of alienation and estrangement has always been the major theme of diasporic writers and Jhumpa Lahiri's stories have this prevailing phenomenon in abundance. She not only talks about the immigrant experience in her works but also shows the psychology of her women and their cross cultural confrontation in vivid pictures. Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories are the interpretations of the meaning of hybridity and talk clearly about women experience being immigrants in an alien land. It depicts the experience of diaspora and acquaints its readers with the complexities and nuances of such an experience. The world that Lahiri portrays is set in motion against the cultural tension, anxiety and resultant dialogues that take place when two very different sections of the world. Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* abounds with male and female characters struggle to survive in the unfamiliar surroundings they are entangled in. Lahiri shows the diasporic struggle to keep hold of culture as characters create new lives in foreign cultures. The female protagonists of her stories represent first and second generation female immigrants who being submerged by the other culture and try to assimilate and as a consequence become hybrid. Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, paint a powerful picture of life in the Indian American Diaspora. She describes the lives of the first and second generations of Indian immigrants who have settled in America, most of her protagonists being second generation characters. These characters face the opportunities and challenges of belonging to two different cultures, and must continuously negotiate an intermediate position within and between two cultures. They occupy a middle ground which could easily turn into a battle ground between the Indian and the American parts of their identities, but the characters in her stories strive to maintain ties to both cultures, identifying themselves as Indian Americans. Thus, no matter how predominantly Indian or American they feel, Lahiri's characters still retain a sense of self as Indian Americans. The continuous renegotiation of their identities can be seen in these stories, offering an interesting perspective on the stories.

The Bengali men who come to the USA in order to study and work are all of marriageable age and they marry Bengali wives and bring them over. These wives form a significant group of immigrants, who in contrast with their husbands do not have any working career outside of the home, either as students or as working professionals. They are expected to cook, clean and otherwise care for their husbands and children, and their only success lies in the careers of their husbands and the extent to which their children excel. Many of these female first generation immigrants seem to turn into desperate housewives and detest suburban American life. Being suburban stay-at-home mother seems to equal an unhappy and isolated existence. Lahiri's women characters, many of whom were born and raised in the United States, were brought up in the Indian tradition and live their lives according to the parameters of

that tradition. The pushing and pulling between cultures results in much tension in the protagonists' lives as they attempt to mediate between old-world demands of tradition and new-world demands of contemporary living and relationship. Trapped in a loveless marriage leads the wife to attempt suicide. Her daughter comes to pity. This turn of events indicates that a major source of the unhappiness and loneliness that these women feel is due to their lack of an independent career and sense of alienation. When their children begin school and later move out, they are left to their own devices for most of the day, and do not have much to do except prepare the family's evening meal and watch soap operas, daily rituals that do not fulfil them.

Ruma's mother was equally miserable with life in the suburbs and her husband seems to feel guilty for not having provided her with a happier life. She raised two children in America and spoke to them exclusively in Bengali, made elaborate Indian meals and owned "more than two hundred saris" (17). These aspects of her life in America show how she was able to cling to the Indian ways of life. Mrs. Bagchi's example seems to indicate that if a Bengali first generation woman joins the work force she will naturally integrate into society and abandon many of the traditional Indian customs, such as dressing in saris. Mrs. Bagchi is an independent woman who has made a life for herself without the aid of a man, and here too she emerges as the exact opposite of Ruma's mother, who if she were widowed, would have moved in with her daughter instead of living by herself. Her mother and the desolate life that she leads with no other source of employment than housework. At one point when the wife complains about the loneliness of living in the suburbs, her husband merely suggests that she go back to Calcutta. This suggestion is more like an empty threat: if she is so unhappy, she can do as she pleases. He knows that going back to Calcutta by herself is not an option and his response might cause her to feel ashamed and angered by her dependency on him. Ruma's father recognises that Ruma is echoing her mother in making herself overly dependent on her husband, and that she is leading a life as an isolated stay-at-home-mother. This makes Ruma's father concerned that his daughter will become as unhappy as his wife was, and he wishes for a different life for her.

Ruma has been a hard-working, successful lawyer, earning six-figure sums. After the birth of Akash she came back to work in a part-time position, but after the sudden death of her mother she resigned and stays at home to care her child. She now uses the bookcase that used to hold her law books to store Akash's things, a choice which clearly shows how she has swapped a working career for being a full-time mother. Although she has made a conscious decision about not working anymore, a decision which means that her husband has to work all the more in order to finance the lifestyle to which they have become accustomed, she does not seem to be particularly proud of it. She has not told her father about her decision, and when asked about her plans for finding work in Seattle she admits to herself that she had not bothered to contact any firms in Seattle, not called up the trusts and estates attorney one of the partners at her old firm had given her the name of. This shows that she at some level feels guilty or shameful about staying away from work, maybe because she feels her talent is going to waste, but also because she is repeating the life that her mother led, a life that did not make her happy. Her father realizes this, and tries to persuade Ruma to go back to work. He is surprised to see his daughter staying away from professional life, as "she had worked for as long as he can remember" (40), and he warns her that she should go back to work so that all her hard work will not go to waste. In this advice he is not primarily worried for her for financial reasons, but rather is concerned about her happiness. He seems to be proud of how hard she has previously worked, and she shares this pride. She mentions several times

how hard she worked as a lawyer and how much money she made, details that show the pride that she used to take in her career, and how important it was to her sense of self. Mrs. Bagchi stands for the opposite choice in life from Ruma and all the other female characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*. She immigrated to the USA by herself, completed a doctorate in statistics and has been a lecturer at an American university for close to thirty years. By not going down the road of marriage and motherhood in America, she does not have to take anyone else into consideration. She has not even maintained ties to her Indian family, and she is regarded as “an anomaly, an Indian woman alone” (8).

Lahiri has portrayed the women in her stories in different shades. They are double displaced in her stories first being women and then as immigrants. Some are the women who represent first generation in America whereas some are the women who represent second generation there. The representatives of the first generation immigrants in the story *Unaccustomed earth* are Ruma’s parents and Mrs. Bagchi. Ruma’s parents came to the U.S. in search of better educational opportunities: after her father receives a PhD degree in biochemistry he finds a rewarding job in a pharmaceutical company, which allows the family to live in comfort. The mother remains at home, and she is only a passive participant in the pursuit of the Dream: her goal is to cultivate the homeland traditions in a foreign country. The economic stability the family achieves is part of the Dream that brought them to America. The feeling of satisfaction – happiness – which is a word frequently stressed by the narrative, is a crucial component of the Dream, an indicator of successful life. Ruma’s father, as he grows older, feels happier and happier with his life in America. Mrs. Bagchi is driven by a different dream when she enters America. She is also successful – she realizes her wish for freedom and independence. The woman escapes India for fear of being forced by her parents to re-marry after her beloved husband’s death. America offers a refuge to her and she can decide about her life there, unrestrained by conventions or customs. She receives a doctorate in statistics, becomes a lecturer at a university, and is fully independent in her life, even though in the eyes of an Indian community she is perceived as a freak and insane because she is a lonely Indian woman. Even though assimilating, the representatives of the first generation women immigrants are nevertheless cultural hybrids. They know their roots, but they also know that to achieve success they need to adapt to new cultural codes, which they inevitably do, because of the contact with another culture. The representative of the second generation depicted in the story is in a different situation. Ruma is an example of upward mobility. Well-educated, hardworking, she becomes a lawyer in New York. Her successful professional life is accompanied by equally thriving family life: an American husband, a three year-old son, Akash, another pregnancy and a new house on the west coast, in Seattle, where the family moves after Ruma’s husband receives another job. Suddenly, the pursuit of her American Dream comes to an abrupt pause and she resigns from most of the things she has achieved so far in her professional career and independence. She decides to take care solely of the family and household, but this does not bring her happiness, “Growing up, her mother’s example – moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household – had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma’s life now” (11). Ruma’s life between Indian and American culture is a constant negotiation between them. Her mother’s death makes her identify strongly with Indian heritage. Ruma lives immersed in the memories of her dead mother, and even though it contradicts her American upbringing, she starts imitating her example. She does not reject American clothes, taste for American food, nor does she use Bengali, her parents’ native language. She rejects something more fundamental: her independence, professional success, and sense of equality with her husband. She accepts her position

according to the Indian tradition: serving the husband as her mother always did it, being mainly a mother and a housewife. And still, although her husband generously accepts all her decisions, “nothing was making her happy” (7). Ruma is able to identify neither with her homeland India, nor with America, thus she suffers from “double displacement”. She suffers from her estrangement as a woman and as a second-generation. Her unwillingness to pursue the American Dream is indicative of her problems with identity. It informs of her lack of belonging, which is emphasized in the narrative by her movement, going on “routes” rather than growing “roots” – she left her home in Pennsylvania to work in New York and then moved with her family to Seattle. The position of in-betweenness, living between two cultures, is uncomfortable and confusing for her.

“Unaccustomed Earth” is the short story told through the point of view of Ruma, a second generation Bengali woman whose mother passed away. Ruma had grown up with contempt for her mother and her traditional ways, but after her passing, Ruma sees her mother as familiar, as home, and as a vital part of her identity construction. Just as she felt unbearable loss at her mother’s passing, so she felt lost when her father sold their childhood home. In contrast, her brother and father are depicted as “citizens of the world” with little need or desire for the roots that Ruma desperately wants. She wants to maintain the sense of herself that she has built off of her connection to her mother; however she fears that this connection will compromise her ability to negotiate intimacy and space. By the end of the story, Ruma realizes that her father has managed to develop a relationship with another woman while keeping in memory his late wife. He plants her favourite flower in the garden at the same time as he attempts to send a postcard to his new companion. He is, effectively able to maintain the roots that are important to him while embracing a life of uprootedness and alternative intimacies. In this scene Lahiri hints at Ruma’s reconciliation of her desire for roots and her desire for a home of her own. “Unaccustomed garden” signifies Ruma’s dislocation and lack of belonging. It shows the sense of strangeness, lack of roots and the need to grow them, the need to make the unaccustomed earth – America – familiar.

The story “Hell-Heaven” brings forth the psyche of narrator’s mother Aparna, a Bangali married woman who is inclined towards a male family friend named Pranab Chakraborty. The narrator says that her father was nine years older than her mother. An age gap due to which she found herself inclined towards Pranab who was quite younger to her father. The short story “Hell-Heaven” is told through the point of view of a second-generation Bengali girl whose mother is trying to adjust to living in America with her family. In the first scene, Lahiri depicts the kind of unpredictable encounters upon which diasporic intimacy thrives as well as the typical role women play in producing intimacy in Diaspora. An intimacy develops between the narrator’s family and a Bengali man because he recognizes that they are Bengali while walking through Cambridge. Because he is Bengali, he is invited to the family table where he becomes a member of the family.

For Pranab, Aparna, the mother, is like an example for all that is familiar and comforting. When he sees her, he cannot mistake her familiarity as a Bengali woman because she dresses like one, talks like one, and even has the “full round face and large dark eyes that are so typical of Bengali women” (61). For Pranab, she embodies home and homeland. In the space of home is where Aparna negotiates this intimacy with Pranab. He brings a sense of Bengali community to her life when he drops by without calling and recalls the neighbourhood where they grew up. She discovers that because of their shared past in India, she is more familiar with him than with her husband. In the space of home is where Aparna negotiates this intimacy with Pranab. He brings a sense of Bengali community to her life when he drops by without

calling and recalls the neighbourhood where they grew up. She discovers that because of their shared past in India, she is more familiar with him than with her husband. Though she cannot act on her potential desire to be with Pranab, she uses the space of home to play out her legitimate intimacy with a fellow Bengali. The presence of the daughter in the home enables her to meet him without breaking any rules. Aparna experiences another loss of “home” and the intimacy that she had created when a white woman, Deborah, enters the picture and becomes the other against which Aparna constructs her image of familiarity and family. Both Pranab and Deborah are banished from Aparna’s land of domesticity. She breaks the teacup that she used to set out for Pranab’s cigarette ashes when he decides to marry Deborah, effectively breaking a symbol of his welcome in her home. When Aparna receives birth announcements for Pranab’s children, she does not display them on the fridge or preserve them in an album. These gestures, though seemingly private and small, are Aparna’s attempt to negotiate different modes of intimacy in an unfamiliar home.

The women struggle more than the men while assimilating in foreign land is depicted by Lahiri in her stories. The struggle of assimilation in foreign land is shown by Aparna and her daughter Usha. Aparna’s daughter struggles with the pressures she faces of a “home” (India) that is not her home, with rules of intimacy that do not align with her experiences in America, and who should be included in her family. Aparna’s daughter too comes to the realization that she does not have to choose between opposites to have the family and life that she wants. She is a child of her parents and “American as well” (82). The dilemma of uprootedness and immigration affects much the life of the children of this couple. The children brought up in the American Culture resent the trips to India. The children face the two conflicting cultures, Indian at home and American outside home. As they grow, they tend to pick up American manners more and neglect the Indian resulting in more worry and anxiety of their parents concerning the future and their children.

Both the first and second generation of Bengali women had the opportunity to resist the pressures placed on them to maintain different ideas of home (Aparna by suicide and her daughter by completely rejecting her family), but the end of the narrative suggests an acceptance of the dual identities and modes of intimacy they share as well as a commitment to renegotiate the space of home and family.

“Mrs. Sen’s” is a short story in Jhumpa Lahiri’s book *Interpreter of Maladies*. It revolves around Mrs. Sen, a thirty year old woman who had a small gap between her teeth, and faded pockmarks on her chin and beautiful eyes. She has been depicted as a baby-sitter for Eliot--an eleven year old boy. Before Mrs. Sen, Eliot was taken care by a university student, named Abby--a slim, freckled girl and then by an older woman--Mrs. Linden. While Abby moved to another university, Mrs. Linden was fired by Eliot’s mother as her thermos had more whiskey than coffee. It was one fine day when Eliot’s mother could find Mrs. Sen who was the professor’s wife, and called herself responsible and kind. On telephone Eliot’s mother told Mrs. Sen that Eliot was eleven and he could feed and entertain himself. She just wanted an adult in the house, in case of an emergency. Mrs. Sen lived in a university apartment located on the fringes of the campus and she wanted Eliot to be brought to her house as she could not drive. Eliot, after school, enjoyed at Mrs. Sen’s house for various reasons. He found her house warm in contrast to his own tiny beach house where they required portable heater, and even sealed the windows with plastic sheets and a hair drier. He especially enjoyed watching Mrs. Sen as she chopped florets, slices, and shreds with the blade which she brought from India. Eliot loved seeing Mrs. Sen’s skill which she showed while

cutting things and was astonished that she kept an eye on the television and an eye on Eliot, without keeping an eye on the blade. And more so, she kept Eliot busy by supplying him with the comics section of the newspaper, and crackers spread with peanut butter, and sometimes a Popsicle, or carrot sticks sculpted with her blade. Eliot even enjoyed listening to the incidents which Mrs.Sen narrated about India. JhumpaLahiri has shown the desolation in the hearts of those women who are migrants and miss their home-India. Mrs.Sen represents the life of all those Indian women who feel nostalgic by thinking of their motherland. Mrs.Sen misses the feeling of empathy which she experienced in her childhood in India, and recollects the occasions when women used to gather gossip and work together sharing their joys and sorrows. Gradually much understanding had already developed between Mrs.Sen and Eliot. Each afternoon Mrs.Sen waited eagerly beneath a pine tree on the main road for Eliot to come back from school, and even Eliot could sense the interest which she took in receiving him. While walking back from the bus stop, Mrs.Sen offered him either sandwiches, or peeled wedges of an orange, or lightly salted peanuts. After receiving him, she used to practice driving for twenty minutes, with Eliot sitting beside her. Eliot could develop empathy with Mrs.Sen and could realize the two things that made her happy: One was the arrival of a letter from her family and the other was fish from the seaside.

Eliot could observe the change in Mrs.Sen's behaviour because she missed the life in India, missed her family, and the language which they spoke. One day she played a tape and could identify each speaker, her third uncle, her cousin, her father, and her grandfather. But Mrs.Sen never made Eliot realize that the whole day he was without her mother. His mother was also satisfied with the care which Mrs.Sen took at her house. It was one noon when Eliot's mother said that he was a big boy then, and could manage alone in the beach. So it was the last afternoon Eliot spent with Mrs.Sen, or with any baby-sitter. Eliot could accept the practicality of life in a positive way because of the inspiration which he derives from Mrs.Sen during his stay with her in her warm house, and expressed readiness to face the real challenge in life.

In "Year's End" we encounter Dr.Chaudhuri's second wife, Chitra, who has a hard time adjusting to suburban life in America. She is scared of being alone in the house, and does not know or care for American traditions. When Kaushik suggests that she learn to drive, she answers:Oh, no, " she said, not as if she were incapable, but as if driving were beneath her. „I would not like to learn" (270).This reluctance to interact with American society in one of the only ways possible for a wife living in a remote, suburban area, indicates how alienated Chitra feels in America. Here she is on the same page as several of the other first generation wives that we encounter in Lahiri'sfiction.In*Interpreter of Maladies*, Mrs.Sens's reluctance to learn how is a signifier of how unhappy and alienated she feels in America, and ultimately becomes her downfall. These examples show that just as entering the American work place, driving a car is also an alien practice, reserved for their husbands. However, Chitra's background is different from these other first generation wives in that she had a career in India. Chitra used to be a primary school teacher "in her former life" (262), a statement which signals that marrying, having children and moving to America makes a female working career impossibility, something that is inconceivable now that she is reborn as a Bengali homemaker in America. Kaushik notices that her demeanour is still that of a primary school teacher, an observation that makes one regret that she is not able to pursue the career that she is clearly well-suited for. As with the other Bengali wives, it seems that staying home with children instead of pursuing a career in America makes integration in society more difficult. Although we do not learn how Chitra feels about her new life in America, being married to a

man who spends all day at work and living in a remote area make it likely that she too will become familiar with the loneliness and desparateness that is experienced by the other first generation wives in Unaccustomed Earth. At the end of the story, Chitra is described as “chafing” under hersolitary existence, and the family moves to a more urban area (293).

JhumpaLahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* forms part of her first published collection-- Interpreter of Maladies. This story shows the mysterious character of Mrs. Das a bangali married woman and an immigrant who comes in contact with Mr.Kapasi, the tour guide for tourists, who visited India of their ancestors. Mr.Kapasi has been depicted as an interpreter of maladies, not only for the tourists, but also for the patients who interacted in Gujarati with the doctor where he worked as part time. The state of tourists and the patients have been equated as both suffer from an illness, a feeling of unease in their lives. Mr. and Mrs. Das (Raj and Mina), an American family is guided by Mr.Kapasi during their visit to the Konarak temple. Mr.Kapasi feels that just like his life, romance was missing between Mr. and Mrs. Das. He gets allured by the beauty and simplicity of Mrs.Das who shows much interest in his profession of interpretation and calls it as romantic and enquires about the cases which he could sort out of his intellectual capacity. This makes Mr.Kapasi wonder if Mr. and Mrs. Das was a bad match, just as he and his wife were. Her sudden interest in him, an interest she did not express in either her husband or her children, was slightly powerful.

Mr. and Mrs. Das, who were not even thirty, had two sons named Ronny and Bobby, and one daughter Tina. Mr Das is a clean shaven man looked exactly like a magnified version of Ronny, the older of the two boys Das. It was when Mr. Das along with three children gets down the car to look at the monastic dwellings at the hill top, Mr.Kapasi gets a chance to interact with Mrs. Das, who then asks Mr.Kapasi to be an interpreter of her malady and suggest some kind of remedy. She narrates to him that all eight years; she had been in pain thinking of the guilt which she had committed by making relations with her husband’s Punjabi friend, who had come to stay with them for a week. Mr.Kapasi is astonished to hear the revelation of the fact that Raj was not the father of Bobby and Mrs Das had conceived Bobby in the afternoon on a sofa when husband’s friend had made love to her swiftly, in silence. When she confesses to Mr.Kapasi about the guilt she feels looking at Bobby, Mr.Kapasi thinks to act as a mediator between the husband and wife, and feels that the confession to the husband could only ease out the wife of her guilt. But when Bobby was attacked by monkeys, Mr.Kapasi realizes the love and emotions in the heart of Mr. and Mrs. Das for each other and the children. Mr. Das exhibits the selfless love for Bobby, unaware of the fact that he was not his son. Mrs. Das on seeing Bobby being injured wanted to take her children back to the hotel. Mr.Kapasi’s address which Mrs. Das had taken few hours back, flutters away in the wind making Mr.Kapasi realizes that the bondage still existed in the family in which there was no place for him to exist.

But the strange shade of a woman is seen through this story of Lahiri. Mrs. Das, the Indian tourist, born and brought up in America allures the interpreter of maladies by her exotic appearance but he is put in the impossible of situation of interpreting a malady he does not understand. Here Lahiri captures the strange world of Indian foreigners in their native land through the eyes of Mr.kapasi. Marriages and their discontents being one of Lahiri’s major themes, Mrs. Das “who had already fallen out of love with life” (66) does not surprise us as she reveals to a stranger that one of her son was caused by another man. She switches on the fantasy world of Mr.Kapasi and the dreadfulness of hope that flits away as he is called to

interpret a malady that threatens life's neat little organization called marriage makes this story apart of the typical Lahiri world.

Many diverse women inhabit this Lahiri world and she has woven the different characters of these women in her short stories. The sheer Bengalingness of Mrs. Sen, Aparna's possessiveness for a Bengali man, Ruma's suffering of double displacement, Mrs. Das's strange malady and Mrs. Sen's sense of alienation show that Lahiri represents her female characters in different hues. Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, paints a powerful picture of women. She describes the lives of the first and second generations of Indian immigrant women also who have settled in America, most of her protagonists being second generation characters. These characters face the opportunities and challenges of belonging to two different cultures, and must continuously negotiate an intermediate position within and between two cultures. They occupy a middle ground which could easily turn into a battle ground between the Indian and the American parts of their identities, but the characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* strive to maintain ties to both cultures, identifying themselves as Indian Americans. Thus, no matter how predominantly Indian or American they feel, Lahiri's characters still retain a sense of self as Indian Americans. The continuous renegotiation of their identities is the main feature of her stories, offering an interesting perspective to them. There is no one single way of representing the diasporic trauma involved in negotiating female identities either as female immigrants or female natives. Each individual, from Mrs. Sen to Aparna has their own means of survival; one resists while the other accepts; one acculturates whereas the other escapes. No doubt, all such reactions are due to the existence of negotiable identities which are always in the process of becoming and changing. Female characters of Lahiri's fiction negotiate their new unstable identities through their own different means and their own individual voice.

Lahiri's short stories represent the themes of cross-cultural situations and sense of alienation which create a natural opportunity to compare the presence of juxtaposed cultural values. Lahiri recounts the lives of Indians and Indian Americans who are caught between the culture they inherited and the world in which they now find themselves. The collection also looks at loneliness and how people try to avert it. Within stories Lahiri sets up contrasts between characters to highlight her views about human nature and relationships. The collections transmit cultural knowledge through various stories that depict variety of plots and the diverse society of immigrants. It attempts to focus on many different characters, places and plots within the same historical and cultural context. These characters exquisitely detail the thoughts of one individual about a period of his or her life. They are defined by isolation of some form or other like husbands is isolated from wives; immigrants are isolated from their families and their homes; children are isolated from their parents; and people are isolated from the communities in which they live. The lives in these stories end with a sense of loss. In their alienation and isolation they feel that they are missing something vital to their identities.

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