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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC STUDIES

ISSN: 1305-578X

Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 17(3), 2214-2219; 2021

Studying Diaspora Through Lilia And Eliot In Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter Of Maladies

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APA Citation:

Aparna Sri, V., & Akash, S. (2021). Studying Diaspora through Lilia and Eliot in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(3), 2214-2219.

Submission Date:08/10/2021

Acceptance Date:22/12/2021

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian American Diasporic writer, was born in London and grew up in Rhode Island to Indian immigrant parents from Calcutta. Her focus is mainly on Indian Bengalis and their diasporic experience. She writes about the first- and second-generation immigrants where the migrant parents try to maintain their original culture and expect their American-born children to abide by their traditions instead of adapting to the foreign culture. Her characters undergo a situation where they cannot cut off their ties with their cultural homeland and also experience the dilemma of adapting to their new culture. The uncertainties and insecurities in the foreign land are represented well in her works. The stories guide the characters toward the possibilities for cross-cultural communion among the Indians and Americans. Lahiri thus deciphers the places and times, individuals and families and traditions in her books. This article analyses the diasporic experience through the eyes of Lilia in *When Mr Pirzada came to Dine* and Eliot in *Mrs Sen in Interpreter of Maladies*.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, Lilia and Eliot, Interpreter of Maladies, Diaspora.

1. Introduction

The word diaspora has its origin in the Greek word, and it means "to disperse". Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define diaspora as "the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions." Robert Cohen defines diasporas as a community of people living in one country who "acknowledge that the old country- a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore- always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions." diaspora talks about the various experience undergone by the diaspora during their settlement in the foreign land. It deals with cultural dilemmas, displacement, and first and second-generation conflict among Indian parents and American children. To adapt and assimilate to their new land, they redesign their identities according to the Indian American identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri writes about the diaspora's issues, including displacement, fragmentation, isolation, rootlessness, discrimination, marginalization, and identity crisis. Aruti Nayar observes in her article

about Jhumpa Lahiri that “Lahiri negotiates the dilemmas of the cultural spaces lying across the continents with a master’s touch. Though endowed with a distinct universal appeal, her stories bring out rather successfully the predicament of the Indians who traipse between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind. The other encountered but not necessarily assimilated” (qt in Kaur 194). Apart from writing about the diaspora experiences, she also writes about the ways to look beyond for the diaspora to adapt and assimilate into the new country. This she has shown in “The Third and Final Continent.”

About her debut collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, she said that “... When I was putting the collection together, I knew from the beginning that this had to be the title story, because it best expresses, thematically, the predicament at the heart of the book- the dilemma, the difficulty, and often the impossibility of communicating emotional pain and affliction to others as well as expressing it to ourselves” (qt in Kalaimathi 190). Jhumpa Lahiri as a writer, feels that she is also an interpreter who interprets the emotions of the diasporas. The book contains nine stories with the subtitle “Stories of Bengal, Boston, and Beyond”. Amy McCurdy states, “A common thread running through Lahiri’s collection of stories is the experience of being foreign ... those trying to adapt to an unfamiliar world don’t always succeed. Some are homesick, many are misunderstood.” (qt in Kalaimathi 190)

There is hardly any solution to the pain undergone by this migration. Jhumpa Lahiri, being herself an expatriate pens down all such intricate details about the immigration problems faced even by the immigrants who voluntarily chose to move out of their country. She expresses the emotional psyche that the diaspora experiences because of migration. A professional job leads a man to move away from his motherland; like wise, marriage and family force a woman to move out of her motherland. Usually, the Indian culture shows a man working for his family, and the woman will take care of her children, in-laws and family members. However, the western culture is entirely different. Characters in her stories find it hard to cope with their new land and a new identity. They are forced to resist culture shock and adjust to the generation gap, which sometimes becomes unbearable for them to justify. Shuba Mukherjee also says, “she illustrates how the younger generation departs from the constriction of the previous devoted expatriates but in doing so, she also points out, how they break loose from strong societal, emotional and psychological attachment” (180). Her characters are placed in a liminal zone. This liminal space is considered the place where the transition takes place.

When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine, he dealt with the suffering of people from East Pakistan when it was a part of Pakistan. This story is written based on the postcolonial subject. It is about Mr Pirzada’s anxiety regarding his family in Bangladesh during his research work in America. Pirzada was a lecturer at the university in Dacca. His wife and seven daughters live in Dacca. He left for the United States during the civil war between Bangladesh and Pakistan. During this war, women were tortured, and it was reported that the army killed lakhs of people during the war. During his stay in America, he befriended an Indian immigrant family and spent time with them every evening. Their daughter Lilia is the narrator of this story. He takes dinner with them and watches the news regarding Dacca and India. Though Pirzada is from Dacca, Lilia found his appearance and behaviour similar to his parents: they spoke the same language, and like most Indians, they took rice for dinner and ate with their hands. The author gives the difference between the luxurious life in America and the life of commotion led by Indians. Lilia’s parents are happy that their daughter is assured of a secure life and a quality education. Pirzada longs for his homeland and lives a life of exile in America. He carried a pocket watch that showed the local time in Dacca. When the war broke out between India and Pakistan over the issue of independence of Bangladesh, Lilia prayed for his wife and seven daughters in Dacca. When the war

ended in Dacca, he left for Dacca, and a few months later, he communicated to Lilia's family that they were safe and happy.

Mrs. Sen babysits an eleven-year-old boy named Eliot. Mr. Sen is a Mathematics professor. So, Mrs Sen spends her time alone in her house. She feels aloof and alienated in her host country. She spends her time talking about her memories with Eliot. Food is one of the significant themes in this story. For Mrs. Sen, everything is in India. She finds the silence in America terrible; she feels tough to drive the car in the Boston traffic. Hence to cope with her loneliness, she chops vegetables and cooks food. She refers to India as her home. Eliot empathizes with her agony of being alienated in this new country. She lives in a world of nostalgia and memories from India.

Let us look at the experiences of diaspora through the eyes of Lilia and Eliot. Here Lilia is a second-generation Indian immigrant born to Indian immigrant parents who observes her parents and Mr Pirzada's behaviour. Eliot, on the other hand, is an American who observes Mrs Sen's ideologies toward America and her nostalgia for India.

Lilia is the narrator of the story. Lilia says that a man named Mr. Pirzada, from Dacca, the capital of Bangladesh came to their house. He has seven daughters and a wife in Dacca. All their names start with A, and he says it is their mother's idea. Mr Pirzada shows their picture that he has kept in his wallet where all are seated in a row with their legs crossed, eating rice with chicken curry. The picture is taken during one of their picnics. He is in America to research the foliage of New England with the help of a grant funded by the Pakistan government. Lilia says that the fund given by the government was a privilege, but when the money was converted into dollars, it was not a significant amount. This indicates America's economic power in terms of foreign currency. After collecting data from Vermont and Maine in the summer, he moved to a university in Boston during the autumn. He lived in a dormitory. He did not have a television or stove in his room. By pointing out the living condition of a researcher, Lilia tries to indicate the lives of a diaspora. The narrator is telling the incident in 1971, during which Dacca was fighting for its independence from Pakistan. In March, Dacca was invaded and torched by the Pakistani army. Many people died in the summer. Lilia's parents invited him home by searching for their Indian acquaintances at the university. They do this to befriend people of their origin. Every evening Mr Pirzada comes to their home to share their meals. Lilia observes her parents saying that the supermarket does not have mustard oil, neighbours never come to their house without an invitation, and they cannot make a phone call to their doctors. Unable to understand the new culture, her parents searched for Indian surnames in the University directory, thus making many friends from India.

Lilia does not remember the first or second visits of Mr Pirzada. Only later did she get accustomed to his presence that she poured water from the Pitcher for the guest. Her father said he is no more Indian as the country was divided into Hindu and Muslim during the 1947 partition. Hence Mr Pirzada belongs to Pakistan and not India. However, it did not make any sense to Lilia as Mr Pirzada and her parents spoke the same language, looked alike and laughed at the same jokes, ate their food with their hands, and ate pickled mangoes like her parents Mr. Pirzada also removed his shoes before entering their house, after dinner, they chewed fennel seeds for digestive purpose, they did not drink alcohol, for dessert they ate plain biscuits with tea. However, her father insisted she understood the difference between them. He taught her the difference using a map, but her mother insisted that Lilia need not know all those details. Her mother always feels proud about her daughter being born in America. According to her estimation, Lilia was assured of a safe life, good education, and good opportunities around the corner. She need not have to eat rationed rice, obey curfews, or watch riots from the balcony, protect people from the riots, not study in the lantern lights, and Lilia need not worry about the pressures in schools regarding the

board exams. Lilia's mother is happy with her daughter's life in America and wishes that her daughter need not know anything about that part of the country. Lilia's father asks her what they learn at school, and Lilia says they learn American history and geography. They begin by studying the American war. They were also taken on historical trips to Plymouth Rock; they were let to walk the freedom trail, they climbed Bunker Hill monument, they made dioramas out of coloured construction paper, they made puppets of King George, and finally, they were given maps to mark the thirteen colonies which Lilia could do with her eyes closed.

Every day Mr Pirzada comes to their house at 6'o clock. She observes him as follows "each evening he appeared in ensembles of plums, olives, and chocolate browns. He was a compact man and though his feet were perpetually splayed, and his belly slightly wide, he nevertheless maintained an efficient posture, as if balancing in either hand two suitcases of equal weight. His ears were insulated by tufts of graying hair that seemed to block out the unpleasant traffic of life..." (IOM 28).

Lilia observes the man thoroughly; she notices the inside of the coat stitched with the phrase "Z Sayeed, Suitors". Sometimes he would have tucked a birch or a maple leaf inside his pocket. Once he arrives, he removes his shoes and leaves them on the baseboard. He follows her father, and they sit together in the drawing room to watch the evening news. It is time for the Indian diaspora to discuss their motherland and share their memories. During this time, her mother will bring mincemeat kebabs with coriander chutney, a typical food among the Indians which adds taste to their conversations. They discuss the fight that is going on in Dacca. Mr Pirzada gives candy very often. One day when Mr Pirzada offered a lollipop, she said thank you. Mr Pirzada was so astonished to hear the word thank you. He asked why everyone was thanking them; even when the connection to Dacca fails, the lady says a thank you. He exclaims, "If I am buried in this country, I will be thanked, no doubt at my funeral." (IOM 29). Lilia, grateful for the candies, felt it inappropriate for her to eat them casually. So, she would eat candy every night and pray for Mr Pirzada's and his family's wellbeing. Before eating, Mr Pirzada takes a silver watch from his pocket and keeps it on the table. Before eating, he has set the watch to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead. Lilia realizes he is not an Indian, and she observes him even more keenly to see the difference between her parents and him. Lilia imagines that all their activities are a shadow of what had already happened in Mr Pirzada's Dacca. Everyone sits before the tv for the national news, Lilia sees the catastrophe of war; she sees the tanks rolling on the streets, destroyed buildings and houses, and newspaper offices set ablaze; simultaneously, she watches Mr Pirzada, who observes the news very carefully. However, on the following day, no one spoke about it in school. They continued to learn about the American Revolution and injustices of taxation and studied the declaration of American independence. One day in the library Lilia tried to read a book on Pakistan, but Mrs Kenyon appeared and asked Lilia to work on her project. Lilia feels the inconsiderate behaviour of the Americans towards the outside world.

At home, she has become very much used to the conversations between her parents and Mr Pirzada; they discuss political issues and anticipate the birth of the new nation on the other side of the world. They played scrabble even at eleven' o clock at night, and then he walked to his dormitory. Despite being in that place for many months, Mr Pirzada was unaware of American customs and traditions. Because Mr Pirzada was constantly thinking about his family, he was unaware of the country he was currently living in. He asked about the orange vegetable that was kept outside each house. Lilia's mother says it is a pumpkin that has to be decorated for Jack o lantern during Halloween. They all sat together to decorate the pumpkin. Mr Pirzada moved the knife and carved the pumpkin with all ease. Dora and Lilia were ready to go out for trick or treat. Mr Pirzada was worried about the girls going alone on the streets. He inquired about the safety of the girls, and Lilia's mother assured him about their safety, saying

that on this, all the kids would be out for trick or treat. Lilia could feel Mr Pirzada's anticipation and assured him about her safety. She also feels guilty for saying that phrase for her own sake and could not assure his family's safety. While observing Mr Pirzada being an American on the streets during Halloween, several people said to her in astonishment that they were seeing an Indian witch for the first time. Lilia realizes she is only seen as an Indian, not an American. Reaching home, Lilia was upset seeing the broken pumpkin.

Expecting her parents and Mr Pirzada to grieve with her, she saw no one accompany her; instead, they were all seated on the sofa. The war was declared on December 4. The United States joined with West Pakistan, and the Soviet Union joined with India to help East Pakistan for its independence. Twelve days passed, the Pakistan army weakened, and the war ended with the birth of a new country Bangladesh. Mr Pirzada flew back to Dacca to find his family. Lilia does not remember his last visits to her house like she does not remember his first visits. Later they received a letter from Mr Pirzada saying that his family was safe and they were all together. He also thanked them for their hospitality during his visits to their house. Lilia, though, finds it unnecessary to eat candy, for Mr Pirzada's family feels much relieved for them. She also realizes what it is to miss someone. Now Lilia understands the emotional psyche of her parents, Mr Pirzada and the diaspora.

Like Lilia, Eliot, an American, observes Mrs Sen, his Indian caretaker. Mrs Sen's husband is a maths professor at a university. She engages in this activity in order to keep herself away from loneliness. Eliot's mother leaves him in Mrs Sen's home. Mrs Sen picks him up after school; she takes care of him so well that she carries some sandwiches or orange wedges to the bus stop. Mrs Sen talks about India and Calcutta, where her home is. For her, everything is in India. She complains about Americans as they do not socialize much like Indians. In Calcutta, when there is a function, all the neighbours gather together and help them in all possible ways. They no need any telephone as they speak through their windows. They gather together and gossip and laugh. She misses the happy memories of Calcutta. Eliot observes her vegetable cutting, where she does it with so much ease. She maintains her kitchen. She talks about fish that is available fresh in Calcutta, where it is much good in America. She says in Calcutta, they eat fish twice a day. She shows her sarees from India. She also talks about the richness of India.

By now, Eliot realizes that her home means India. Mrs Sen refuses to learn to drive, and she says that in India, they hire a driver to drive them to places wherever they want. She is afraid to drive. One day her intense desire to buy fresh fish made her take the car. However, to her dismay, she and Eliot meet with an accident. From then onwards, Eliot stopped coming home. However, she misses Mrs Sen because she is vibrant and her sharp cooking skills. She makes rich dishes at home. She is also brightly dressed. Eliot compares his mother with Mrs Sen and misses Mrs Sen's home; now, he is alone

2. Conclusion

Thus, Jhumpa Lahiri sketches the trauma undergone by each individual in a foreign country. In this story, she finely portrays the views of an Indian immigrant parent, second generation Indian- American Lilia and a migrant who gets back to his family in Dacca. Beyond the identity crisis, this story's trauma of missing home and family is intense, proving that Jhumpa Lahiri is a realistic diasporic writer.

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