

Relocating Oneself Beyond Barriers

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Abstract

*South-Asian diasporic authors write out of their specific cultural, individual and collective needs that relate to their experiences of racism, ethnic discrimination and sexism in the new space. The task at hand is to re-structure and re-constitute alien paradigms to suit the spaces inhabited by the immigrant. Immigrant writing involves a powerful “presencing” of source and host cultures. There are indeed variations within the immigrant groups in terms of the degree of retention of ethnic cultural values, the behavioural patterns and the degree of accommodation arrived at with the demands of the host culture. These various facets of immigrant experience, that are thrown into focus as a result of cross-cultural encounter, point to the shared experiences of the immigrant communities, which constitute the ethos of the diaspora. Diaspora is an important conceptual tool because it highlights the multiple standpoints borne of migration and displacement. It illuminates an ambivalent politics of positioning and being positioned, of identification and being identified. In her debut collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*, also called, “stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond”, Jhumpa Lahiri probes deeply into the maladies of cultural dislocation and the consequential emotional trauma. This paper analyses four short stories titled “A Temporary Matter”, “The Third and Final Continent”, “Mrs. Sen’s” and “Interpreter of Maladies” in the anthology and attempts to trace how the immigrants who vacillate between two cultures overcome the identity crisis they face.*

Keywords: Identity, Cultural Dislocation, Displacement, Other, Diaspora, Positioning

South-Asian diasporic authors write out of their specific cultural, individual and collective needs that relate to their experiences of racism, ethnic discrimination and sexism in the new space. The task at hand is to re-structure and re-constitute alien paradigms to suit the spaces inhabited by the immigrant. Immigrant writing involves a powerful “presencing” of source and host cultures. There are indeed variations within the immigrant groups in terms of the degree of retention of ethnic cultural values, the behavioural patterns and the degree of accommodation arrived at with the demands of the host culture. The first generation is often more concerned with preserving their native cultural traits, while the priority of the second generation is assimilation into the host culture. Core values include marriage, dating, courtship, education, respect for elders, religion etc. while peripheral values include food habits, dress code, language etc. In general, the first-generation immigrants are particular about retaining their ethnic cultural heritage especially in core values and they try to transmit these to the next generation. They are more accommodating with regard to peripheral values like dress, food habits and language spoken at home. First generation immigrants are wary against their cultural values being devalued in the dominant society. This is more pronounced in gender relations.

In her debut collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*, also called, “stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond”, the Indo-British writer Jhumpa Lahiri probes deeply into the maladies of cultural dislocation and the consequential emotional trauma. While trying to highlight the cultural differences encountered

by the characters, the author “deftly deals with the intercultural miscommunication and emerges as a capable interpreter of the emotional pain and suffering of her characters” (Dubey 68). The stories show how it becomes necessary to acknowledge the inherent merits of one’s native culture, which is in constant conflict with the adopted culture. The select stories in the anthology, present a broad canvas wherein the positive and negative relationships are juxtaposed. Values like love, compassion, kindness and humanity have immense significance to the characters in their homeland and hostland.

“A Temporary Matter”, the first story in the collection, depicts the alienation and loneliness experienced by immigrants in a foreign land. It shows the marital discord in the life of a young couple Shoba and Shukumar, brought about by the pre-natal loss of their child. The story is confined to five days, when there will be no electricity for an hour, which is the temporary matter indicated by the title.

When the story begins, it is clear that the couple Shoba and Shukumar live like strangers under the same roof. Shoba works in an office downtown, where she searches for typographical errors. Shukumar is in the sixth year of his graduate school. Their conjugal life, which is marked by happiness during the early years of marriage, attains fruition with the conception of the child. But the happiness ends with the pre-natal death of the child. The dramatic change following the event is clearly depicted in the following words:

They weren’t like this before. Now he had to struggle to say something that interested her, something that made her look up from her plate, or from her proof-reading files. Eventually he gave up trying to amuse her. He learned not to mind the silences. (Lahiri 12)

Power cut, one of the temporary matters in the story, is what brings the estranged couple close as, “something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again” (Lahiri 19). Shoba, who remembers how they used to play games and exchange jokes in India during the dark hours, suggests that they should narrate events from their lives, which they have never told before. To Shoba, the dark hour is so special, as it is the time

to recollect her glorious childhood days in India. The strange game that ensues in the darkness very soon turns “into an exchange of confessions-the little ways they’d hurt or disappointed each other and themselves” (Lahiri 18). One interesting aspect in this game is the willingness and patience with which the couple listens to each other’s confessions. Shoba tells him, how she has looked into his address book to see if he has written her address there, when they have been newly acquainted. Shukumar, in his turn, tells her about how he has once come closest to infidelity when he ripped out a photo of a woman in one of the fashion magazines and has felt an intense desire for her.

In addition to confession during the dark hours, they indulge in some amount of love-making on the fourth night “with a desperation they had forgotten” (Lahiri 19). Eventually, Shukumar starts looking forward to power failure so that he is really disappointed when the electric company informs him that the line has been repaired ahead of schedule. On the fifth day, a startling revelation comes from Shoba when she says that she is going to leave Shukumar. She has signed a lease for a separate accommodation, which she has been looking for some time. Even a physical relationship cannot bring the couple emotionally close. The marriage bond which is considered “sacred in India, is gradually slithering down under the pressure of new needs under a different background” (A.K. Mukherjee 110).

The climax of the story is reached when Shukumar makes the final confession about the sex of the still born child. He keeps it a secret as Shoba has wanted it to be a surprise. Shukumar tells her: “Our baby was a boy. His skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighed almost five pounds. His fingers were curled shut, just like yours in the night” (Lahiri 22). The final confession brings the couple emotionally close. Loss of motherhood is a great shock to Shoba, who had ardently wished for a child. She has the feeling that Shukumar has not been affected by this. She is agitated by the lack of emotion on his part. But when he confesses to her that “he has held his son, who had known life only within her, against his chest” (Lahiri 22) and that he has promised himself that he will never tell Shoba as it is the one thing that she has wanted to be

a surprise, she realizes the sincerity of his love. The story ends with a hint of their reconciliation: “Shoba had turned the lights off. She came back to the table and sat down, and after a moment Shukumar joined her. They wept together, for the things they now know” (Lahiri 22). Though the reconciliation of the couple is not clearly indicated, their tears indicate a transition from estrangement to involvement. The confessions prove to be a “bliss in disguise” (Lahiri 19), a bliss that cures their emotional maladies and brings them close.

The story seems to depict Shoba’s ethnic consciousness, which recognizes how in the traditional Indian society, a wife gains full acceptance only when she becomes a mother, because motherhood is the one thing that makes her a complete being. Shoba tends to develop a guilty conscience which mars her happiness. She oscillates between the host and home pulls. Her decision to leave Shukumar and her final reconciliation with him reveal the complexities of conflicting cultural ethos.

“The Third and Final Continent”, like, “A Temporary Matter” deals with marital discord. The narrator who is also the protagonist, works in America and has accepted the American life style. His marriage has been arranged with a girl from Calcutta, Mala who is twenty- seven. He considers marriage merely as a duty to be fulfilled: “It was a duty expected of me, as it was expected of every man” (Lahiri 181). He is not bothered about the sacred value attached to it in India. Perhaps, it is the influence of the host culture, which prompts him to speak of marriage in a light-hearted manner. While he speaks of Mala, his words are marked by the absence of love. Finally, when Mala informs him about her plans to reach America, he does not feel delighted. After her arrival, he finds her to be very traditional and is surprised when she wears fine saris while going out, which makes him ruminate, “I waited to get used to her, to her presence at my side, at my table and in my bed, but a week later we were still strangers” (Lahiri 192). He further expresses his bewilderment at having lived in a new space in the following words:

I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his

fortune far from home and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (Lahiri 198)

The description sums up, the bafflement experienced by most immigrants who are miles away from their homeland. However, the appreciation of Mala as “a perfect lady” (Lahiri 192) by a hundred-and-three year old American landlady, Mrs. Croft brings a total transformation in him, which makes him acknowledge the innate goodness of his wife. Though initially the tendency is one of assimilation, towards the end of the story, he shifts to acknowledging his native cultural codes along with the acceptance of the foreign culture, thereby assuming a hybrid identity.

“Mrs. Sen’s” depicts the identity crisis experienced by the lady, Mrs. Sen, resulting from the intense exclusion and dispossession caused by cultural displacement. Mrs. Sen finds it extremely difficult to adapt herself to the secondary space. The relationship between Mrs. Sen and her husband is presented through the perspective of the eleven-year-old boy, Eliot. Mrs. Sen often nostalgically looks back to her home and family and the good old days, which she has spent in India. She seeks solace in memories. Another noteworthy aspect of the story is the relation between Mrs. Sen and Eliot. The story also depicts the dissatisfaction and discontentment experienced by Mrs. Sen in her marital life.

Mrs. Sen’s feelings about the secondary space is expressed thus: “Here in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence” (Lahiri 115). Her inability to sleep peacefully shows her difficulty in adapting herself to the new land. Mrs. Sen’s culture shock results from the awareness of her disadvantaged “otherness” in the American society. The material benefits are abundant but the “otherness” makes it difficult to Mrs. Sen to adapt herself to her adopted home. In the new world, As Narula observes where one is now situated, “there is an awareness of being on the periphery, of a hyphenated identity, and of not belonging to the

mainstream: these are all realizations that dawn on the consciousness of the individual” (36).

Mrs. Sen’s culture shock starts with her forcible transplantation to American soil. She is very nostalgic about her homeland and the bygone days. Nostalgia, in her case, is intense as she has never regarded her primary space as constricting prior to immigration. She remembers how she used to enjoy the celebrations and festivals in India in the company of her family, neighbours and friends: “It is impossible to fall asleep those nights, listening to their chatter” (Lahiri 115). She plays a cassette of people talking in her language and tells Eliot that it is a farewell present that her family has made for her. As the succession of voices laugh and say their bit, Mrs. Sen identifies each speaker: “My third uncle, my cousin, my father, my grandfather” (Lahiri 128). Mrs. Sen reveals her tendency to cling on to her native cultural baggage by wearing sari all the time and adorning her forehead with crushed vermilion.

The emotional void in Mr. and Mrs. Sen’s relationship is well-evidenced in the following words: “A few minutes later Mr. Sen would arrive, patting Eliot on the head but not kissing Mrs. Sen” (Lahiri 124). Another proof of the disharmony in Mr. & Mrs. Sen’s relationship is seen in the episode, when Eliot asks the two to pose before his camera. Eliot looked through the window in the camera and “waited for Mr. and Mrs. Sen to move close together, but they didn’t. They didn’t hold hands or put their arms around each other’s waists” (Lahiri 180). The hard-heartedness of Mr. Sen towards his wife is also expressed when Mrs. Sen and Eliot meet with a minor accident. After the incident Mr. Sen pats Eliot’s head and says, “The policeman said you were lucky. Very lucky to come out without a scratch” (Lahiri 134). He is not concerned about his wife at all. Perhaps this is the most prominent factor that aggravates the misery of Mrs. Sen.

The relation between Eliot and Mrs. Sen attains specific significance in the story. Eliot’s own mother is a fashionable American woman, who gives too much importance to a false manners and propriety. She is a working lady, who has no time to look after her son. But Mrs. Sen, who is herself childless, gives Eliot love and care, which he does not get from his own mother. Perhaps, Mrs. Sen feels that the boy has

added some meaning to her life. That is why she shares her sorrows with him. Eliot comes to know India more closely, from the tales told by Mrs. Sen. Eliot finds the warm hospitality of Mrs. Sen in sharp contrast to the coldness of his own mother. Eliot learns that two things make Mrs. Sen happy; one is the arrival of a letter from her family, since it brings her closer to her dear ones, at least for the moment and the other is the fish from sea side. To her, just like a letter, fish is also a reminder of native culture.

The most poignant moment in Eliot- Mrs. Sen relationship is the comfort that the boy imparts to her following the news of her grandfather’s death. This is the event which reveals the depth of their relationship. It is almost a mother-son relationship that they share. Towards the end of the story, Mrs. Sen and Eliot meet with an accident, when she dashes her car against a telephone pole. Eliot’s mother takes the incident seriously and stops Eliot from going to Mrs. Sen anymore.

The story negotiates both the problems of centre-margin divide and of male-female oppositions. As an immigrant, Mrs. Sen is away from the mainstream and she is unable to grow past the phase of nostalgia, and gets further marginalized because of her gender. Her diasporic self is in conformity with the model of diasporic formation proposed by William Safran, which views the homeland as the ideal place to which the diaspora must eventually return. The deep emotional relationship between Mrs. Sen and Eliot shows how love bonds people beyond the boundaries of nations, religions and even age.

“Interpreter of Maladies”, which won the O’Henry Award, is the titular story about which Lahiri remarks:

When I was putting the collection together, I knew from the beginning that this had to be the title story, because the predicament at the heart of the book—the dilemma, the difficulty, and often the impossibility of communicating emotional pain and affiliation to others, as well as expressing it to ourselves. In some senses I view my position as a writer, in so far as I attempt to articulate these emotions. As a sort of interpreter as well (Aguiar, talkback.com, par.9)

The story, set in Puri, is a description of a brief encounter between an ill-matched Indian couple

living in America and their Indian tourist guide, Mr. Kapasi.

In America, Mr. and Mrs. Das live like strangers rather than like husband and wife. Their relationship with their children Tina, Bobby and Ronny lacks emotional depth as “they are all like siblings” and 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 . . .” (Lahiri 49). During their trip to India, Mr. Kapasi the driver-cum-guide becomes a keen observer of each and every action of the family. Similarity between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das is their respective loveless marital lives. This is one factor which brings them close. On his way to the Sun Temple, Mr. Kapasi tells them about his other job, the job of an interpreter in a doctor’s clinic. This interests Mrs. Das, who hopes that he will be able to suggest a remedy to cure her emotional malady. It is with this intention at the back of her mind that she reveals the secret of the short sexual involvement with a Punjabi friend of her husband which has resulted in the conception of a child.

Mr. Kapasi tells the Indian couple that he translates the symptoms of Gujarati patients to a non-Gujarati doctor. He thinks that his job as an interpreter is actually a sign of his failings, because in his youth he has been a devoted scholar of foreign languages and “had dreamed of being an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries, resolving conflicts between people and nations, settling disputes of which he alone could understand both sides” (Lahiri 52). Moreover, he knows that his wife has little regard for his job as an interpreter. So, he uses the phrase “doctor’s assistant” while referring to his position. It is this indifference on the part of Mrs. Kapasi, that makes him feel fascinated by Mrs. Das, when she praises his job. Mrs. Das remarks that it is a romantic job, a big responsibility as the patients are totally dependent on him. Mr. Kapasi is carried away by her remark and then begins his infatuation for her. The infatuation fades when he realizes that she considers him a father-figure when she tells him: “For God’s sake, stop calling me Mrs. Das I’m twenty-eight. You probably have children of my age” (Lahiri 64).

The story reaches the crisis- point when Mrs. Das reveals to Mr. Kapasi that Bobby is not Raj’s son. She confesses to Mr. Kapasi that the

child has been conceived as a result of a brief sexual involvement with a Punjabi friend of Mr. Das. This shocks Mr. Kapasi as he cannot imagine a woman revealing the most hidden secrets of her life to a stranger. She tells Mr. Kapasi: “For eight years I haven’t been able to express this to anybody, not to friends, certainly not to Raj. He doesn’t even suspect it. He thinks I’m, still in love with him” (Lahiri 65). Towards the end of the story, Mr. Kapasi has been able to relieve Mrs. Das off her burden. He wants her to confess the truth to Mr. Das. He wants to explain that “honesty was the best policy. Honesty, surely, would help her feel better” (Lahiri 66). The story ends with monkeys attacking one of the children and the driver rescuing him. The family huddles together and the driver is forgotten.

The relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Das lacks emotional fulfilment. Perhaps, this may be the reason why she gets sexually involved with another person. The extra-marital affair of Mrs. Das shows the influence of the liberal American norms on her. However, the native cultural consciousness, especially marital fidelity, haunts her, which eventually leads her to confess her guilt to Mr. Kapasi. According to Madhoo Kamara, this shows how individuals, trapped in the sterility of custom and tradition struggle for their comprehension of destiny and how desperately they try to discover interpersonal ties, or some metaphor for meaningful self-hood in a socio-cultural context (126).

Conclusion

The nuances of cultural interaction become the striking thematic link in the select stories in the anthology *Interpreter of Maladies*. The Indian immigrants, who vacillate between the two cultures, confront identity crisis which is painful, yet inevitable. This is intensely felt by immigrant women, who are unable to find a meaningful place for themselves in the foreign culture to which they migrate. As Neerja Chand opines, these writers focus “in particular on the pain and violence of dislocation. . . which is often accompanied by a poetics of loss, as well as emergence of a sensibility enriched by the simultaneity of geography, which involves the possibilities of living here in body and elsewhere in mind and imagination” (142). Most of the characters

travel back and forth in a state of suspended animation, inhabiting many different spaces at the same time. Many of the protagonists in *Interpreter of Maladies*, specifically the ones in diaspora, try to cope with the gender stereotypes and roles in their new country. The quest for identity, as defined by one's "positionality" and circumstances, is a pre-dominant concern in *Interpreter of Maladies*. The intense loneliness experienced by immigrants, due to changing cultural scenario, invokes the memories of tradition and homeland and helps them relocate themselves in their foreign space. The protagonists of *Interpreter of Maladies* show the deep affinity that they have for their native culture. In moments of intense despair, the characters suffer from identity shifts. But their evolving identities make them attached to ancestral ties in their attempts to solve the conflicts in their immigrant experiences. They achieve self-discovery and a meaningful life by relying on Indian tradition to enlighten their American circumstances. They show how they make meaning from their discontinuous and fragmentary remains of their Indian inheritance. They bring the resources of the past to make up their present. The immigrant stands at the border not passively but actively, and intervenes in the transmission of cultural inheritance or tradition in such a way, that she can refashion received ideas. Inherited knowledge or "restaging the past" (Bhabha 3) gives new unexpected meanings in the new culture, very often for the better. The immigrant women get empowered in the process as she acts as the catalyst using received knowledge to bear upon the present. They have helped, as Suma Chitins says, "to bring home the idea, that, the challenge to feminism in India is to help Indian women realize selfhood in full measure" The hope that they express through their works is "a revival of sensitivity to the uniqueness of the Indian situation and of the capacity to respond to this uniqueness by forging new ways" (25). Lahiri goes beyond the barriers of nations, culture, religions and generations in affirming the necessity of human relationships.

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