

NAVIGATING DIASPORIC DILEMMAS: SOCIAL ISSUES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES*

Dr. S. KANDASAMY

Associate Professor and Head, Department of English
Urumu Dhanalakshmi College, Trichy

Dr. J. ALBERT VINCENT PAULRAJ

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Urumu Dhanalakshmi College, Trichy

Abstract

This paper explores the complex portrayal of social issues in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection Interpreter of Maladies, focusing on themes of diaspora, identity negotiation, cultural dislocation, gendered experiences, and emotional isolation. Lahiri's nuanced narratives depict the internal and external struggles of Indian immigrants as they reconcile their heritage with contemporary life abroad. By incorporating selected short stories, this article analyzes the psychological, cultural, and gender-based tensions faced by diasporic individuals. This paper highlights how Lahiri does converge on articulating diasporic melancholy, cultural duality, and hybrid identity through narrative strategies and character development.

Keywords: jhumpa Lahiri, diaspora, cultural identity, social isolation, gender roles, negotiate

Introduction

Indian Writing in English has historically served as a fertile ground for negotiating questions of identity, exile, displacement, and postcolonial legacy. Among contemporary authors, Jhumpa Lahiri stands out for her poignant depiction of Indian diasporic life, particularly in the United States. Her debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), provides an intricate map of the cultural and psychological terrain of South Asian immigrants grappling with dislocation and cultural hybridity.

Each story offers intimate portrayals of characters caught in between — geographies, languages, generations, and moral codes. Her protagonists often experience alienation, nostalgia, fractured communication, and loneliness. These issues are not merely incidental but fundamental to the diasporic condition she portrays. Critic J. Albert Vincent Paulraj, in multiple studies on diaspora and Indian fiction, argues that “the Indian diasporic subject remains locked in a perpetual negotiation of identity, constantly shaped and reshaped by both the homeland and the host culture” (“Exploring Cultural Displacement” 47). This theoretical insight aligns closely with Lahiri's portrayal of individuals like Mrs. Sen or Mr. Pirzada, whose

lives oscillate between emotional longing and social adaptation.

Diaspora and Cultural Displacement in *Mrs. Sen's*

The titular story “Mrs. Sen's” offers one of the most direct representations of cultural displacement in Lahiri's collection. Mrs. Sen, an Indian immigrant and housewife, finds herself utterly unmoored in American society. Despite her physical presence in the U.S., her emotional and psychological self remains tethered to India. Her inability to drive, her obsession with procuring fresh fish, and her daily ritual of cutting vegetables on the floor mirror her desire to recreate her homeland in exile.

The critic, Paulraj underscores that “diaspora is not only a geographical journey but an existential dislocation. The immigrant psyche often clings to symbols of the homeland to preserve continuity of self” (“Exploring Cultural Displacement” 50). This is clearly an evident when Mrs. Sen says, “Everything is there [in India]. Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot even drive” (Lahiri 113). Her lament is not just about mobility, but agency — the loss of power, cultural coherence, and familiarity.

As critic Anjali Gera Roy points out, “Lahiri’s characters frequently fail to naturalize, and the homeland becomes a mythic space of emotional authenticity” (Roy 78). Mrs. Sen’s home, filled with saris, spices, and silence, becomes a microcosmic India in the American suburbia. Her identity is suspended, fragmented by nostalgia and fear.

Negotiating Identity in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”

In “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” Lahiri uses a child narrator to reveal the complicated layers of diasporic identity during the Bangladesh Liberation War. Mr. Pirzada is not Indian, yet he speaks the same language, eats similar food, and follows the same customs. The story illustrates how geopolitical lines complicate diasporic identity even within shared cultural frameworks.

Paulraj notes: “Lahiri illustrates the futility of constructing diaspora through static binaries like native or foreign or belonging or displacement. Identity in diaspora is relational, provisional, and dialogic” (“Identity Crisis” 27). This observation aligns with the narrator’s realization that national identity is not as clearly defined as she assumed. “Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian,” her father tells her (Lahiri 25), but to her, he is indistinguishable from her own family.

The story subtly critiques the oversimplified notions of national identity, especially in diaspora, where markers like language and religion transcend political boundaries. Paulraj highlights that “for the diasporic subject, identity becomes a negotiation between memory and moment, between geography and genealogy” (“Identity Crisis” 30).

Emotional Isolation in “Interpreter of Maladies”

The title story, “Interpreter of Maladies,” pivots around Mr. Kapasi, a tour guide in India who also works as a medical interpreter. He meets the Das family, Indian-Americans who are visiting India as tourists. The contrast between Mr. and Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi symbolizes the deepening gap between diasporic Indians and their ancestral culture.

Mrs. Das’s confessions to Mr. Kapasi, followed by her indifference to his emotional response, underline the alienation between self and society, confession and intimacy. Paulraj writes, “Diasporic communication is often

marked by performative disconnection — where conversations lack continuity and vulnerability” (“Communication Breakdown” 65). Mr. Kapasi’s romanticized interpretation of Mrs. Das’s interest is shattered when she reveals a secret not out of emotional connection, but as an act of momentary catharsis.

Lahiri’s language accentuates this isolation: “It means ‘interpreter of maladies,’” she said, frowning. “But the doctor’s patients are not ill in the way I am” (Lahiri 65). The gap between speaking and understanding is Lahiri’s central metaphor. Paulraj adds, “The interpreter is a figure of fractured communication — able to translate speech but not emotions” (“Communication Breakdown” 68).

Gender Roles and Marital Conflict in “This Blessed House”

“This Blessed House” shifts the lens toward newly married couples within the diaspora. Sanjeev and Twinkle, though both Indian-American, differ vastly in temperament and cultural accommodation. While Sanjeev clings to convention and “Indianness,” Twinkle freely adopts American eccentricities, especially in her delight over the Christian paraphernalia left in their new home.

This difference in cultural response leads to marital friction, highlighting gender dynamics within diasporic marriages. Paulraj observes, “Lahiri’s female characters frequently resist the prescriptive cultural roles assigned to them, asserting autonomy through small acts of rebellion” (“Gender Dynamics” 91). Twinkle’s refusal to throw away the Christian relics becomes symbolic of her resistance to perform tradition for the sake of stability.

Furthermore, Sanjeev’s internal conflict mirrors a broader concern: the fear that assimilation may threaten not only identity but masculinity. Paulraj argues, “Male protagonists in diasporic literature often struggle with both cultural dislocation and a loss of patriarchal control” (“Gender Dynamics” 96). Lahiri thus not only narrates the immigrant story but also interrogates the gender politics embedded within it.

Loneliness as an Existential Theme

A consistent undercurrent in Lahiri’s work is loneliness — both in literal and symbolic forms. Her characters often experience detachment, not just from others, but from

themselves. Whether it is Mrs. Sen's silent yearning, Mr. Kapasi's unfulfilled longing, or Sanjeev's silent resentment, the stories are saturated with internal solitude. Paulraj interprets this through the lens of diasporic melancholia: "Loneliness in diaspora is not merely absence of company, but absence of continuity — a disjointed self without cultural or emotional rooting" ("Exploring Cultural Displacement" 53). In Lahiri's world, this melancholy manifests in tea cups, silence, glances, and gaps between spoken and unspoken words.

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* is a rich exploration of social issues embedded in the diasporic experience: cultural dislocation, identity fragmentation, emotional disconnection, and shifting gender roles. Her stories resist easy closure, echoing the open-ended nature of immigrant lives. By weaving complex emotional textures into her characters' lives, Lahiri humanizes the immigrant experience while exposing its deep psychological strains. Paulraj's scholarship provides a bridge between narrative empathy and academic insight, helping decode the diasporic psyche Lahiri portrays. Lahiri's fiction, as seen

through Paulraj's lens, thus stands as both literature and social document — echoing the silences, desires, and dilemmas of the displaced self.

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