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## **Away from Homeland: Exploring the Diasporic Sensibility in Select Short Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri**

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**Abstract:** Jhumpa Lahiri is, no doubt, one of the leading contemporary Indian writers in English. Born to immigrant Bengali parents in London, she grew up in U.S.A. The immigrant feelings that she inherited from her parents ostensibly shaped her mind and helped establish her fame as an important Indian English author. Her first collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* that came out in 1999 won the much-coveted Pulitzer Prize in 2000, thus securing a safe place for her in the history of Indian English literature. Her fame was strengthened by later works like the novels *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland* (2013), and another collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Her short stories in the first collection chiefly centre round the feelings and experiences of the immigrant Indians who are caught between the tradition that they have inherited and the alien culture that they confront every day. However, the term 'Indian Diaspora' refers to the Indians who have left their motherland and settled in a foreign land. It also refers to the people of Indian origin who are born and brought up in a foreign land. Diasporic sensibility consists in a number of feelings like rootlessness, loneliness, alienation, cultural clashes, identity crisis, homesickness, nostalgia and so on. The present paper seeks to explore the diasporic sensibility in select short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri from her first collection.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, rootlessness, cultural conflicts, homesickness, identity crisis.

### **Introduction**

The present age is the era of globalisation. The term 'diaspora' generally refers to those people who have left their homeland to settle in other countries. Etymologically, the term 'diaspora'



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derived from the Greek word 'diaspirein' which means "to scatter about or disperse". Originally, it was used to mention the dispersion of the Jews in the Fifth century B.C. In the field of literature, this term has become a topic of much discussion in recent times. The term 'diaspora' is "generally thought in terms of 'homelessness', a sense of trauma and exile", as Ian Buchanan puts it (Buchanan 132). A diasporic writer is one who lives in some other country, far away from one's original homeland. Such a writer is usually found to treat issues like loneliness, alienation, rootlessness, displacement, cultural conflicts, identity crisis, past memories, assimilation, nostalgia, cultural hybridity and so on. It is interesting to note that the elements of diaspora form an integral part of post-colonial literature. However, a diasporic writer feels inclined to focus on the lives of expatriates, immigrants, exiles and refugees. While going through the history of Indian English literature, one inevitably comes across a large number of diasporic writers who have made significant contribution to the post-Independence Indian literature in English. The first generation of diasporic women writers include Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukherjee who explored the themes like nostalgia, rootlessness, alienation etc. Of the second generation of diasporic writers, mention may be made of V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Rothinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai. Their writings also foreground the themes of rootlessness, alienation, loneliness, displacement, cultural-clashes, nostalgia, identity crisis and the like.

Jhumpa Lahiri is indisputably one of the greatest Indian English authors in contemporary times. She forms an important part of the Indian diaspora. She was born in London to immigrant Bengali parents. When she was just two years old, her family moved to U.S.A. Hence, she is usually referred to as an Indo-American writer. She started her career as an author with her first collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). This book fetched the author the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 2000. The stories contained in this collection deal with the variegated experiences of Indians in exile, who keep oscillating between their ancestral culture and the alien culture that they face every day. Her name and fame again spread far and wide in 2003 when she published her first novel *The Namesake*. Her other works include a short story collection



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*Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and a novel *The Lowland* (2013). Lahiri is a writer whose works serve to illustrate the diasporic issues like rootlessness, loneliness, alienation, homesickness, past memories, cultural conflicts, identity crisis, nostalgia and so on.

In the title story “Interpreter of Maladies”, Lahiri lays bare the variegated experiences and feelings of an American family of Indian origin that have come to visit India. Their taxi driver-cum-tour guide Mr Kapasi takes them to different important places of India. Mrs Das, the unhappy wife of the unfeeling scholar Mr Das, unlocks her heart and reveals her long-kept secret to Mr Kapasi in the hope of getting some remedy for her guilt-ridden psyche. It is through this lady that the diasporic issues like alienation, loneliness, identity crisis, cultural-clashes, rootlessness and nostalgia have been explored in the story. The story opens with Mr and Mrs Das bickering about “who should take Tina to the toilet”. At the very outset, it is crystal clear that the couple have fallen prey to conjugal disharmony and emotional estrangement. However, we learn that they are on their way to the Sun Temple at Konarak. The Das couple have two sons - Ronny and Bobby, and a daughter - Tina. The cultural clash is first felt in their appearances, for they look like Indians but dress like foreigners. While conversing with the middle-aged tour guide Mr Kapasi, Mr Das points out that he and his wife Mina were both born and brought up in America. At present, their parents live in Assansol, India. They have already retired. So, the young couple visit them “every couple of years”. Later on, Mr Das also reveals that he teaches Science in a school at Brunswick, New Jersey situated in America. Strangely enough, the parents and their children remain alienated from one another on the emotional level in the car. It also comes to light that Mr Kapasi guides the tourists on two days – Fridays and Saturdays. On other days, he works as an interpreter at a doctor’s chamber. He interprets the words of the Gujarati patients to the doctor because the doctor does not know Gujarati. As Mrs Das showers compliments upon Mr Kapasi’s job as an interpreter, the tour guide starts fantasizing about her. He is captivated and intoxicated by her voice and praise. Mrs Das also shows an unusual interest in Mr Kapasi, thus prompting him to visualise his future correspondence and intimacy with this charming lady. After a few hours, they reach the Sun Temple at Konarak. Interestingly enough, the erotic pictures on the temple induce in Mr Kapasi a strong urge to



embrace Mrs Das. While driving back, Mr Kapasi suggests visiting the hills at Udaygiri and khandagiri so that he may enjoy Mrs Das' company for some more time. The family give their consent to visit the hills. As they reach the hills, Mrs Das prefers to stay in the car on the ground that her legs are tired. So, Mr Das begins to climb the hills with his children. Left alone, Mrs Das reveals her long-concealed secret to Mr Kapasi. The secret is that her son Bobby was fathered by a friend of her husband. Now she shares her past memories with Mr Kapasi. She relates how her parents left no stone unturned to bring about a romantic affair between her and Mr Das in their adolescence. They got married at a young age. After the birth of their first son Ronny, life grew dull and boring. As her husband always remained busy with his teaching, she had to shoulder the responsibility to bring up her son. More often than not, she fell victim to exhaustion. Consequently, she had to decline the invitations of her friends. Gradually, her friends and acquaintances stopped calling her. As a result, she was subjected to complete loneliness and alienation. A dull and monotonous life continued to plague her. One day a Punjabi friend of her husband came to stay with them for a week for some job interview in that area. On receiving the welcome news of his success, the friend got so excited that he could not but make love to Mrs Das in the absence of her husband. The lady, however, made no protest. Her second son Bobby was thus conceived on a sofa in an afternoon. Throughout the story, Mrs Das gives vent to her feelings of boredom, loneliness, alienation and, of course, her feelings of nostalgia. It is interesting to note that all these feelings form an integral part of the diasporic sensibility. Though she was born and brought up in America, she shares the Indian sensibility regarding the sanctity in marriage. She continues to suffer from a guilty conscience for her act of adultery:

... I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr Kapasi, to throw things away. One day I had the urge to throw everything I own out the window, ... (Lahiri: *Interpreter of Maladies*: 65)

It is of paramount importance to note that Mrs Das is oscillating between the Indian tradition she has inherited from her parents and the western culture she encounters every day. Again, her behaviour towards her husband and her children points to the disturbed psyche of an immigrant



living far away from the homeland. Another important aspect of diaspora is found in the fact that the Das couple cannot help feeling an irresistible longing for their homeland, i.e. India. Despite their birth and upbringing in an alien land, they are eager to know their roots and ancestral home. Thus, nostalgia and homesickness, two vital traits of diasporic sensibility, are quite unmistakable here.

“A Temporary Matter”, another short story in Lahiri’s collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, centres round the feelings of emotional estrangement and loneliness that continue to plague an Indian married couple – Shukumar and Shobha – living in Boston. Their emotional estrangement was occasioned by the birth of their still-born baby. However, the story opens with a notice informing the young couple of a power-cut that will continue for five days from 8 pm to 9 pm. On each of these five nights, they exchange confessions with each other during the power-cut in order to come to terms with the loss of their baby and bridge the gap between them. Despite living abroad, they inevitably feel drawn to their original homeland, i.e. India. Interestingly enough, Shukumar also writes his dissertation on “agrarian revolts in India”. Thus, the story sheds ample light on the diasporic issues like loneliness, alienation, rootlessness, homesickness and nostalgia. Again, an unbridgeable gap is quite evident between the husband and the wife; “... he and Shobha have become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible” (4).

That they have fallen victim to the feelings of loneliness and despair is thus unmistakable. Shukumar again feels sick for his homeland. He feels sorry about the fact that the time he spent in India is less than that spent by his wife in the homeland. He cannot but wish that he had spent more time in India. This throws a great deal light on an immigrant’s feelings of homesickness and his desperate search for his own roots. Moreover, one can easily understand that the male protagonist is caught between the culture of his homeland and that of the host country. In other words, cultural conflict and identity crisis, two important aspects of the diasporic sensibility, reign supreme in Shukumar’s mind. He admits that he did not feel attracted to India during his boyhood. It is only



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after the death of his father that he began to feel drawn to his homeland. He cannot escape feeling envious of his wife who spent much more time in India than he did. Now, he wishes that “he had his own childhood story in India”. While exchanging confessions, they also share their past memories. Shukumar, for instance, recalls the sweet memory of his first meeting with Shobha at a lecture hall in Cambridge. He recollects how a group of Bengali poets were presenting recitals and how the audience reacted. He remembers how he was pleased to find a beautiful lady, i.e. Shobha sitting next to him. The story thus teems with diasporic issues such nostalgia, homesickness, alienation, loneliness, rootlessness, cultural clashes, identity crisis and the like.

In the story “When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine”, Lahiri has projected such issues as rootlessness and homesickness through Mr Pirzada. Again, the author explores the themes of identity crisis and cultural conflict through Lilia. Originally, Mr Pirzada came from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh. He has seven daughters who live with their mother in Dacca. Despite living abroad, he always feels worried about his family who are far away from him. Each and every week, he writes letters to his wife and sends comic books to his daughters though the postal system in Dacca has almost collapsed. Now, he is staying in America as he has been awarded a grant “from the government of Pakistan to study the foliage of New England”. He comes to the house of Lilia to have his dinner and watch the evening news. It must also be noted that Lilia’s parents, who have emigrated from India to America, continue to face some problems like cultural conflicts and alienation. Through Lilia’s reminiscence, we are made aware that her parents keep on complaining about the absence of their native culture in the foreign land. The Supermarket does not carry mustard oil; doctors do not make house calls; neighbours do not come without invitation. It is a pity that all these Indian practices are absent from the alien land. Thus, it goes without saying that the cultural clashes go on plaguing the immigrants. In addition to that, Lilia falls prey to identity crisis and discrimination at her school. Though her mother is quite confident about her proper upbringing in America, Lilia does face a number of problems in the foreign land. One day she voluntarily and jovially disguised herself as a witch for the Halloween. At that time, the natives humiliated her by calling her “an Indian Witch”. Moreover, she is now regarded as an ‘Orient’ by the natives. It



brings to the fore the bitter truth that an immigrant can never become a normal citizen in an alien land no matter how much he or she tries to absorb the culture of the host country. Lilia is thus reminded time and again that she belongs to another country and that she is a mere stranger to the natives. Hence, one has every reason to assert that the present story is replete with the diasporic feelings like rootlessness, alienation, loneliness, identity crisis, cultural conflicts and so on and so forth.

The story “Mrs Sens’s” deals with the life of an Indian couple Mr and Mrs Sen who live in America. The story also centres round Mrs Sen’s work as a baby-sitter to eleven year-old Eliot. Mr Sen teaches Mathematics at the university. Mrs Sen has started taking care of Eliot after his school is over. Eliot’s father lives far away and his mother remains busy with her office work throughout the day. So, when the school is over, Eliot comes to Mrs Sen’s apartment and spends time with her. Throughout the story, the narrator has portrayed how Mrs Sen behaves like a typical Indian woman. More importantly, she tries her level best to learn how to drive a car, lest she should lose her job as a baby-sitter. However, during her conversation with Eliot, she often lays bare her feelings of homesickness and nostalgia, and her desperate attempt to keep in touch with her own roots. She often shares her past memories with Eliot. There is no doubt that she is a complete stranger here. Naturally, she has been subjected to the feelings of loneliness, alienation and displacement. Her home-sickness often makes her reminisce about her homeland, her relatives and her parents. In addition to that, she is being tormented by cultural conflicts. She complains that no one will come to help her if she faces any problem or meets with a mishap in her apartment. But in India, if a person simply raises his voice and shouts for help, the entire neighbourhood will come to help him. Thus, she points to the unbridgeable gap between the indian culture and the American culture. While talking about driving, she grows so emotional that she asks Eliot, “Could I drive all the way to Calcutta?” Once again, feelings of homesickness overpower her. There is no denying the fact that she is going through the pangs of alienation, loneliness and boredom. Time and again, she cannot but reminisce about her homeland. While speaking of the driver’s seat in the car in America, she refers to India to point out that drivers in India sit on the right side. Of the two things that make her





happy, one is, of course, the arrival of a letter from her family. The letter perhaps helps relieve her of the pangs of alienation, identity crisis, cultural clashes and homesickness. The other thing that proves to be a source of happiness to Mrs Sen is fish from the seaside. The fish possibly helps her keep in touch with her roots on the emotional plane. It seems to fuel her passion for the homeland. She recollects how she grew up eating fish twice daily in India. She cannot refrain from talking about the land of her origin. She adds that “in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky” (123). One day Mrs Sen plays a tape of an Indian raga. Again, she relives the moment of her farewell at her home by playing a cassette of “people talking in her language”. Thus, she often feels sick for home and tries in each and every possible way to connect to her homeland through her memories or reminiscence. A strong sense of nostalgia always reigns supreme in her mind. The story ends with Mrs Sen crying for her mistake in driving the car, and Eliot departing from her apartment with his mother forever. In a word, the present story deftly addresses the diasporic issues like alienation, loneliness, rootlessness, nostalgia, cultural conflicts, past memories, identity crisis etc.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, one must point out that the short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri are not only charming to the general readers but also rich in variegated issues and ideas. One of the issues is diasporic sensibility that has been discussed above. The stories unquestionably move the readers emotionally and psychologically. Her imagination is so powerful that we are made to visualise each and every minute detail that she wants us to observe. In that sense, the stories offer a rich feast to the readers. However, it has already been pointed out that most of her stories show the immigrant Indians and their problems which are more emotional than physical. These people can neither forget their native culture completely nor accept the alien culture. As a result, they constantly suffer from cultural conflicts, identity crisis, rootlessness, alienation, loneliness, homesickness, past memories and the like. All these feelings constitute the diasporic sensibility which is too strong in Lahiri’s stories to forget.



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