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## **“The baffling New World, they must encounter everyday”: A Critical Study of Transnationalism and Alienation in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies***

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**Abstract:** Jhumpa Lahiri (Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri) frequently writes fiction about the Indian immigrant experiences of the United States of America. She debuted in the literary world in 1999 with the publication of her collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*. The stories of *Interpreter of Maladies* narrate the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants in America "navigating between the strict traditions they have inherited and baffling New World they must encounter everyday". The stories focus on characters, mainly of Indian lineage that struggle with issues of memory of homeland going beyond the national border and create a sense of alienation. They suffer from psychic trauma and haunting presence of their lost homeland and also from the anguish of reinventing home in the land of their choice. Transnationalism has important role in Indian-American immigrant identity, ethnicity and nationalism construction. In the context of transnationalism, identity and ethnicity are negotiated because of people's mobilization from one culture or nation to another. In Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* the characters try to preserve their Indian cultural values. It can be seen through the way they live, their food habits, using Indian language and their attention to Indian political and economic information by television and newspaper. This paper is an attempt to analyze how Lahiri (re)locates transnationalism and the resultant alienation affecting the lives of the Indians in exile in her short-story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Ethnicity, Imaginary homelands, Immigrants, Transnationalism.

### **Introduction:**

*Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), the 2000 Pulitzer Prize winning anthology of nine short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri, depicts the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants in America who struggle



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with their memory of homeland going beyond nation, and creating a sense of alienation. Lahiri shows that how the immigrants would most often hold tightly to the literature and culture of their native country even if they lived in another. Through food, through their culture they try to hold connection with their mother country. In the life of immigrants, food is the bridge between the old world and new world, the homeland and the host land, the past and the present time, and engages its functions as the tool of nostalgia (Wulandri, 1). In other words, food is clearly an important part of the culture that binds them with the homeland. For immigrants food becomes their identity. It induces a sense of belonging in a foreign land.

Randolph Bourn in his article "Transnational America" (1916) shows "a new way of thinking about relationships between cultures". He does not see immigrants assimilating easily to another culture; rather the immigrants are more likely to maintain contact with their culture of origin. To understand transnational families better, one needs to consider the role, emotions play in establishing a transnational family "Migrant stories are linked with the experiences of adjustment, settlement, nostalgia, renewal, loss, discrimination..." (Skrbis,p.236). The author argues that transnational families rely on "emotional labour" a term that was first introduced by Arlie Russell Hochschild in her book *Managed Heart* (1983) to demonstrate the emotional work "that allows the generation and maintenance of kin connection to occur across space and time". Lahiri's characters like Mrs. Sen, Mr. Pirzada, Lilia's parents, Mala try to adept the culture of their homeland rather to be assimilated with the culture of host land. They create an "imaginary homelands" of their own. This term is coined by Salman Rushdie in a book of the same name where he propounds an antiessetialist view of place. Their displacement or memory of going beyond nation, creating a sense of alienation.

**Transnationalism:**

"I am a pendulum

Swinging in 6 hours interval

On my two-dial watch

My future is my past is my future again."

---

- Natasa Garnett (2001)



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Transnationalism is the economic, political cultural process that extend beyond the boundaries of national states, where immigrants are more likely to maintain contact with their culture of origin and less likely to assimilate (to take into mind and thoroughly understand). The term first cited in 1916 by American writer Randolph Bourn in his paper 'Transnational America' to describe a new way of thinking about relationship between cultures". In his writing 'Transnational America', Bourn rejects the 'melting pot theory where a heterogeneous society becomes more homogeneous, where the different elements 'melting together' into a harmonious whole with a common culture or vice versa. The melting pot theory holds that like metals melted together at great heat, the melting together of several cultures will produce a new compound. Broune rejects the 'melting pot theory' and does not see immigrants assimilating easily to another culture. Broune's view of nationality was related to a connection between a person and their 'spiritual country, that is their culture. He argued that people would most often hold tightly to the literature and culture of their native country even if they lived in another. Therefore Bourne could not see immigrants from all different parts of the world assimilating to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, which were viewed as American traditions. This article goes on to say that America offers a unique liberty and opportunity and can still offer traditional isolation. He felt that with great mix of cultures and people, America would be able to grow into a transnational nation which would have their interconnecting cultural fibers with other countries.

"Transnationalism" as defined by Basch et al (1994) is," a process by which migrants through their daily life activities creates social fields that cross national boundaries". 'Transnationalism' refers to multiple ties or interactions linking people across the borders of nation states, where the immigrants are more likely to maintain contact with their culture of origin. In migration research the concept of transnationalism was coined to focus on the grassroots activities of international migrants across the borders. R. Smith in *Transnational Migration Studies* says

"Transnationalism is the practices and relationships that link migrants and their children with their home country, where such practices have significant meaning and are regularly observed".



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It describes the tendency among immigrants particularly in recent decades to maintain ties with their country of origin while also integrating in the destination country.

At the beginning of the 1990s in the United States, Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, Christiana Blank in *Transnationalism : A New Atlantic Framework For Understanding Migration* states; “We have defined transnationalism as the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together with country of origin and country of settlement” (Garret)

"Transnationalism" is an experience that is a part of the daily experience of a large group of people that live outside their homeland. Even when the move is voluntary, it tends to complicate the relationship these migrants have with their country of origin and settlement: the experience changes profoundly the ways the immigrants think about themselves, family and their country. In *From Immigrant to Trans Migrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration* Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc define "transnationalism" as "a process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-standard social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (p.48). Transnational migrants are active participants in their social and cultural lives of their host country, "at the same time they are engaged elsewhere in the sense that they maintain connections, build institutions, conduct transactions and influence local and national events in the countries from which they emigrated. Porte et al defines 'Transnationalism' as "occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social conduct over time across national border from their implementation". 'Transnationalism' as the experience of tension of living bi-nationally, of being in-between, most transnational are relatively successful in establishing little home. Now in the following pages, I will discuss how the concept of 'transnationalism' will be applicable to the stories of *Interpreter of Maladies* by Lahiri.

Published in 1999, at the turn of a new country and on the threshold of third millennium, Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* was an international best seller with her collection of short stories, the Asian-American writer won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000 and Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award in the following year. The collection includes nine short stories (some of which had already appeared in American reviews, such as the *New Yorker* and *Epoch*). The subtitle



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of the work "Stories from Bengal, Boston and Beyond", indeed evokes Lahiri's focus not only on the dual opposition between East and West, since the adverb 'beyond' describes in-between diasporic space which blurs spatial and temporal binaries and provides hints of the global and ethnic concerns that the Indian-American conjures up in her fiction. The frontier becomes an indistinct line, "an elusive line, visible and invisible, physical or metamorphic, amoral and moral" (Rushdie, 2002; 411) implying a journey of deprivation, mourning for (im)possible homecomings and potential advantages for the future generation (Lahiri, 2006).

Of the nine stories three are entirely located in India, while the remaining ones are set in the US. The stories of this first group, in their turn, can be divided into two categories, with regard to the ethnic origin of the protagonists: two of them ('The Real Darwan' and 'The Treatment of Bibi Haldar') feature two Indian women, while 'Interpreter of Maladies' (the titular story) combines both an Indian-American family with an Indian citizen. The six stories of the second group are all set in an American sub-urban landscape, but they can also be divided into two categories, those where children interact with adults, ('When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine', 'Sexy' and 'Mrs. Sen's') and those where sentimental discord is central ('A Temporary Matter', 'This Blessed House' and 'The Third and Final Continent').

### **Transnationalism in 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine':**

In the second story of the collection, 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine', Lilia, a ten year old American child of Bengal descent confronts her ethnic origin by observing Mr. Pirzada, who is a regular guest in her home for short period. The episode is set in 1971, the time of the story being that of Indo-Pakistani War, a second, even if not less acute, partition in the Indian subcontinent. Mr. Pirzada, a Pakistani Muslim, is on study leave in the US. Every evening, he visits Lilia's parents, who are Hindus of Indian origins. Food is the catalyst for solidarity and transnational belongings in this diasporic household. The young girl can't but notices many similarities they all share in spite of their different birthplaces:

"Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands". (Lahiri, 1999; 25)



The line drawn between here and there, between Hindus and Muslims makes no difference to Lilia. Even when her father shows her the geographical map with different colours for India and Pakistan she reflects about the arbitrary use of colours (and borders) to illustrate national differences. Instead, she notices that Mr. Pirzada and her parents "were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence and a single fear".(Lahiri,1999;41) Though both Lilia's family and Mr. Pirzada live in America, but they maintain the culture of their homeland, Lilia sees :

Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea". (Lahiri,1999;25).

Thus the Indian immigrants, both Lilia's family and Mr. Pirzada try to hold tightly to the culture of their native country even if they lived in abroad. Through their use of food, use of culture they maintain connection with their home country. As Irma Maini observes:

"Food is clearly an important of the culture that binds them despite barriers of nation, nationhood or nationalism" (Maini).

### **Transnationalism in 'Mrs. Sen's':**

'Mrs. Sen's', the sixth story of the collection, is the story of a young Indian housewife, who after her arranged marriage with a compatriot, migrates to North America where her husband is a university mathematics professor. Food and kitchen equipments are metaphors for the nostalgia she feels about India, since the only mention of the name of her country "seemed to release something in her"(Lahiri, 1999;113). She creates a small scale Indian in her American house with recipes, books, make-up and cloths.

In 'Mrs. Sen's', though Mrs. Sen lives in America but she maintains the culture of her homeland. Throughout the story we see how she more likely to maintain contact with their culture of origin and less likely to assimilate. Unlike a Western women, she wears sari : "she wore a shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys, more suitable for an evening affair than for that quiet, faintly dazzling August afternoon".(Lahiri,1999;112). Beyond national boundary she maintain her culture of origin as Eliot sees: "Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Sen wore shoes"(113). Mrs. Sen's daily ritual of chopping vegetables symbolically connects her with India : "Instead of a knife she



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used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship...the steel more black than silver." (Lahiri,1999; 114). Mrs. Sen being an Indian Bengali housewife she applies vermilion. Eliot "saw her standing before the bathroom mirror, solemnly applying with the head of a thumbtack".(117). She says "I must wear the powder every day, for the rest of the days that I am married. Eliot "like a wedding ring, you mean?" "Exactly, Eliot, exactly like a wedding ring. Only with no fear of losing it the dishwater." (Lahiri,1999;117)

The another culture that Mrs. Sen maintains was "fish from the seaside". Mrs. Sen said she had grown up eating fish twice a day. She added that in Kolkata "people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed...they ate the tail, the eggs, even the head"(Lahiri,1999;124). Thus preparing fish becomes a silent way of battling racial subjugation and to perpetuate the national identity. Cooking Bengali food, metanomised by fish a way to uphold their culture in the private domain of a Bengali immigrant's household. According to Krishnendu Roy -

Rice and fish become particularly potent symbols of Bengaliness precisely because outsiders, be the other Indians or Americans, are considered unable to appreciate them or incompetent in handling the bones. Rice and fish are considered a real insider delicacy...Through repetition, rice and fish become quintessence of Bengaliness. (190-91)

### **Transnationalism in 'The Third and Final Continent':**

'The Third and Final Continent', the final story in the collection is told by an unnamed male narrator. It presents the struggle of a Bengali graduate, who has moved from Calcutta to London then to Boston. In this story we can see him that he is more interested to maintain the culture of his homeland rather to be assimilated in the host land. The unnamed protagonist born in Asia, travels to Europe to study and finally immigrates to North America. Although he has adapted to the British way of life as a student, he attempts to keep his cultural bond by keeping the most trial of Indian traditions alive, such as eating "egg curry". Mala, the wife of the protagonist exactly maintains Indianness even when come to America:

The free end of her sari did not drag on the floor, but was dropped in a sign of bridal modesty over her head... Her thin brown arms were stacked with gold





bracelets, a small red circle was painted on her forehead and the edges of her feet were tinted with a decorative red dye. (Lahiri,1999;191).

Also when his wife Mala arrives in America, Mrs. Croft called her perfect woman after seeing her in the Indian sari: "She is a perfect lady". (195). We see that the protagonist and his wife must held tightly to the culture of their native country even when they live in America: "we ate egg curry...we ate with our hands..." (Lahiri,1999;192). Like a typical man, or typically like a Bengali man, the narrator felt "strange wearing shoes indoors and always removed them before entering room". (Lahiri, 1999; 185).

The narrator thinks that he and his wife though are in America, in abroad, still attached with South Asian food and Indian tradition. The narrator wants his son to retain his Indian culture: "So we have driven to Cambridge to visit him (narrator's son) or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands and speak in Bengali". (Lahiri,1999;197). Eating rice by hands and speaking Bengali are two important symbols in this story, which proved that original nationality is still important for the migrants. Thus, though they went beyond boundaries of nation states, contain connection with their homeland. We see at the end of the story the narrator as well as Lahiri laments:

"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 appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination." (Lahiri,1999;198).

### **Food as a Metaphor of Transnationalism:**

Food though apparently a trivial matter, serves as an important social as well as national role. Out of all the significant aspects of community life, food (apart from arts) is perhaps the only one that binds while all others separate one community from the other. Food and culinary items define social hierarchies, and serves as a driving force. For immigrants and non-residents food certainly serves as an important part of their identity. When away from home, food from one's land brings as much pleasure as mother's voice on overseas call. Food serves as a key to binding. In a strange land familiar items of food are as welcome as familiar faces. Just as music or art breeds familiarity, food also serves as a medium of link. The personal life of Jhumpa Lahiri is the very



prototype of diasporic culture. Having spent more than thirty years in the United States she still feels 'a bit outsider'. Though she has confessed that her days in India are a 'sort of parenthesis' in her life, the fact that she is at heart an Indian cannot be denied".

The titular story 'Interpreter of Maladies' has Das family on a visit to India. Mr. and Mrs. Das enjoy all things Indian. The Das couple as if brimmed with all things Indians. Just as the Suntemple at Konarak is a must see, they also enjoy *jhalmuri* that is typical of Bengal and its adjacent states. Mrs. Das appears quite as foreigner in her dress and taste as she does not forget to carry a water bottle with her lest she catches infection with contaminated water. But she cannot resist enjoying the *jhalmuri*:

"She walked slowly, carrying some puffed rice tossed with peanuts and chili papers in a large packet made from newspapers" (p.46)

So, food definitely works here as an integral metaphor to assist the notion of transnationalism in the collection.

### **Alienation:**

In *Politics*, Aristotle recognizes that "human beings are essentially social: the life of a person is lived in common with other people, and the institution of that common life is the city or polis". (qtd. in Bloom 89). Alienation is a state of being cut off or separate from a person or group of people. The state or experience of being alienated. Alienation is withdrawing or separation of a person or a person's affections from an object or position of former attachment. Alienation is the feeling that one has no connection with the people around you, the stage of being alienated, withdrawn or isolated from the objective world. The definition of alienation is the state of a person who has disengaged themselves or have been alienated from the attentions from a person, place or thing they once enjoyed. Alienation is a state in which a person feels oneself alone, estranged, worthless and meaningless. This may be result of socio-political set up or due to capitalist surroundings but it is accepted fact that a person who suffers this has to bear a psychological agony. In our history of religions, it has been reported that Adam complaint loneliness and asked God for a companion. This makes clear that loneliness makes a man estranged from one's own surroundings.



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The feeling of being stranger or sense of loneliness, strangeness or sense of having no belonging in the surroundings is termed "Alienation". The Latin term "alience" means 'to remove or take away'. In modern sociological investigations and also in psychology it means man's feeling of aloneness towards society, nature, and people or even from one's self. Memory of homeland going beyond nation thus creating a sense of alienation, Lahiri in her story 'A Temporary Matter', where the first generation American Shoba and Sukumar, in 'A Real Darwan' where the Boori Ma, in 'Mrs. Sen's' where Mrs. Sen, going beyond nation creating a sense of alienation.

#### **Alienation in 'Interpreter of Maladies':**

The third, as well as the titular story of the collection, 'Interpreter of Maladies' features an Indian-American family the Dases and an Indian tour guide Mr. Kapasi. Once a student of foreign languages, dreaming of "serving between two nations"(59), Mr. Kapasi works part time as an interpreter for Gujarati patients in a doctor's office. Mrs. Das comes to be fascinated by the responsibilities Mr. Kapasi holds, defining his job as "romantic"(53). Though Mrs. Das has her family but mentally she is alienated from them. That's why she has not shared her mental agony to none but Mr. Kapasi: "Don't you see? For eight years I haven't been able to express this to anybody not to friends, certainly not to Raj." (65). Mrs. Das could not share her agony that Bobby was a son of adultery. She has suffered from alienation for eight years: "Eight years, Mr. Kapasi,I have been in pain eight years".(65). Though she has family but she "loved neither her husband nit her children". Mrs Das "had already fallen out of love with life"(68). Thus Mrs. Das's alienation is seen.

#### **Alienation in 'A Real Darwan':**

In the fourth story of the collection, in 'A Real Darwan', the old woman Boori Ma is an expatriate, the victim of a traumatic experience of loss, her grief encompassing not only the issue for her ethnic identity but also her affection domain, since she has lost her family and all her possessions. Besides her transgression nature also displayed by a job (that of caretaker) which places her interstitial position since "under normal circumstances this was no job for a woman"(73). Ironically, her being a "victim of the changing times"(72), in the eyes of the residents, leads her to an unpredictable conclusion : blamed for negligence and as a consequence, identified as responsible for a theft occurred in the building, she is kicked out of the lodging with all her things. Lahiri



believes that Indian immigrants face humiliating experience not only in America but in every kind of dominant culture and in other nations. As a self-appointed sweeper of the stairwell of a multi-storied building her services "came to resemble those of a Real Darwan" (73). Boori Ma "had separated from her husband, four daughters, a two-story brick house, a rose-wood almirah and a number of coffer boxes" feeling alone. Her past identity of a rich man's wife of East Bengal is important than her present identity as a sweeper of Calcutta city. She cannot forget her connection with her homeland. She left a rich life style of Pakistan for a poor life in India. The idea of "imaginary home" is present in the story, and Boori Ma who is fixed with her upper class identity and remains alienated from the West. While she weeps, she tells stories of her past; her daughter's extravagant wedding, her servants, her estate and her riches. She cannot forget her identity related with her first homeland; "Yes, there I tasted life, have I mentioned that I crossed the border with just two bracelets on my wrist? Yes there was a day when my feet touched nothing but marble. Believe me, don't believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them."(71).

At the end she is suspected to be the informer to the robbers and is thrown out of the place when a few things of the locality are stolen in her absence. Jhumpa Lahiri underscores impossibility of an exile communicating emotional pain to others through the characterization of Boori Ma. The story concludes as the residents throw out Boori Ma's belongings and begin a search for a "Real Darwan". Thus alienation is seen in the story. Alienation explores the idea of displacement because Boori Ma is displaced from Pakistan to India. The final incidence symbolizes that she had been always alienated in West Bengal and her identity will be always attached to East Bengal.

#### **Alienation in 'Mrs. Sen's':**

The sixth story of the collection, 'Mrs. Sen's', is the story of a young Indian housewife who after her arranged marriage with a compatriot, migrates to North America where her husband is a university professor. Mrs. Sen starts babysitting Eliot, an eleven year old American boy with a career mother (a western and a neoliberal image of womanhood which strictly contrasts with Mrs. Sen's) and despite their difference in age and race, they develop solidarity and mutual comradeship. They share the same kind loss and alienation: the Indian woman is homesick for her far away



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community in Kolkata; Eliot, in his turn, is curiously attracted by Mrs. Sen's behaviour and develops a liking for the woman and her house as a place of care and affection. In silently observing her the American boy is able to identify his own loneliness, being an only child with a single parent and living in a state of isolation. Mrs. Sen repeatedly remembers her homeland: "At home nobody has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit or express a grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood has come to share." (116) and Eliot understands that "when Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India." (116).

But in America she suffers from alienation: "Here in this place where Mrs. Sen has brought me, I cannot sleep in so much silence." (115) To get relief from her isolation she badly wants to go Calcutta "Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot?" (119) Mrs. Sen's final adventurous decision to drive her husband's car to buy fish ends with a minor accident that marks the epilogue of the effective intimacy between the woman and the boy. The story 'Mrs. Sen's' illustrates a woman's grief for her unresolved assimilation. Both Mrs. Sen and Eliot, despite their differences, are victims of the dislocation, sufferer of alienation.

### **Conclusion:**

From the above discussion we can conclude this paper by saying that Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* definitely shows the experiences of the immigrants. Her characters who expatriate, want to be connected to their country of origin. But in doing so they suffer from a sense of alienation. The immigrants specially the first generation immigrants badly want to maintain the culture of their origin than to be assimilated with the culture of host land. No matter whether the story takes place, the characters struggle with the feeling of exile and struggle between two worlds in which they are torn. Whether the characters are homeless woman from India or an Indian male student in the United States, all characters display the effects of displacement. The immigrants in spite of their displacement, they try to hold tightly to the culture of their native land. Transnationalism plays a pivotal role in the lives of the immigrants bifurcated both by the inherited tradition and the negotiation with the alien culture in this particular book. No matter if the stories set in Bengal or Boston, there is a universal eloquence of the characters in exile or the resultant emotional confusion



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