

Executive Summary of the Report

Name of the Principal Investigator: **Mr. Nirmal Pandit Balasaheb**

UGC reference Number: **File No: 23-1974/10 (WRO) dated 06.10.2010**

Title of the Project:

“The Sense of Alienation in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri”

Objectives of the Project:

1. To comprehend the term ‘alienation’ in Indian diasporic literature.
2. To study ‘alienation’ as a product of globalization and internationalization.
3. To understand several aspects of ‘alienation’ reflected in the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri.
4. To examine the sense of alienation in the narrative world of Jhumpa Lahiri.
5. To explore the experiences of peoples who faced the sense of alienation in an alien land.

Whether objectives were achieved:

Alienation is an old issue which has drawn out deep concerns throughout human history. The introductory chapter deals with the concept of alienation, its interpretation, causes and effects in detail. It also gives an account of the contribution of Jhumpa Lahiri in giving an altogether new edge plethora of diasporic literature by introducing several aspects of alienation in her narrative world. The objectives of project are tried to point out in the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri.

Achievements from the Project:

Several aspects relating to the sense of alienation in the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri chosen for the study have not received adequate critical attention in recent times. The present research project, therefore, assumes significance in attempting to trace the sense of alienation in all manifestations. The sense of alienation in the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri is of greater relevance today when the world has become a global village.

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This study also tries to explore the sense of alienation reflected in *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. It will also invite attention of the young scholars across the world to study the works of other Indian diasporic writers in English.

Summary of the Findings:

Alienation is a feeling of not belonging, estrangement from oneself, other individuals, society or work. The term is widely used. Each one of us has experienced alienation in one form or another whether it be in a school or among family members or in religion or in politics or in society. Alienation is inevitably produced not by the individual but by the shallowness and depersonalization of modern society. The word ‘alienation’ comes from the Latin ‘to be made into a stranger,’ and it once referred to being deprived of your birthright.

With the rapid social changes in the modern era, there was a complete breakdown of simplicity in life and economy. The increasing industrialisation and urbanisation brought various problems in the life of human beings. When answers to such questions were uncertain, feeling of alienation overpowered the human beings.

The theme of alienation becomes a pivotal concept in the literary world. It has been in use in theological, philosophical, sociological and psychological writings. The feeling of uncertainty, insignificance and the search for identity directly leads to loneliness, better to be termed as ‘isolation’ or in modern sense ‘alienation’. Alienation is a state of man’s incompatibility with his milieu.

In the present scenario, writers like Anita Desai, Bharthi Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy, Uma Parameswaran, Manju Kapur, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri etc. write about the theme of alienation in their creative world. The present project primarily focuses the sense of alienation in the fictional world of Jhumpa Lahiri. She in her creative world is constantly concerned with the sense of alienation of the protagonists from themselves, from society and from others. She depicts the

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dilemma of modern man. She is not a social realist in the conventional sense of the term. She is more interested in portraying the responses of a sensitive mind to the world around her/him.

The project runs into the following chapters:

Introduction, Alienation in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Alienation in *The Namesake*, Alienation in *Unaccustomed Earth*, Summing Up.

Contribution to the Society:

The present study deals with the concept of alienation, its various aspects and contribution of select writer in diasporic literature. It also explores the sense of alienation reflected in *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. It is not only the study of Indian diasporic literature but also a study of sociology, history and human psychology. Thus, the present research is related to all the social sciences. The study will consider a comprehensive picture of all disciplines. It will also invite attention of the young scholars across the world to study the works of other Indian diasporic writers in English.

No. of publications (Out of the Project): 01 (one)

I published a paper entitled “Immigrant Maladies in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*”, in *Critical Responses to Indian English Fiction*, (ISBN 978-81-261-4646-8) edited by Arvind M Nawale, Anmol Publications Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 2011.

I presented paper entitled Paper on “National Sensibility in the Narrative World of Jhumpa Lahiri” at the three-day National Seminar on “Nations and Narrations” organised by the Department of English, Dr. Babasahed Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad on 20-22 March 2012.

I presented paper entitled “Anatomising Immigrant Lives in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*” at the APSCH sponsored two-day national seminar on “The Diasporic Discourses and Indian Perspectives” organised by the Department of English, Telangana University, Nizambad on 29-30 October, 2010.

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CRITICAL RESPONSES TO INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

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Immigrant Maladies in Jhumpa
Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

Pandit B. Nirmal

Introduction

Pulitzer Prize Winning author, Jhumpa Lahiri was received exceptional praise from both critics and readers for her two collections of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), and her novel, *The Namesake* (2003). Her oeuvre sensitively explores the topography of human relationships, and her protagonists, many of whom are of Indian descent confronting Western culture, experience heightened, hybrid forms of the alienation, loneliness, misunderstanding and displacement-as well as love-characteristics of such "outsider experience." Her narrative world shuttles between the homeland and the adopted land. The imbibing of influences of various past or contemporary authors and her excellent narrative technique establish her as one of the flowering figures in the World Literature.

Her debut collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, narrates lives of Indians settled in America, of people "navigating between the strict traditions they've inherited and the baffling New World they must encounter every day" (cited from inner flap of *Interpreter of Maladies* 1999). The nine elegant stories focus on

characters, many of Indian heritage who struggle with issues of identity, loss and personal relationships. They suffer from psychic trauma and haunting presence of their last homeland - the land of their birth - and also suffer from the anguish of re-sensitizing home in the land of their choice. They often find themselves sandwiched between two cultures.

These stories introduce us to people who left behind family, friends and the familiar heat and bustle of India to build a new life in America - a cold, bleak land of strangers and new customs. It also describes the sense of loss, longing, exile, alienation, loneliness, displacement, dislocation, experienced by all immigrants, giving voice to their anguish and probing into their complex psychoses. As the child of immigrants, Jhumpa Lahiri experienced the trauma and angst of immigration. Here, I would like to quote lines of Jhumpa Lahiri, "I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways I am so much more American than they are... I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world are more explicit and distressing than for their children... But it bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged" (Sebastian 2010: 1-2).

Immigrant maladies in *Interpreter of Maladies*

Out of the nine dazzling short stories, six are set in the United States and three in India. Through these nine stories, Jhumpa Lahiri probes into immigrants' maladies that disrupt relationships between characters in an alien land. As an omniscient observer, she gives a minute description of immigrant life, their various maladies, angst, trauma and dreams. Lahiri's success is in the fact that she has emerged as an interpreter of immigrant maladies in its various nuances and manifestation.

The first story, *A Temporary Matter*, deals with marital discord or more explicitly lack of communication in a marriage. As D.H. Lawrence says, "the great relationship for humanity will always be

the relation between man and woman" (Nityanandan 2005: 24). Shoba and Shukumar, a young couple, have drifted apart after losing their child in a miscarriage. Both deliberately avoid each other. Their malady in failure in communication in emotional stress. In the darkness of the power cut, the silences between them begin to melt away. "Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again" (19). The sudden intimacy that has crept into a relationship-gone-sour is beautifully portrayed by Lahiri. The story ends in mutual sharing of pain of loss. It was indeed a small temporary matter that brought about the crisis and the resolution.

In the second story, *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, Lahiri concerns herself with interpreting the maladies that beget prejudices among people of different national identity of geographical separation. It also reminds us of Lahiri's own experiences of growing up as an immigrants' child through the mouthpiece character, Lilia. The story is about an Indian-American Lilia, who sees the similarity between her Bengali parents and Mr. Pirzada a Pakistani from Dacca. She is intrigued by the visitor whose watch is set to Dacca time. Through her eyes we see the life that expatriate lives - separated by distance but united by sentiment. As a child, she watches in surprise and awe the unfolding drama of Mr. Pirzada's life.

The title story, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, acts as a kind of metaphor for what Lahiri as writer is performing: she interprets the "maladies" of her characters. It is about a second generation Indian American couple Mr. Das and Mrs. Das on a tour of India with their three children. Their tour guide, Mr. Kapsi is also the interpreter of maladies of foreign patients in doctor's clinic. In an intimate talk between Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapsi, she confesses that one of her two boys is the fruit of her husband's friend. Mr. Kapsi tries to console her with the query, "Is it really plain you feel, Mrs. Das or is it guilt?" (66). The story reveals how guilt-ridden people like Mrs. Das seek remedy for their ailments in the wrong place.

A Real Durwan tells of Booti Ma, a stair well sweeper deported to Calcutta after partition. She is interpreter of her own past and present and Lahiri brings out the pathos of her situation with gentle

sympathy she recalls about her woes and sufferings she encountered ever since. In the end, Booei Ma is eventually thrown out with her belongings, and the residents search for a real dinner.

The fifth story, *1001* chronicles the extramarital love affair of an Indian with a Caucasian woman, Miranda, a young midwestern woman has an affair with a married Bengali man called Devajit Mitra. She tries to adopt Bengali culture, learn Bengali, eat Indian food, watch Indian movies and to the end she realises futility and uselessness of this relation. Lahiri wants to show how prejudices are built and relationships broken due to misunderstanding, ignorance and miscommunication.

Mrs. Sen focuses on the life of an immigrant woman abroad, working as a baby-sitter for eleven years old Eliot. She has to learn driving in order to keep her job. She finds it difficult to learn the American life style. Her job mirrors her fear, frustration, isolation, loneliness and homesickness. Mrs. Sen has failed to get Americanised. She longs for her life in India and nostalgically speaks of it to Eliot. Through this story, Lahiri points out inability of Indian American immigrant to understand and adopt the western culture.

This Blessed House presents the story of young Asian couple - Sanjeev and Twinkle, who have just their married life in Connecticut. They encounter "Christian Paraphernalia" (137) left behind by their former house owner. Twinkle is a character opposite to Mrs. Sen, fully Americanized in her life style. Sanjeev finds difficult to adjust to her ways, regrets for having not married a girl of Indian sensibilities. The "Christian Paraphernalia" (137) is both the clash and reunion of the young couple in the end.

The next story, *The Treatment of Bibi Halder*, is about a strange malady Bibi Halder is suffering from. She is very naive and believes that marriage is a panacea for all maladies. Lahiri presents the pathetic story of a rural Indian girl who undergoes treatments for her maladies. She becomes somewhat relieved when she hears from a well-meaning doctor that "relations will calm her blood" (162). Her only relations are an elderly cousin and his wife, who keep her isolated in the storage room. But by 'relations' the doctor clearly

means 'a man' (160), 'a husband' (163). At the end of the story, Bibi gets disgraced by someone in her loveliness and under the supervision of neighbours delivers a son. Now, Bibi stands "cond" (172).

And the last story, *The Third and Final Continent* brings Lahiri's interpretation of the maladies of her protagonist who undergoes the pangs of immigration to England and then to U.S.A. The story recounts a Bengali youngman's departure for England, where he stays for some time and then shifts to America to accept a full-time job as a librarian. He admits, "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" (198). These lines express a universal experience—the experience of all immigrants who yearn for a home, who yearn to belong and who yearn to be rooted.

Conclusion

To conclude, *Interpreter of Maladies* clearly reveals the maladies of immigrants in its various nuances and manifestation. Having won critical acclaim for "its grace, acuity and compassion in detailing lives, transported from India to America," (Sinha 2008:185) the elegant collection of short stories remains a subtle evocation of the wren and complex portrayal of family life and Indian immigrants trying to saddle two cultures—their Indian heritage and the American dream. In all, Jhumpa Lahiri only interprets the "maladies" faced by immigrants but does not suggest any solutions to these traumatic maladies. She emerges as the 'interpreter of maladies' not the 'physician of maladies' in the Indian diasporic literature.

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