

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Search for a Sense of Belonging: A Thematic Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's Selected Short Stories**

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**Abstract:**

The Indian subcontinent has witnessed numerous migrations before and after Independence, from Partition migration to moving abroad for better opportunities for work, to getting married to someone living in foreign land. Often a physical or geographical sense of belonging is discussed in diasporic literature, but another aspect i.e. is the emotional one is often overlooked. The sense of belonging which comes with relationships remains largely unexplored. There is a difference between how we perceive our relations with society, country and with our loved ones. One of the most common examples to unravel the belongingness is the marital tie-ups where husband and wife both seem to belong to each other. This theme is remarkably addressed in one of the eminent writers of contemporary times, Jhumpa Lahiri. Better known as a diasporic writer, Lahiri deals with the lives of immigrants in foreign lands. Lahiri, who herself has lived in London, US and Italy, has experienced the struggles and adventures of transition and change, which reflects in her writings. This paper will study three short stories A Temporary Matter, When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine and The Third and Final

Continent from Lahiri's short story collection Interpreter of Maladies to explore how the human relationships work in a foreign land in an attempt to find a sense of belonging.

**Keywords:** Sense of belonging, human relationships, migrants, tracing roots, Indo-Pak.

The support towards one country or community doesn't necessarily mean one has to stand against another. The cultures across the world are so intricately woven that it is not only difficult to dissect but also an attempt so futile that it will not yield much results. The eternal nomadic adventures of human nature are exemplified in the umpteen stories of explorers crossing seas, traders expanding their businesses and scholars leaving home in search of education and enlightenment. The motives may have changed over centuries, and while it may still carry a certain charm and thrill about them, the technological advancements have made the phenomenon easier and more frequent.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

It is also important to observe that the diasporic communities living in foreign lands never miss an attempt to trace their roots. Either it may be through celebrating Indian festivals while living overseas or by engaging the children into fun activities which introduces them to their culture and tradition. Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies* discusses various such incidents where the characters engage in recalling their past to create a clearer picture of present. The advent of modern times brought conveniences in our lives along with luxuries, and issues like existential crisis, identity crisis etc. The urge to find a certain sense of familiarity is often recorded in the works of diasporic writers.

Nilanjana

Sudeshna "Jhumpa" Lahiri was born on July 11, 1967. Lahiri is an American author of Indian origin known for her short stories, novels and essays in English, and, more recently, in Italian. Lahiri was born in London and later shifted to US with her parents. Her initial years where she spent her formative years and received her education in US left a deep impression on her writings. The stories she heard during her early years and the conflicts she felt while trying to identify with one, or more cultures watered her multifaceted personality. During an interview with Francesca Pellas, Lahiri said, "I used to look for an identity that could be sharp,

acceptable, mine. But now the idea of a precise identity seems a trap..."<sup>1</sup> After completing her studies she turned towards learning Italian, a language she fell in love for the rest of her life. Lahiri now writes in Italian, but the persisting search for a familiarity still reflects in her works. However, she now accepts the fluidity regarding one's identity and embraces the diversity her life and journey has offered her.

Her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* contains nine stories on different themes, woven together by a single thread of Diaspora. The language and technicality are more American than Indian but the subjects are somewhat Indian in their approach. She pens down the experiences of her childhood as well as the stories from her family and community in fiction. Whether it is the portrayal of protagonist in the last story 'The Third and Final Continent' which is similar to her father, or the glimpses of her uncle's life in her novel *The Namesake*, the incidents shared by her and her family find place in the writer's works.

The first story *A Temporary Matter* recalls the game from Shobha's life in an attempt to revisit her past and clear the actions of her future. The story is set in contemporary times and discusses the life

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<sup>1</sup> <https://lithub.com/what-am-i-trying-to-leave-behind-an-interview-with-jhumpa-lahiri/>

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

of a couple struggling to revive their relationship after undergoing a tormenting accident. Both Shobha and Shukumar share same cultural background while living and coping up with the adversities of a foreign land. The desire of being a perfect hostess, stacking up preparations for Indian meals in pantry and offering warm welcome to guests are only few of the pieces in the story which come together to form a coherent study of Indian relations.

Lahiri's second story When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine also shares the theme of revisiting the past. While the young protagonist Lilia tries to learn about her history, she also compares it to the Revolutionary War of America. When Lilia's class teacher asks her to work on the American history of war, she sneaks into another aisle of library and starts reading Indian history instead. When confronted by teacher though, she surrenders and gets on with her assignment. The curiosity reflected in Lilia's behavior is quite similar to the inquisitiveness shared by people living away from their homelands. Evidently people feel a sense of longing when they come across even the smallest of keywords or the most futile instances which readily make them recall their home.

The first two stories point out and attempt to search the past to reconnect not only with the people around the lead characters but also to re-establish lost connections with their origin. When Lilia

addresses Mr. Pirzada as an Indian behind his back, her father quickly starts correcting her on her mistake. He explains her how the country is now divided and Mr. Pirzada would not like to be called an Indian. The story is written with a backdrop of crucial years leading to 1971 war. It discusses the camaraderie and feeling of mutual brotherhood between people of different countries which share same roots.

Lahiri expresses the emotions of different communities and countries of South-Asian people living in foreign land. She explicates how people sometimes belonging to enemy countries can develop mutual love and respect for each other while living amidst an entirely different culture and community. A strange fact that often goes unnoticed by people living in these native lands is that the nouveau-enemies once shared the culture, custom and tradition, and hence their bonds among themselves should be stronger than with those of the West.

While her first story A Temporary Matter explores the relationship of husband and wife in foreign land, it also details the psychological changes that often take place in the lives of couples after undergoing a trauma. The way Shobha and Shukumar keep avoiding each other for months, without trying to confront the situation and resolve it, is more or less still a western impact. While some would call it a western influence on the relationship of husband

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

and wife, chances are the situation could still be similar had the incident happened in Indian background. A marriage in Indian subcontinent, however sacred it must be thought, and no matter how much the ratio and proportion of unhappy or failed marriages have increased over the years; the fact stands that there have always been married couples who failed to confront each other and resolve the conflicts.

The theme of alienation doesn't happen only on social or physiological level, the psychological alienation also manifests at different levels in the story. For one part, a feeling of alienation happens because of the society they live in, for another, it also happens because both the husband and wife fail to sympathize with each other's pain and suffering. Towards the climax when Shobha breaks the news of moving into new apartment as she wanted to be by herself, it is then only that Shukumar reveals the gender of the baby and that he had reached hospital in time to see the baby, a fact which Shobha was totally unaware of. The tears in the climax prove to be cathartic, a much needed confrontation that could have taken place months ago.

Shobha and Shukumar seek a sense of belonging not only in the physical world but in their emotions as well. Indian society is more close-knit than its western counterpart, hence the relationships Indians share are different from those living

anywhere else. This difference in complexity of relationship is explored in Lahiri's another story 'The Third and Final Continent'. Written in the first person narrative, the story gives us a brief account of how different cultures and traditions shape our perspectives towards relationships. The relation between the narrator and Mrs. Croft appears stronger than with Mrs. Croft and her daughter. Mrs. Croft and the narrator's mother both suffered from ailments before they died, and somehow it was the narrator who took care of both of them. The Indian roots of sentimentality, emotion, love and affection become more apparent as the story gradually unfurls. The difference in societies and the way people handle relationships is also evident from the way the two women handle their widowhood. While the narrator's mother goes into depression, Mrs. Croft stands firm and takes charge of her life and lives independently. The emotional sense of belonging which Shobha and Shukumar were searching in each other, Mrs. Croft found it in her piano lessons; a solid ground which helped her to stand strong. Shobha stands in between; she represents a generation of women which has left the deprived state and is gradually moving towards an independent, powerful womanhood. She represents two countries, two communities, two societies, two cultures and two generations. Shobha represents a territory where feminism has

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

started sprouting, where women, even Indian ones, do not dwell in the weak pasts. Shobha represents the biggest transition among all of Lahiri's stories.

A similar complexity in relationship is discussed in the story When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine, but unlike the previous ones, this story deals with the sense of familiarity towards a changing geography. Mr. Pirzada who witnessed one partition, was about to become part of a second one through 1971 Indo-Pak war. When Lilia asks to hand out another glass "for the Indian man",<sup>2</sup> her father promptly says, "Mr. Pirzada won't be coming today. More importantly, Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian...Not since Partition. Our country was divided in 1947."<sup>3</sup> The whole calculation seemed incomprehensible to the young narrator and when she inquires about its resonance with the date of India's independence, her father, in the most concise manner spills out the brutal reality of the time, "That too. One moment we were free and then we were sliced up... like a pie."<sup>4</sup>

Lilia, a ten year old, can't seem to comprehend why Mr. Pirzada belonged to another country when he spoke the same language and ate the same food. Even after years, the voice of narrator echoes through the past

It made no sense to me. 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. 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.<sup>5</sup>

The similarities in culture and tradition made it quite hard for South-Asian communities living in foreign land to distance themselves from people who looked and felt familiar. Even today a lot of Indians and Pakistanis living abroad find it easier to communicate with each other as compared to the natives. The idea that geographical separation could tear apart age-old associations was unthinkable. It was worse for the people who had already gone through the pain of Indo-Pak partition and now again had to distance themselves from another country and community. The separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan brought havoc upon already shattered lives of people, and just when people had started identifying with new surroundings they were bombarded with another division and war. One can only imagine the loss of

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<sup>2</sup> Interpreter of Maladies, pg 21.

<sup>3</sup> Interpreter of Maladies, pg 21.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pg 22.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pg 22.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

belongingness and traumatized identification.

Prominent critic M.A.R. Habib in the book *History of Literary Criticism* says that, "Said sees culture as that which fixes the range of meanings of "home", "belonging", and "community"; beyond this is anarchy and homelessness."<sup>6</sup> This sense of belonging is what a lot of people living in foreign lands are trying to trace. When Mr. Pirzada becomes disturbed after watching news on the television, his sorrow arises from the feeling of loss of home, losing a sense of belonging and his inability to identify with a familiar community. Families which lived together for decades, people who became each other's families because they shared the same roots could not understand the recurring wars and partition.

Lahiri explores the ease of succeeding generations in her stories, the generations which did not have to go through the trouble of crossing over cultures and borders. While there were conveniences among the younger generation, there was worse confusion in them regarding their identity and roots. The first generations of migrants had at least been among their own people and hence were well acquainted with their roots, but the succeeding generations were deprived of that exposure. Lilia's character in *When*

*Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* represents the later; a generation which was in process of tracing its roots while keeping in mind how the human relationships worked in particular surroundings. When questioned of her education by her father the narrator answers that she studied American history at school; an attempt quite futile considering one had to learn someone else's history while overlooking one's own past.

Lahiri's short stories enigmatically develop from geographical belongingness to emotional ones. The layering and complexities of these stories discuss one of the most humane aspects of civilization and immigration. While all the people across the world have moved around the globe for various reasons, the natives of Indian subcontinent, people from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh specifically are intertwined because of their cultural roots and hence in a foreign territory might easily find a feeling of mutual love and respect for each other.

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<sup>6</sup> *History of Literary Criticism*, pg 746.