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Isolation and Community in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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"As is frequently the case with immigrants in general, the Diaspora is also keen on taking pride - some self respect and dignity- in the culture and tradition of the original homeland.

This frequently takes the form of some kind of 'national' or civilization appreciation of being an Indian in origin."

-Amartya Sen in the "Argumentative Indian"

While Indian writers have been making a significant contribution to the world literature since Independence, the past few years saw a massive flourishing of Indian fiction in the global market. Though the writers vary in style yet there is a common thread binding them together- The sense of exile and alienation. The recent literature of emigration and exile is forged by perspectives that emerge from at least two cultures, identities and in some cases, languages. The themes in migrant literature however vary, depending not only on the country of origin but also on the pattern of the migration itself. The attention of the first generation migrant literature is often directed at the act of migration, the passage to another land, the reception in the emigration country, issues of rootlessness and racism, nostalgia and longing. While some of these issues do crop up in second generation migrant writing, it does so often in much more morally complex way. Affiliations are more ambivalent, there is recognition that globaluprootedness is a global phenomenon and the focus is not on the country of origin or arrival, but in the community that does not fully belong to either.

Jhumpa Lahiri has expressed this sense of feeling in exile more than once. Her first book of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, earned her critical notice as well as popular acclaim, not to speak of string of awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000. What sets Lahiri apart is the combination of her absorbing concern for the moral and psychological truth related to the immigrant's discontentment with the outstanding literary qualities which makes her writing- supple, elegant, economical, ironic and compassionate, marvelously capturing the nuances and minutely observed details. "Though endowed with a distinct universal speech, her stories do bring out rather successfully the predicament of the Indians who trapeze between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind, and the other encountered but not necessarily assimilated", remarks Aruti Nayar.

With its characters poised between the old world of India and the unnerving newness of America, Jhumpa Lahiri's prize winning collection of short stories, The *Interpreter of Maladies*, reveals her commendable grasp of biculturalism and authoritative grace. Having won critical acclaim for its "grace, acuity and compassion in detailing lives, transported from India to America," the book remains a subtle evocation of the warm and complex portrayal of family life and Indian immigrants trying to saddle two cultures – their

Indian heritage and American dream. Lahiri introduces us to people who left behind their families and 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. Lahiri's subject is the loneliness of dislocation, cultural displacement, sense of identity and belonging with one foot in two worlds. Imbued with the fine details of both Indian and American cultures, Lahiri's stories describe with universal compassion, the fragmentation of identities, the alienation and sense of loneliness experienced by all immigrants, giving voice to their anguish and probing into their complex psychoses. Lahiri "hits her stride closer to home on the uncertain ground of the immigrant, the sense of loss and longing that permeates other Indians abroad . . . with a rare eye for the details of displacement."

The American short story genre is thriving and provides fertile ground for scholarly discourse. That being said, there is an unfortunate dearth of scholarship in the field. While collections of short stories often receive commendations (for example, *Interpreter of Maladies* received the Pulitzer Prize in 2000), they do not receive the critical and scholarly attention they deserve. A recurrent theme in the contemporary American short story in general concerns the tension between isolation and connection/community, a theme that is prevalent throughout American literature and society. As feminist relational psychoanalyst Carol Gilligan explains, Within the context of US society, the values of separation, independence, and autonomy are so historically grounded, so reinforced by waves of immigration, and so deeply rooted in the natural rights that they are often taken as facts: that people are by nature separate, independent from one another, and self-governing. To call these "facts" into question is seemingly to question the value of freedom. And yet this is not at all the case. The questioning of separation has nothing to do with questioning freedom but rather with seeing and speaking about relationships.

Freedom has been misinterpreted as autonomy and separation from others. Instead, freedom should include the ability to have meaningful relationships with others. The tension between connection and separation, or autonomy and intimacy, can be found in many works of American literature, most especially in the short story. Contemporary American women writers, who have greatly enriched the short story genre in recent years, have added their own variations to this thematic tension. I attempt to explore those variations through the lens of relational psychoanalysis in Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a member of the marginalized group: an Indian American writer and in addition she belongs to the more general group of women who are marginalized by the larger patriarchal society. Bonnie TuSmith, in her study "My Relatives: Community in Contemporary Ethnic American Literatures" concludes that "ethnic literature does indeed offer an alternative discourse, a 'first language' of community rather than isolation" (190). I would like to broaden this statement to apply to any isolated or marginalized group. While ethnic literature includes a large amount of work showcasing the tension between isolation and community, the tension that surfaces because of attempts to be at the same time within and separate from community is prevalent throughout the stories. The central characters are usually displaced or marginalized from the mainstream society and are often searching for a community in which to define themselves or their identity. While connection with others indeed seems crucial to the central character's sense of self, the character often exhibits an ambivalent attitude towards

such connection by shunning the very community she craves. Because of her displaced or marginalized status, she develops rigid defenses that protect against the pain of rejection but that also prevent connection or relationship. The search for a sense of individuality within community is a trope that permeates these collections. The tensions that arise in these short stories center on the struggle to find a balance between autonomy and connection/community. The individual must feel separate and independent but, at the same time, connected and emotionally bound to others in order to successfully define her true self. Emotional bonds are particularly important to the character's sense of true self and are more important than being physically included in a group. Emotional connection must be present for the character to identify herself in relation to others. Therefore, to be an integral part of a community she does not have to be in such a community physically or geographically. Kenneth H. Baldwin and David K. Kirby, in their introduction to their study of community and isolation in American fiction, argue that "although no sharp line can be drawn between external and internal worlds, it is clear that the notion of 'community' has steadily become less a matter of geography, consanguinity, and visible bonds and more a matter of shared psychological and spiritual states" (x). Community, therefore, is not only a physical state but is also, and more importantly, a mental state where two or more people share connection. However, to be connected emotionally also carries threats. One particular threat lies in the possibility of losing sense of self and assimilating into the other; another threat is the prospect of rejection by the other. The characters in these collections resist some connections because the threat of losing their hard-earned autonomy is too looming. The risks of revealing emotional vulnerability, too, dissuades them from letting others too close. They struggle between the navigation of a physical and emotional sense of community and the need to feel independent from the very same community. Many times, their lack of success in obtaining this balance causes them to retreat or be pushed into isolation, where they then yearn even more for relationship, Isolation can be caused by numerous factors. An individual can be excluded by a community because of difference, or she can purposely isolate herself from it. Sometimes both conditions exist. In this situation, the isolated individual may attempt to embrace her isolation in an effort to define herself against the community that is isolating her. By isolating herself from the community in which she truly wants to belong, the protagonist develops a sense of control, even if it is illusory. This sense of control often makes it even more difficult for the protagonist to connect because she does not want to risk losing that illusion of control.

Lahiri points out that the older she gets, the more aware she is that she has "inherited a sense of exile" which strongly pervades her major writings. Lahiri's major concern is the "question of identity which is always difficult one, but more for those who are culturally displaced, like the immigrants are, or those who grow up simultaneously." In an interview, when asked how she felt growing up as the child of immigrants, Lahiri explained," It was always a question of allegiance, of choice. I wanted to please my parent . . . I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peer . . . It was a classic case of divided entity." Thus we can say that it is the complications of being a hyphenated American that informs her work completely. Her true genius lies in capturing the ordinary moments in the life of her characters and

transforming them into works of art. She combined her authentic familiarity with the lives of the Indian Diaspora and her gift of inhabiting the space of her characters while describing the most mundane experiences, thus making the readers identify with the characters.

With deft and precise strokes Lahiri, like a true miniaturist, straddles between the two worlds of Boston and Bengal with great ease. In her collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, many of Lahiri's people are Indian immigrants trying to adjust to a new life in the United States, and their cultural displacement is a kind of index of a more existential sense of dislocation. One couple living near a small New England campus ''used to trail their fingers, at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world'' in search of new friends ("When Mr. Pirzada came to dine" 24). Another faculty wife, who has taken a baby-sitting job to fill her empty afternoons, tells her young charge that everything she cares about remains in India in the home she left behind. ''Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me,'' she complains, ''I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence.'' ("Mrs. Sen's" 115)

What Mrs. Sen misses in America is the close sense of community she knew in India. ''Not everybody has a telephone,'' she explains. ''But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements'' (116). In America, she worries, she could scream at the top of her lungs and not a single person would come to her aid.

The first story in the collection, "A Temporary Matter", very strategically unfolds the coldness that has entered the relationship between the thirty plus couple, Shoba and Shukumar, after the still birth of their first child, The ' temporary matter' of power failure for a few evenings leads to permanent severance of ties between them . In the event of their electricity going to be cut off for one hour every evening at eight for a few days, the wife proposes a game of saying something to each other they had "never told before" (13). In the candle lit darkness, the initial innocence in the game slowly acquires the grimness of manoeuvre intent on disclosing the wife's wish to separate from the husband for which she had already made adequate preparation.

"Shukumar hadn't spent as much time in India as Shoba had" (12). For Shukumar, whose parents had settled in New Hampshire, his first visit to India taking place when he was an infant proved a nightmarish experience as "he'd nearly died of amoebic dysentery" then (12). He never visited India again. It was only after his father died that the country begins to interest him and even then he merely studies "its history from course books as if it were any other subject" (12). A recital by a group of Bengali poets in Cambridge proves boring to him: "He was unable to decipher the literary diction and couldn't join the rest of the audience as they sighed and nodded solemnly after certain phrases" (13). The event of power failure also becomes reminiscent of India. In the words of Shoba: "It is like India. Sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch. I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark. He baby just cried and cried. It must have been so hot" (11).

Lahiri's characters realize, however, that America offers them, or at least their children, opportunities they would never have at home. In the story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", the narrator, Lilia, says her mother knew she ''was assured a safe life, an easy life, a fine education,

every opportunity'' in the States. ''I would never have to eat rationed food or obey curfews or watch riots from my rooftop or hide neighbors in water tanks to prevent them from being shot, as she and my father had'' (26).

In the course of this story, 10-year-old Lilia is initiated into the anxieties and complexities of the grown-up world. In experiencing third-hand the travails of her parents' friend, Mr. Pirzada, who has lost contact with his family back home in Dacca during the civil war of 1971, Lilia learns about politics and political turmoil for the first time and the personal consequences of such change." When Lilia refers to him as "the Indian Man" her father corrects her: "Mr Pirzada is no longer considered Indian . . . not since partition. Our country was divided" (26). She learns what it means to face losing one's family and one's home, and she learns just how vastly daily concerns in suburban America differ from those in less stable parts of the world:

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, . . . (25)

Eliot, the 11-year-old boy in "Mrs. Sen's", learns a similar lesson from his homesick baby sitter, who introduces him to the concepts of isolation and exile and loss. The story reveals Mrs Sen's fondness for her home but, as Eliot understood, "When Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables" (116). The story brings in subtle contrast between the home country of Mrs. Sen and the country she lives in. There is an implicit emphasis on the concept of home, family and neighborhood as especially characteristic of India. One of the two things which made her happy, as Eliot gradually learnt was "the arrival of a letter from her family". When she receives one with a happy news the apartment becomes "suddenly too small to contain her" (116).

In fact, most of Lahiri's characters find emotional connection elusive or fragmentary at best. In "A Temporary Matter", a husband and wife have grown estranged after their son's stillbirth. During a week of electrical shutdowns in their neighborhood, they find a parlor game — ''telling each other something we've never told before'' – devolving into a hurtful game of guilt and humiliation (13). By the end of the week, both are secretly relieved to find their marriage coming to a close.

"This Blessed House" presents a second generation immigrant, who along with her husband moves into a new house in the US. The young Indian newlyweds in "This Blessed House" similarly uncover the fault lines in their partnership as a silly tiff over some Christian knickknacks discovered in their new home (a 3-D postcard of St. Francis, a Nativity snow globe, a paint-by-number picture of the three wise men) escalates into a fight not only about religion but also about autonomy and control.

Two pairs of unhappy liaisons also stand at the center of "Interpreter of Maladies" and "Sexy". In the title story, a tour guide who is showing an American-born couple around India recognizes in the pair's exchanges – ''the bickering, the indifference, and the protracted silences'' – the same signs of discord he sees in his own marriage (53). His flirtation with the woman, however, undergoes a strange metamorphosis after she tells him about cheating on her husband; he begins to suspect that he has simply been used as a receptacle for her guilt, that he is

only a bit player in her life story. The polarity of vision is achieved by Lahiri with the help of her own impressions of India, when she used to come to India along with her parents as a child: "The terrain is very much the terrain of my own life-new England and New York, and Calcutta always hovering in the background."

As for "Sexy", it depicts two adulterous couples: Laxmi's cousin's husband, who is cheating on his wife with a woman he met on an airplane; and Laxmi's friend Miranda, who is sleeping with a married man named Dev whom she met at Filene's department store. After Miranda spends an afternoon baby-sitting the son of Laxmi's cousin, she finds herself re-evaluating her affair with Dev. It chronicles the extra marital affair of an Indian with a Caucasian woman, told from a non-Indian perspective. Miranda's childhood memory of a reaction to a painting of goddess Kali, evoking trepidation and horror does not deter her in anyway. She tries to learn all about Bengali culture and even makes an abortive bid to learn Bengali, though before her marriage she had ridiculed his family as the only Indian family in the neighbourhood.

The "Third and Final Continent" has its protagonist, an immigrant from India who exclaims about his survival in New World: "I know that my achievement is quite ordinary," he admits and continues:

I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home and certainly I am not first one. Still there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, 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. Based on the life of her own father, the story tells of a young man who came to US, has an arranged marriage in India and writes about his new wife and the life together. Through the eyes of a young Indian, the narrator experiences the cultural difference between the young man and his aging landlady.

Discussing the title of the book with Elizabeth Farnsworth, Jhumpa Lahiri observes:

The title is . . . Well, it's the title of one of the stories in the book. And the phrase itself was something I thought of before I even wrote that story. I thought of it one day after I ran into someone I knew. I asked him what he was doing with himself, and he told me he was working as an interpreter in a doctor's office in Brookline, Massachusetts, where I was living at the time, and he was translating for a doctor who had a number of Russian patients. And he was fluent in English and Russian. And on my way home, after running into him, I thought of this . . . I just heard this phrase in my head. And I liked the way it sounded, but I wasn't quite sure what it meant, but I wrote it down. I just wrote down the phrase itself. And for years, I sort of would try to write a story that somehow fit the title. And I don't think it happened for maybe another four years that I actually thought of a story, the plot of a story that corresponded to that phrase. I think that, in part, it's a reflection of what I observed my parents experiencing and their friends, their circle of fellow Indian immigrant friends. It's also, in part, drawn from my own experiences and a sense of... I always say that I feel that I've inherited a sense of that loss from my parents because it was so palpable all the time while I was growing up, the sense of what my parents had sacrificed in movingto the United States, and in so many ways, and yet at

the same time, remaining here and building a life here and all that that entailed.

As per her role as the interpreter in the stories, she opines,

I think that, in part, it's a reflection of what I observed my parents experiencing and their friends, their circle of fellow Indian immigrant friends. It's also, in part, drawn from my own experiences . . . I always say that I feel that I've inherited a sense of that loss from my parents because it was so palpable all the time while I was growing up, the sense of what my parents had sacrificed in moving to the United States, and in so many ways, and yet at the same time, remaining here and building a life here and all that that entailed.

In the opinion of Michiko Kakutani, "It's all about wonder bread and curry, a mingling culture and conflicting hearts and liking America but longing for India."

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