



**Lapis Lazuli**

**An International Literary Journal (LLILJ)**

**Vol.4 / NO.2/Autumn 2014**

An Appraisal of 'Home' as a Psychological space in *Interpreter of Maladies*

Altaf Ahmad Bhat

Shabir Ahmad Mir

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri has emerged as a glittering star on the recent literary map with dynamism. Her fiction explores new regions in the cosmos of Diasporic Writing. She presents the holistic picture of displaced people with sociological reality and psychological mystery. The present study evaluates her concept of 'home' in the light of her debut book *Interpreter of Maladies*. Although

Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ) ISSN 2249-4529

Vol.4/ NO.2/Autumn 2014

URL of the Journal- <http://pintersociety.com/>

URL of the Issue: <http://pintersociety.com/vol-4-no-2autumn-2014/>

© [www.pintersociety.com](http://www.pintersociety.com)

## An Appraisal of 'Home' as a Psychological space in *Interpreter of Maladies*

the stories are multilayered and touch several concerns of Indian immigrants living in America, yet their core is the notion of 'home' both as a geographical entity and as a psychological space.

### **Introduction**

The present era is doubtlessly globalised and it appears as though the territory of our planet has been shrunk and contracted. It is not only verbal nexus such as telecommunication, mobile connectivity and internet interaction, but also the physical nearness which has resulted with the movements of the people from one place to another. As it is known that there is a rat race competition, and to get the fundamental requirements of life fulfilled at one's own place is a herculean task. Therefore, the people leave for alien lands to make perpetual the flame of their existence with prestige and consolation. There are others who embrace voluntarily the global culture. Such people go out to reside in highly progressed metropolitan cities to carry on their educational pursuits and to strive for economic gains. Moreover, there are a few people who are flung away by the law of the land as exiles, or they leave for abroad themselves to evade the punishment of the crimes either committed by them deliberately or inadvertently. Whatsoever, the displacement may be, the people are not absolutely cognizant about the pangs and troubles they have to face on the foreign soil. To get the adequate adjustment and assimilation is not only difficult but next to impossible.

The writers, being more sensitive and reflective, are affected by the issues of these migrants. The physical as well as psychological trauma of the people on the new dreamy lands, impinge upon the minds of the writers. Such writers are either themselves immigrants and have first hand experiences of the circumstances which the people face, or they are inspired to

incorporate these concerns by dint of their causal visits and bookish information. The artists who deal with matters aforementioned are in literary terminology called Diasporic writers. Diasporic literature has emerged as a peculiar subgenre of post-colonial writing.

### **Historical Background of Diasporas**

The ‘Diaspora’ is a derivative word and its origin lies in two Greek words ‘dia’ and ‘speirein’ which etymologically and respectively mean “through” and ‘scatter’. The Diasporic writing mostly involves people of two different nations and cultures which are in sharp contrast as in Colonial Literature where there is always a clash between the colonizers and the colonized. The relation between these two opposite poles is always ambiguous or what Homi Bhaba says an ‘ambivalent’ one. The people of these varied homelands never come to friendly terms. The ‘otherness’ regularly pricks their conscience and consequently, the mutual warmth never develops within them.

Basically the concept Diaspora has biblical roots. According to the ancient history, there was a tribe of Israelites located at Judoka, and around 700 B.C., it was attacked by Assyrians and the race of Jews was dispersed. They moved and settled to three different places-Babylon, Judoka and Egypt, and these regions fall in Middle East. By 170 A.D., Romans assaulted once again Judoka and made it a colony under their power and supremacy. The Jews in this way lost their mother land. A Roman Governor was appointed to exploit the people without an iota of pity and kindness for the tyrannized subjects. His sole purpose was to squeeze money out of Jewish public who out of compulsion scattered all over the world-Asia, Africa and Europe as well.

### **Indian Diasporas**

## An Appraisal of 'Home' as a Psychological space in *Interpreter of Maladies*

So far as the Indian Diaspora is concern, it can be historically divided into two broad categories: Old Diaspora and New Diaspora. The former class consists of indentured labourers who migrated to Caribbean Islands like Trinidad and South Africa. The latter group includes the immigrants who follow the global cultural wave and settled themselves in the different parts of the world. Therefore, these peoples comprises of migrants, immigrants, expatriated, expels, refugees, foreign residents and dislodged communities and ethnic minorities living in exile. These terms are so identical that they crises-cross one another and are mostly employed interchangeably.

Indian English literature is a huge corpus produced by writers belonging to India. Among them some are born Indian while as others are related to it by their ancestral roots, and have not even set their feet on Indian soil any time in their life. Thus, they have an artificial glimpse of our nation taken from outside as an estranged and exotic place. The concrete example is V.S. Naipaul. Moreover, the giant writers who have left their indelible marks on the canvas of immigrant and expatriate writing are Kamla Markandaya, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Bharti Mukharjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Suntra Gupta, Rohintan Mistery, Chitra Bannarjee Divakarani, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and so on. But the credit of writing first book in English goes to Dean Mohamed who breathed his first in Patna, India. After spending some fifteen years in the Bengal army of the British East India Company, migrated to Europe, and first settled in Ireland, then moved to England in 1784. There he brought out his prototype- *The Travels of Dean Mohamed* in 1794. Therefore, it becomes explicitly clear that Indo-Anglian literature especially immigrant writing is not without an elongated history.

## **Jhumpa Lahiri**

Jhumpa Lahiri born as Nilanjana Sudheshna to Bengali Indian parents in London in 1967, and moved to the United States when she was only three. Her upbringing and personality is solely foreign and she knows the deep and far corners of Indian people on American soil. She depicts with authority the misery and hardships of these hybrid type of people with accuracy and with factual vignettes. Lahiri occupies a foremost position in the evolution and development of expatriate and immigrant literature. She has reached acme of fame with her debut *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), a collection of nine short stories and then with her maiden novel *The Namesake* (2003). Whatever she pens down is sufficient to catch the sight of the public. Her concern is almost the same as those of her senior Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee but is not without difference. Her main focus is on socio-cultural and psychological estrangement of her personages, and highlights their troubles and tribulations which they undergo on the queer new world

### **Concept of 'Home' in *Interpreter of Maladies***

Jhumpa Lahiri raises the question of 'home' and 'belongingness' repeatedly in her writing. Stewart Hall says that "people who have been dispersed forever from their homelands... belong at one and the same time to several homes...thereby creating forms of belonging"(310). This idea of diverse belongings has a matching relevance with the fictional delineation of Lahiri's characters. It identifies the interactive dialogue between displaced and the host culture, and considers identity as a dynamic rather than a static process. In Lahiri's "The Third and Final Continent" for example, the principal narrator gives reflection of his early life in America as a bachelor and then a married person. It shows a constant improvisation of belonging without

## An Appraisal of 'Home' as a Psychological space in *Interpreter of Maladies*

letting go. The notion of 'home' like belonging is multilayered in Lahiri's fiction. Sudesh Mishra defines 'home' as "non-territorial abstraction". This underlies the fact that diasporas may enjoy the status of citizenship but not participate in a common cultural ground with the dominant community and consequently not feel at home. Due to this scenario, the ordinary objects, rites and language become the significant signifiers of 'belonging' and 'home'. Moreover, the writer seems to use the concept of 'home' as safe and secured space where her protagonists carve out their own identities though modified. Chandra Talpade Mohanty defies the definition of 'home' as one based on solid physical boundaries. She distinguishes between 'being home' and 'not being home' and focuses on the difference between the two specific modalities. She interrogates the concept of 'home' in like manner:

What is home? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where my parents live?  
Where I live and work as an adult? Who where my parents? Is home a  
geographical space, a historical space, an emotional sensory space? (126).

This approach towards 'home' creates a dilemma about the urban and educated Indian diasporas as portrayed in Lahiri's fiction for whom the notion of 'home' is not necessary as physical but a socio-cultural fact.

*Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of nine stories by Jhumpa Lahiri is the presentation of nostalgic longing for an idealized concept of 'home' or for emotionally balanced life. The setting is mostly the American landscape with personages belonging to India. Their longing is more for reconciliation and adjustment with alien cultural establishment. In spite of being economically secure, her protagonists appear estranged and in dilemma. They are regularly

reminded by the past. The concept of 'home' thus becomes a scenario where association and affinities are defied and sometimes flourished. They straddle between the two cultures in which the idea of 'home' is moulded equally by them. In "At Mrs. Sen's", an isolated Bengali wife residing in a small flat in America expresses her sense of estrangement by babysitting a ten year old boy. She is hesitant in adapting the American style of living. Her refusal to drive and wear the fashionable clothes is a sign of negation for negotiation and digestion of foreign culture. The painful memories of her previous 'home' and the attempt to review Bengali dishes foreground her feeling of alienation: "send pictures' they write. 'Send pictures of your new life' what pictures can I send? They think I live the life of a Queen....they think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace"(125). All this reveals Mrs. Sen's disgust with the American reality and her feeling for 'sweet home'. Lahiri's characters do not lose their faith in Indianness and for them American dream has no meaning at all. Mrs. Sen represents the extreme form of diasporas aloofness and homesickness. She publicizes her services as a child minder who is 'responsible and kind' (111). Whatever she does and feels, one thing is evident that she does not feel at home in America. She denies the American manner of living and to assimilate it in her blood. Lahiri describes Mrs. Sen through the perception of an American boy, Eliot who makes analogy of her personality with that of his American mother. With her 'cuffed, beige shorts', her bare 'shaved knees and thighs'. When Son and his mother see Mrs. Sen for the first time, she is swathed in "a shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys, more suitable for an evening affair than for that quiet faintly drizzling August afternoon" (112). The white lampshades "were still wrapped in the manufacturer's plastic" and the sofa "was draped at all times with a green and black bed cover printed with rows of elephants..."(115). The story is all over scattered with the signifiers of Mrs. Sen's estrangement of her new surroundings. The

## An Appraisal of 'Home' as a Psychological space in *Interpreter of Maladies*

arched shape of the knife and its comparison to a barge suggests her personal journey from her native 'home' in Calcutta to a far away town in Boston. Lahiri employs metaphorical words to describe Mrs. Sen's cooking and expresses her annoyance with the environment: "...she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart.... She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices and shreds".(114). The main issue in the story is Mrs. Sen's endeavour to learn driving. Her husband suggested that it may make her self-assured and boost a confidence in her, but her difference to learn indicates her dismissal of America and its illusions: "Mrs. Sen says that once I receive my license, everything will improve. What do you think, Eliot? Will things improve?" (119). She further adds whether the car will help her to "drive all the way to Calcutta?". She drives only once when she goes to buy a fresh fish for a Bengali dish. This is the metaphor of returning 'home' and her reluctance to move freely in America. The striking instance of nostalgic sense of 'home' is obvious in Mrs. Sen's fervour and zeal on receiving a letter from her family. She embraces Eliot "clasping his face to sari, surrounding him with odor of mothballs and cumin"(121). All this shows despite passing her days in America, Mrs. Sen is not able to drive away the sweet memories from her mind and it is a proof of oft cited dictum that "home is where heart is".

In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", the writer enacts the concept of estrangement and 'home', only diasporas can think. The coming of Mr. Pirzada helps Lilia, the narrator to realize her parents' nostalgic feeling from the American setting even though they seem well-adjusted and well-negotiated. Her mother trims hair "bobbed to a suitable length for her part time job as a bank teller"(27). Lilia's mother feels proud of the fact that her daughter "was assured of a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity"(26). But despite this seeming satisfaction,



her parents' deeds and thinking indicate that their life is being interfered by the sweet notion of 'home' they left behind. The story like a pendulum vacillates between the nostalgia for the past and the struggle to shape present. They are incessantly reminded by Indian socio-cultural setup: "lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in yogurt sauce" (30). This thing along with her concern with Indian politics leaks out her inner connectivity with the roots. Their present belonging 'home' creates in their consciousness the real life they have left behind. They are not able to run their life smoothly and satisfactorily. Their disillusionment with American life and their yearning for Indian dish, language and socio-cultural scenario is accelerated by the arrival of Mr. Pirzada. In the delineation of Lilia, the author depicts the dual belonging or 'in-betweenness' of a second generation immigrants who are able to lead such an existence where their 'home' is at logger heads with the external reality. Moreover, the behavior of the first generation diasporas is put adjacent in the face of Lilia's conduct which incorporates both Indian and foreign culture. She eats Indian meals at home, but robs as a witch for Halloween and reads about American Revolution without any guilt. In her character, the hybridity of the contemporary immigrants is explicit. They are observers as well as participants of two different poles. It also signifies their elasticity to move between the two cultures and seek the position where they feel at 'home' on the foreign soil. Although Lilia's family negotiates and adjusts in America, yet Mr. Pirzada shows reluctance at peripheral and denies coming at centre. He in this way symbolizes the most intense form of nostalgic feeling of 'home'. It is clearly evident from his watch which is permanently set to Decca time for the religious purposes. Lilia also realizes that "life was being lived in Decca first...our meals, our actions were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a logging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged"(31). Like Mrs. Sen, Mr. Pirzada no doubt stands in the present, but his emotional being is displayed

## An Appraisal of 'Home' as a Psychological space in *Interpreter of Maladies*

through flashbacks where one sees the incidents and occurrences happened earlier in the newly freed Bangladesh, and the recollections of his better half and daughter in Decca. The dealings of two protagonists magnify it clearly that they do not look upon America their 'home'. 'Home' continues to be elsewhere. This is the real sense of nostalgia when one does not yield before diasporic state as a permanent settlement.

The sense of belonging with nostalgia is prevalent everywhere in *Interpreter of Maladies*. In "The Real Durwan" Boori Ma as a dependent sweeper in a middle class apartment block, perpetually looks back to the satisfied life lived in the past. Her idea for idealized 'home' left behind provides her calm and comfort: "Aside from her hardships, the other things Boori Ma liked to chronicle were earlier times.... At our times, we ate goat twice a week. We had a pond on our property, full of fish"(71). In Jhumpa Lahiri's stories, it is not merely self-consciousness in the characters' priority of Indian eatables or music, but the consciousness of their cultural affinity and craving for their original space. This is an awareness of native Indian values and norms. In "A Temporary Matter" the husband listens to his wife's past memories which includes her journey to India, and wishes "that he had his own childhood story of India"(12). These illustrations show that it is one thing to spend days by hook or crook, and another to live with heart's satisfaction and contentment. Lahiri's personages are on foreign soil, but their soul is with their lost 'home'. This is omnipresent. They can do anything but cannot make 'home' in America.

The title story "Interpreter of Melodies" describes the loneliness of a young mother, Mrs. Das. She is lingering between two modes of thinking and living. Apparently absorbed and

adjusted, yet tries to adhere to traditional values that are being challenged. She hates her husband who leaves her behind “all day with the baby surrounded by toys always cross and tired”(64). In her solitude, she is seduced by the visiting friend, and it creates a horrifying fear in her mind. Due to the same, she turns into “a woman not yet thirty, who loves neither her husband nor her children, who had already fallen out of love with life”(66). Through the depiction of Mrs. Das, the author expresses the predicament of the diasporas who appear alien both on the land of their birth and adopted one. Her family trip in India discloses them as visitors whose attitudes and dealings are outright American. Their guide Mr. Kapasi feels that they are as strangers as an American family: “They looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors”(44). The writer displays Das family’s exoticness in the Indian atmosphere through their dialogue and action. Despite Indian, their visit to India does not appear an act of returning ‘home’ and roots. They cannot be called diasporas, but transformed hybrids emotionally detached from their parental ‘home’. This is the second generation diasporas. They are not nostalgic for a return to their physical and geographical space of their real ‘home’, though psychologically they feel. Mr. Kapasi’s interest to form a bond with Mrs. Das refers to the emotional void within them both: “In time she would reveal the disappointment of her marriage and his. In this way their relationship would grow, and flourish.”(55). Moreover, in “This Blessed House”, the husband gradually understands that the woman he has wedded is an alien person who has no regard for his socio-cultural values and so feels nostalgia about Indian type of marriage and Indian heritage:

He was getting nowhere with her, with this woman who he had known for only four months and whom he had married.... He thought with the flicker of regret of

## An Appraisal of 'Home' as a Psychological space in *Interpreter of Maladies*

snapshots his mother used to send him for Calcutta, of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils with consulting a cookbook (146).

### **Conclusion**

All these descriptions and textual illustrations reveal that Jhumpa Lahiri's fictional landscape is familial and familiar. The characters are mostly from middle class enjoying material luxuries, but suffer emotional poverty. They are externally rich, but internally and psychologically bankrupt. The concept of 'home' for the writer is not only as refuge, but also a location for clash and commotion in the psyche of diasporas. Moreover, their inner trauma is dramatized through a stark contrast between immigrants and Americans. The characters expend time mostly in their inner cosmos pondering over the sweet past in contrast to sour present. They evoke the concrete symbols that revive the notion of 'home' and articulate their estrangement. The Indian dress and food are indispensable reminders and signifiers of the past where there was a real 'home' sign of care and comfort. The stories also underlie a fact of modern living where conventional socio-cultural values and selfless concerns slowly give way to selfish ends and materialism. But one thing is crystal clear everywhere that whether the characters belong to the first generation diasporas or second one, they are not contented with the alien surrounding. Their minds are always preoccupied with the memories of past that has lovable thing in it in the shape of 'home'. It signifies that one can forget all, but not the indigenous roots and real belonging.

### Works cited

- (1) Hall, Stewart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Jonathan Rutherford (ed.). London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. Print.

(2) Lahiri, Jumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*.

London: Flamingo Imprint of Harper Colins Publishers. 1999. Print.

(3) ... “Two Ways to Belong”. *The New York Times* (22 September, 1996).

(4) Mishra, Sudesh. *Diaspora Criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ., 2006. Print.

(5) Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.

(6) Nyman, Jopi. *Home, Identity, and Mobility in Contemporary Diasporic Fiction*. Amsterdam:

Rodopi, 2009. Print.

**About the Author:** Altaf Ahmad Bhat & Shabir Ahmad Mir, PG Centre, Depart. Of English

Govt. Degree College for Women, M A Road, Srinagar.